# Essential Psychotherapy

## Foundations and Practice

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## Foundations and Practice

Based on Buddhist Mind Training

With an introduction to Focusing by Astrid Schillings

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Abstain from everything harmful,
Cultivate the wholesome,
And free your mind.

THE BUDDHA

# Contents

Initial Overview ..... 17

Preface to the English Edition ..... 19
Introduction ..... 20
Shared concerns of buddhist teachers and psychotherapists ..... 21
Beginnings of Essential Psychotherapy ..... 24
Initial reservations about an integrated approach ..... 25
Basic Principles of Essential Psychotherapy ..... 29

Part One – Buddhist mind training in Psychotherapy

Emotional veils and stressful emotions ..... 37
The process of clearing emotional veils ..... 42
The basic emotions ..... 45
Three layers of emotional experience ..... 47
Awareness practice in working with emotions ..... 48

**A. Five steps of Working with Stressful Emotions** ..... 49
The origins in the teachings of the Buddha ..... 50
Step 1: Pause ..... 52
Guided meditation: *Making a pause* (exercise A.1) ..... 54
Being able to hold an emotion ..... 56
Strengthening the healthy self (Ego) while dissolving self-centredness ..... 59
Step 2: Applying helpful methods ..... 61
*Pausing and Finding Remedies* (exercise A.2) ..... 65
Step 3: Transforming the view of the emotion ..... 67
Taking my emotion as a teacher ..... 68
Transforming the view in Vajrayāna ..... 69
Step 4: Liberating the emotion in its true nature ..... 71
Emotions are simply expressions of the dynamic nature of mind ..... 73

Step 5: Taking emotions as the path of awakening ..... 74
Resilience through complete detachment ..... 76

**B. Inner Work with the five Basic Emotional Patterns** ..... 79
Five aspects of timeless awareness ..... 81
1. Lack of awareness ..... 84
Basic ignorance ..... 84
Dullness, indifference, neurotic doubts and mistaken beliefs ..... 88
Stepping out from the prison of fear ..... 91
*Three keys: study, contemplation, meditation* (exercise B.1) ..... 93
Five steps in cultivating awareness ..... 97
2. Anger and resentment ..... 99
From unpleasant sensations to aggression ..... 100
Other aspects of anger ..... 102
*Three keys: Patience, understanding and compassion* (exercise B.2) ..... 104
Five steps in resolving anger ..... 109
3. Pride ..... 115
Seven kinds of pride ..... 116
Other aspects of pride ..... 120
*Three keys: Simplicity, devotion, friendship* (exercise B.3) ..... 123
Five steps in resolving pride ..... 125
4. Desire ..... 132
Attachment as the basis of all emotions ..... 134
Other aspects of craving and desire ..... 137
*Three keys: Relaxation, giving, and loving* (exercise B.4) ..... 139
Five steps in resolving desire ..... 140
5. Jealousy and Envy ..... 145
The jealous mindset: Looking with the eyes of jealousy ..... 147
*Three keys: Honest communication, equanimity and joy* (exercise B.5) ..... 149
Five steps in resolving jealousy ..... 152
Summary: A new beginning on the stage of our life ..... 158

**C. Clarifying the Meaning of One's Own Life** ..... 159
*Clarifying our priorities through contemplation* (exercise C.1) ..... 160
*Contemplating the qualities that particularly inspire me* (exercise C.2) ..... 162
*Writing down particularly inspiring qualities* (exercise C.3) ..... 165
*Experiencing the qualities in every cell of our body* (exercise C.4) ..... 169
*Ten practical steps to cope with having lost the meaning of life* (exercise C.5) ..... 171
*Seven steps to anchor the meaning of life deep in ourselves* (exercise C.6) ..... 176
*Breathing consciously with these qualities in the heart* (exercise C.7) ..... 178
*Meeting each other through heart-breath, without anything to do* (exercise C.8) ..... 179

**D. Four Insights – Four Steps – Four Truths** ..... 181
*The four truths as daily practice* (exercise D.1) ..... 184
First truth: What is suffering and what is happiness? ..... 186
Second truth: Suffering arises from lack of awareness ..... 189
Third truth: Awakening is possible, and suffering can have an end! ..... 192
*How I envision a completely healthy person* (exercise D.2) ..... 194
Fourth truth: Treading the path of awakening and healing ..... 195
*The Eightfold Path as a process of healing and personal practice* (exercise D.3) ..... 197

**E. Cultivating Awareness** ..... 201
Releasing blockages and continuing in the flow ..... 205
*The Fourfold Cultivation of Awareness* (Satipaṭṭhāna, exercise E.1) ..... 207

*Exploration in four steps – an exercise for two* (exercise E.2) ..... 210
*Awareness with Breathing, in sixteen steps* (Ānāpānasati, exercise E.3) ..... 212
The 4x4 steps of awareness practice at a glance ..... 219
Conceptual and non-conceptual thinking ..... 224
Cultivating awareness in the therapeutic process ..... 226
Mahāmudrā, natural being ..... 228
*The Mahāmudrā prayer of the Third Karmapa* (exercise E.4) ..... 231

**F. Antennas of the Heart: Living Compassionate Resonance** ..... 241
Breathing from the heart: Giving and Receiving (Tonglen) ..... 241
*Breathing from the heart (Tonglen) with ourselves* (exercise F.1) ..... 243
*Breathing from the heart (Tonglen) with another person* (exercise F.2) ..... 244
*Breathing from the heart (Tonglen) in couple relationship* (exercise F.3) ..... 247
*Bodhicitta means to live in the We-mode* (exercise F.4) ..... 248
Buddha nature: Everyone can awaken! ..... 249
*Behold the noble being in every human* (exercise F.5) ..... 250
*Settling in compassionate goodness* (exercise F.6) ..... 251
Encountering each other in simple being ..... 253

**G. The Self and the Non-self** ..... 257
The five aggregates of existence: Is there a self? ..... 258
Ego-strength on the path of awakening ..... 261
The awakened qualities of a healthy self ..... 266

**H. The Healing Buddha within us** ..... 269
The twelve wishes of the Medicine Buddha ..... 270
*A simple meditation on the Medicine Buddha* (exercise H.1) ..... 272

**I. Preparing for Dying and Accompanying Others** ..... 279
The Five Forces of Mahāyāna Mind Training ..... 279
*Steps in preparing for dying* (exercise I.1) ..... 281
Applying the Five Forces in living and dying ..... 284
*Guided meditation: Preparing for dying* (exercise I.2) ..... 288
*A healing journey to the Land of the Buddha* (exercise I.3) ..... 291

**J. The "Bridge" from Part One to Part Two** ..... 295
Review of Part One ..... 295
Outlook on Part Two ..... 302

## Part Two – Psychotherapy based on Buddhist mind training

### Preparing the Ground

**K. Introduction** ..... 311

**L. The Structure of the Psychotherapeutic Part** ..... 313

**M. The Therapeutic Relationship** ..... 319
The attitude of the therapist ..... 319
The effect of the therapeutic relationship ..... 321
*Attuning Meditation* (exercise M.1) ..... 321

**N. Activating Resources** ..... 323
*Finding Resources* (exercise N.1) ..... 325
*The Safe Place* (exercise N.2) ..... 327
*Developing Kindness* (exercise N.3) ..... 329
Strengthening the inner observer ..... 330
*Scaling a Sensation* (exercise N.4) ..... 331
*Reviewing the day mentally* (exercise N.5) ..... 332
*Discarding the memory of an unpleasant situation* (exercise N.6) ..... 334

**O. Coping Strategies and Interventions for Mental Problems and Disorders** ..... 337
Seven Step Strategy (method O.1) ..... 337
Desensitization in Sensu (method O.2) ..... 339
Case study for desensitization in case of fear of heights ..... 340
*The As-if method in a professional role* (exercise O.1) ..... 343
Advice to a Good Friend (method O.3) ..... 344
Detaching after a separation (method O.4) ..... 345
Using key sentences (method O.5) ..... 346
*The Inner Garden* (exercise O.2) ..... 347
Verbal demarcation (method O.6) ..... 348
*The Lying Eight* (exercise O.3) ..... 349
Working with basic patterns and counter-pattern (method O.7) ..... 351
*Weeding weeds, sowing seeds* (exercise O.4) ..... 352
*The Beach Ball* (exercise O.5) ..... 354
*The Cylinder of Light* (exercise O.6) ..... 355
*The Shining Star* (exercise O.7) ..... 356
*Pendulum for Decision Making* (exercise O.8) ..... 357
Transition to Focusing ..... 359

**P. Focusing – A Door into Essential Psychotherapy** ..... 361
How was Focusing found? ..... 362
The self as a process ..... 363
The inner relationship to experience – The client's client ..... 364
The language of process ..... 367
Related awareness ..... 368
How does change come about? ..... 371
Change arises in interaction – Awareness as a process ..... 374
Process description (case study) ..... 377
Open questions and intuitions ..... 382
Structure-bound experience ..... 382
Whole Body Focusing ..... 384
The essential ground of Focusing ..... 387

*Creating Open Space – and developing it* (exercise P.1) ..... 388

**Q. Deliberately induced Dis-identification** ..... 393
*Disidentifying with physical sensations, feelings and thoughts* (exercise Q.1) ..... 394
*The Suitcase* (exercise Q.2) ..... 396
*Guiding the client towards the True Self* (exercise Q.3) ..... 400

## Working with the inner dynamics of the Personality

**R. Working with Sub-personalities (method R.1)** ..... 403
*Self-exploration: Who am I, how am I, what am I?* (exercise R.1) ..... 405
*The House of sub-personalities* (exercise R.2) ..... 405
The 5 phases of working with sub-personalities (with elements of EPT) ..... 409
*Daily review of a sub-personality* (exercise R.3) ..... 412
*Climbing a mountain with a sub-personality* (exercise R.4) ..... 412
Case study on sub-personality work ..... 414

**S. Working with the Inner Child (method S.1)** ..... 421
The Inner Child in the Buddhist view ..... 422
*Giving to the Inner Child what it needs* (exercise S.1) ..... 423
Case study no. 1 on working with the Inner Child ..... 426
*Breathing from the heart (Tonglen) with the Inner Child* (exercise S.2) ..... 428
*The Tree* (exercise S.3) ..... 429
*The House of our Childhood with a person as a resource* (exercise S.4) ..... 431
Case study no. 2 on working with the Inner Child ..... 433

**T. Working with Parental Images (method T.1)** ..... 437
Case study on working with parental images ..... 438
*Exploration of parental images* (exercise T.1) ..... 441
*Experiencing one's parents in their own healing environment* (exercise T.2) ..... 443
*Writing a letter to our father or mother* (exercise T.3) ..... 444
*Detaching from a person* (exercise T.4) ..... 445

**U. Working with Investigative Methods** ..... 451
Investigative work in conjunction with Inner Child Work (method U.1) ..... 451
*The Corridor* (exercise U.1) ..... 455
*The Inner House of our whole Personality* (exercise U.2) ..... 456

**V. Working with Traumatic Experiences** ..... 461
Alternating between resource and trauma (method V.1) ..... 463
Case example for trauma processing ..... 465
Detaching with the help of a symbol (method V.2) ..... 469

**W. Working with Dreams (method W.1)** ..... 473
Dream-Work from a Buddhist perspective ..... 473
Dream analysis in six phases ..... 475
Case study on dream work ..... 478

**X. Working with the Will and with Envisioning** ..... 487
*Getting to know the taste of a decision* (exercise X.1) ..... 487
*Goal Setting* (exercise X.2) ..... 489
*Envisioning: "Where do I want to be in 5 years?"* (exercise X.3) ..... 491

**Y. Working with the Higher Self** ..... 495
*Alignment with the Higher Self* (exercise Y.1) ..... 495
*The Wise Friend* (exercise Y.2) ..... 496

*Temple of Silence* (exercise Y.3) ..... 499
*The Maypole* (exercise Y.4) ..... 501
*The Triangle of Light* (exercise Y.5) ..... 503
*The Hourglass* (exercise Y.6) ..... 504

**Z. Couples Therapy** ..... 507
*Journey into the past with our experiences as a partner* (exercise Z.1) ..... 508
Notes for couples living together (methods Z.1 and Z.2) ..... 510
Therapy sessions with couples ..... 512
Representing the inner dynamics in the couple by six chairs (method Z.3) ..... 513
Means of reconciliation ..... 517
Reconciliation Ritual (method Z.4) ..... 518

Final Words ..... 519

Appendix ..... 520
Bibliography ..... 521
List of proposed methods ..... 528
List of proposed exercises ..... 529
Epilogue: How Essential Psychotherapy came into being ..... 533
Advanced training in EPT ..... 535
Expressions of gratitude ..... 537

# Initial Overview

This book introduces you to the foundations of 'Essential Psychotherapy' (EPT) – a psychotherapeutic approach that combines the wealth of experience of the buddhist tradition with western psychotherapy. It addresses the essential concerns of being human: giving life deep meaning, freeing ourselves from limiting emotional patterns, and awakening to our own potential.

As a widely accessible introduction, this book offers many practical pointers for therapeutic work, both with oneself and with others, which also address these essential concerns. Non-professionals are given an initial understanding of buddhist mind training in addition to the proposed therapeutic interventions. The main objective is to be of concrete benefit for individuals on their paths of healing and to place work with emotional patterns in the context of a path of true awakening. Awakening here means to increasingly free ourselves from restrictive emotional and cognitive patterns and to reveal our inherent potential for awakened qualities such as love, compassion, openness, flexibility and wisdom.

This introduction is aimed at various kinds of people: those who are interested in pursuing this sort of integrative path independently, those who are looking for appropriate therapeutic help, and those who would like to offer help to others after completing their training in Essential Psychotherapy. Additionally, it addresses psychotherapists who wish to integrate their work with a path of awakening and to rely on buddhist teachings that have been tried and tested for two and a half millennia.

The approach reveals a fresh perspective on buddhist teachings without requiring any previous knowledge. In addition to subtle analyses of mental-emotional processes, there are many practical exercises for use on one's own path. Psychotherapeutic understanding

refi es and strengthens the path of awakening, and buddhist mind training deepens the therapeutic work.

Buddha Śākyamuni (5th century B.C.) described his teachings as a *path* (Skt. *mārga*) based on experience and exploration. He insisted that his audience should not regard his teachings as a faith, religion or philosophy, but examine them by themselves. We can also call this path a *science* of awakening or, as Jack Kornfield writes in 'The Wise Heart':

> "... a living psychology of one of the oldest and best developed systems of healing and insight in the world. This kind of psychology does not differentiate between worldly and spiritual concerns".[1]

In this spirit, this book is dedicated to our teacher, one of the greatest humanists and psychologists of the twentieth century: Gendun Rinpoche – a Tibetan mahāmudrā master, whose understanding of the mind and kindness of heart continues to nourish many of us to this day. He saw the inseparability of the worldly and the spiritual, of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and showed everyone the liberating path of direct insight. Thank you!

1 Jack Kornfield, "The Wise Heart", New York, 2008, page 13

# Preface to the English Edition

The translation follows the German original, written during the first two cycles of the three years training in Essential Psychotherapy and published in 2016. A French translation was then made available in 2021, serving the second generation of French trainees. Throughout these years the interest from English speaking readers grew continually, our Danish group had to use rough translations into Danish and English.

We could finalize this project thanks to the combined efforts of Kathrin Rehders, who did the initial translation, Rachel Goody (Vijayamala), who with great care improved the English, Tilmann Borghardt, who compared the translation again with the original and slightly adapted some phrases to fit our present understanding, and finally, Friederike Schütt, who did the type setting and graphic design. Our deep gratitude goes to all of them.

We also wish to thank the members of Norbu Editions within the Ekayana Trust for Contemporary Buddhism, who again offered their support for this publication like for the French one.

*Hennef, Germany, July 2025,*

*Wolfgang Erhardt and the team of EPT teachers*

# Introduction

Our experience in supporting clients in psychotherapy as well as in guiding practitioners who intensively follow the buddhist path shows how the interaction of buddhist mind training and psychotherapeutic understanding harmoniously nurtures one's inner development. When such integration occurs, one can certainly speak of a 'psychotherapy of awakening.' This means primarily that this form of psychotherapy

– is inspired by the path of awakening,
– fits harmoniously into it,
– and offers its psychotherapeutic methods as support for this path.

In the authors' opinion, it is not possible to realize awakening with conventional psychotherapy – which was anyhow never its intention. In order to awaken fully, daily personal training in deep awareness is needed, addressing the most subtle areas of consciousness. This can however be prepared for and initiated through psychotherapy. Buddhist mind training involves working with one's own mind including the emotions (the "psyche" in the western sense) all the way through. It leads ever deeper into wholesome states of mind with increasing stability. This wholesomeness or fundamental sanity reveals itself as the basic nature of mind, and the habitual patterns separating us from it will gradually be dissolved. Thus, buddhist mind training is basically already a psychotherapy of awakening as long as we actually apply it effectively and in all its depth, which we unfortunately often don't do because of our avoidant tendencies.

## Shared concerns of buddhist teachers and psychotherapists

Psychotherapists, like buddhist[2] teachers, work for the overall good of the people who come to them. Both groups work primarily with the mind and psyche or, to put it another way: with cognitive and emotional patterns. They also share a focus on the long-term well-being of the people they are accompanying and do not normally seek short-term relief only. They wish to support all aspects of human development and help to integrate therapeutic work into an overall vision of comprehensive healing of the whole person – physically, emotionally and spiritually.

A first collaboration between psychotherapists and buddhist teachers usually happens in the context of a buddhist centre, where often enough participants seek help in psychological crises. When they first meet with buddhist mind training, many people (including therapists) think it may have the answers to *all* emotional and spiritual questions. They hope that this well tested buddhist approach with its many masters could perhaps provide all the help necessary in life – for their search for meaning, contact disorders, attachment traumas, depressive moods, anxieties, psychoses, couple conflicts, or whatever stress and turbulence they may experience in life. But on closer examination or with experience, it becomes clear that additional psychotherapeutic support is often needed.

Buddhist teachers may initially believe that they can help anyone through training in mindfulness, wisdom and compassion. This may be true in theory. But experience in accompanying people shows that many need additional therapeutic support. Often, they are not able to apply the teachings directly to their emotional challenges and restrictive patterns. They need regular, preferably weekly, competent

**2** We prefer to write the words "buddha" and "buddhist" in small letters wherever possible. Only when it refers to a specific person or is used as a title "Buddha" is written in capitals.

guidance in order not to bypass the tricky points and to really focus attention where it is needed.

My own experience has taught me (Tilmann) this: During my medical studies I read a lot of psychotherapeutic literature and did several two-month clinical traineeships in psychiatry, neurology and psychosomatics, but did not complete any substantial training in this field. Later, as a monk in our buddhist monastery with some 200 inhabitants and volunteers, I was often responsible for those who exhibited psychological symptoms, managing as best I could. The other lamas (meditation instructors) asked me, as a doctor, to look after the residents and long-term guests who were going through severe mental crises. Depression, drug withdrawal, pre-psychotic confusion, personality disorders, anxiety syndromes, obsessions, psychoses – I have tried my hand at many a clinical picture, with only a little psychotherapeutic knowledge, but with heartfelt enthusiasm and with an understanding that had grown out of buddhist mind training. Sometimes there were quick, surprising improvements, sometimes lasting ones, but often I reached a point where professional help from experienced psychotherapists and psychiatrists became necessary. In the early days, our teacher Gendun Rinpoche was still alive, and he too, even though he was known for his blessing and healing powers, wanted this professional help to be sought.

Through the years I learned to increasingly appreciate the profound guidance of psychotherapists and psychiatrists. Medication was also occasionally necessary and, when carefully prescribed, turned out to be quite compatible with the path of mind training. Some volunteers, who lived in the monastery for longer periods of time, went out for weekly therapy sessions and made valuable inner progress by combining psychotherapy and buddhist mind training. This was also noticed by the psychotherapists: There seemed to be a synergy between buddhist and therapeutic methods. The consulting psychotherapists were often surprised at the rapid progress their patients were making – perhaps partly due to being immersed in a supportive community, and partly thanks to their buddhist mindset and training.

To explain this synergy, it seems that buddhist mind training adds, in some areas, an extra dimension or quality to psychotherapy. For example, it makes it easier for us to relate to the deep resources that manifest themselves in a trusting mind. It nurtures confidence in one's own intrinsically healthy mind. It furthers the continuous training of mental recollection (mindfulness), insight into spiritual principles and awareness of emotional processes – even without support from therapists. The buddhist approach expands our view of the world with its basic understanding of the inevitability of suffering and at the same time the possibility of experiencing sanity (in the sense of an all-encompassing mental health) at any time. It also fosters an attitude of taking full responsibility for one's own life and happiness and engaging in compassionate activity. At the same time, we train ourselves to look without immediately reacting and to simply be aware. Awareness makes it possible to recognize habitual patterns and emotional imprints with their almost instinctive reactions and not fall right back into their trap.

Buddhist teachings, as we have come to know them, are aimed at people who are emotionally relatively stable and can follow their path with daily personal practice. It is assumed that the individual person is able to manage the transfer from receiving general guidance in a group to practicing independently. It's not easy, though. Actually, close individual guidance would be helpful for many, even if they don't need therapy. Buddhist mind training, however, does not normally provide as close guidance as that offered by psychotherapists, with their more or less weekly therapy sessions. Moreover, buddhist teachers are not trained in psychotherapeutic practice, they are not familiar with the very effective methods used there and usually have little time for intensive individual care. In addition, they are the contact person for too many people to be able to accomplish intensive personal guidance.

For all these reasons it makes sense to have increasingly close cooperation, making use of the synergies: buddhist centres often turn to psychotherapists when someone needs additional help. Some buddhist teachers attend psychotherapeutic training and some psycho-

therapists practise buddhist mind training. In the meantime, it has also become common for many practitioners on the path of awakening to use additional psychotherapeutic support, since it deepens their understanding of their inner processes and offers specific ways to dissolve restrictive emotional patterns. This book will explore different aspects of these interesting and illuminating synergies.

*As an aside: If you want a more detailed overview, you can jump to the connecting chapter between Part One and Part Two (chapter J). There you will find a review and summary of each chapter of the book, bringing out other striking synergies and similarities between buddhist mind training and psychotherapy.*

## Beginnings of Essential Psychotherapy

Students of Trungpa Rinpoche founded the Naropa Institute[3] in Boulder, Colorado, in 1978 and developed the foundations of 'Contemplative Psychotherapy'.[4] In 1987, at the first international conference on 'Buddhism and Psychotherapy' at the World Trade Centre, the Tibetan master Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche concluded the exchange with the following words:

> "There was much discussion at this conference about differences between Buddhism and Western psychotherapy. But these differences are artificial, and they hinder mutual recognition and appreciation. Buddhism is not a belief or custom brought about by a specific culture or environment, but a way for students (everywhere) to realize who they are and what the world of their experiences means. There cannot be

3 Today it is called "Naropa University – Training Centre for Contemplative Psychotherapy"

4 In the years after 1991, I (Tilmann) had a very strong friendship with Edward Podvoll, the long-time director of the Naropa Institute and author of the ground-breaking book on psychosis 'Recovering Sanity'. We spent three years together in retreat and cared for patients together. His knowledge and inspiration have stimulated me to explore buddhist-oriented psychotherapy.

> many different truths about what and who we really are, so it is not appropriate to classify buddhism as an eastern culture and then draw corresponding boundaries. Of course, there are differences between East and West, but these differences are based on ideas that have arisen not least because of language barriers. I think it is important that we work our way through these barriers in order to reach a proper, open appreciation of each other, which will then enable us to work together effectively." [5]

Other buddhist teachers, too, are calling for both approaches to be used, to benefit from their synergies. So, in 2002 Jigme Rinpoche asked me (Tilmann) to establish an institute for buddhist oriented psychotherapy. This seemed like an almost impossible dream, since the exchanges had only just begun. But we continued the annual four- to seven-day meetings. Then, in 2009, thanks to the courageous decision of Wolfgang Erhardt, who had been the driving force of these exchanges from the beginning, and with the support of other psychotherapists and buddhist teachers, the 'Institute for Essential Psychotherapy' (EPT Institute) was founded. It offers three-year further education courses for people without previous therapeutic qualifications, and one-and-a-half year courses for certified psychotherapists.

## Initial reservations about an integrated approach

Essential Psychotherapy (EPT) integrates insights from two quite different approaches to exploring the mind. It has been developed through the collaboration of psychotherapists and meditation teachers rooted in the buddhist tradition. But this collaboration was not

5 http://www.dharmadownload.net/pages/english/Natsok/0010_Teaching_English/Teaching_English_0002.htm

a forgone conclusion to start with. We used different terminologies and had needs for differentiation and dyed-in-the-wool claims to sovereignty and we had to overcome many a rift in order to fina ly come to an understanding of one another. Even today there are still reservations in buddhist as well as in therapeutic circles about the interaction of psychotherapy and buddhist mind training.

Buddhist teachers are sometimes concerned by the following:

- They might be worried about a possible *infi tration with foreign beliefs* and want to see the authentic transmission of the tradition safeguarded. Their concern is that close cooperation with psychotherapists could greatly change the presentation and methods of buddhist mind training and that therapeutic thinking could influence and water down the traditional training in deep awareness.
- They are sceptical as to whether one is really following a *common path* or whether their therapeutic-psychological world view may hinder psychotherapists from actually understanding the path of awakening and getting involved with it on deeper levels. For those buddhist teachers, the path of awakening would be the overarching common framework, into which psychotherapeutic work would be integrated.
- They wonder whether psychotherapeutic and buddhist *approaches* are really compatible. For example, is therapeutic work, which uses conceptual reflection, compatible with deeper meditative mind training, which discards conceptual preoccupations?
- Possibly, the *intentions* of psychotherapy and the buddhist path are actually contrary. For example, while therapy may intend to enhance temporary happiness and ego empowerment, the buddhist path intends to enhance ultimate, non-referential happiness and wishes to dissolve the illusion of a stable self.
- *Priorities* may shift, and students may give up the path of awakening because they prefer psychotherapeutic work. This could delay their work on existential questions and more profound levels of being. An example of such profound work, which needs to be done, is preparing for death by developing awareness of impermanence

and the dependent arising of all phenomena and by realizing the inherently free nature of mind.
- Some buddhist teachers see no *need* for cooperation. They assume that buddhist teachings – as long as they are correctly understood and applied – meet all the challenges of life and do not need to be supplemented by psychotherapy.

Some psychotherapists also express reservations:
- They are concerned about people *by-passing* their emotional issues by adopting a seeming 'spiritual' attitude and appearance – but in reality, cultivating avoidance tendencies. A spiritual path used to avoid difficult issues in this way, could make effective psychotherapeutic work impossible.
- They wonder whether psychotherapists and buddhist teachers talk about the same topics and can *understand each other* in depth. Terms like repression, transference, counter-transference, ego-enhancement, basic trust, personality traits, character, trauma, neurotic patterns, to name but a few, have no directly recognizable equivalent in buddhist terminology. The aim of strengthening the ego in psychotherapy, appears to contradict the dissolving of ego-centredness as the declared goal of the buddhist path.
- Psychotherapists sometimes have the feeling that they are viewed with *scepticism* in buddhist circles, and their competence is not valued. They hear from people, some of whom are inexperienced, that their methods are counterproductive on the path of awakening, – almost as if therapeutic work was wasted time for someone on the buddhist path.

Difficulties on both sides:
- To enable the integration of a wide range of competencies it would be necessary for therapists from different schools to get involved in the exchange with buddhist teachers. However, it is by no means a matter of course that psychotherapists of different therapeutic disciplines exchange information with each other. There are still *rifts between schools* such as behaviour therapy, psychoanalysis, gestalt

therapy, Jungian depth psychology, humanistic approaches like focusing and others. The distance to which the long-standing struggle for demarcation of the individual psychotherapy training courses has led is not easy to dissolve, even (or especially) between related forms of therapy.

- The same problem can also be observed among buddhist teachers: It is quite unusual to see representatives of different schools exchanging meaningfully with each other, for example teachers of the Tibetan tradition exchanging with teachers of the Burmese, Thai or Japanese tradition. Many consider their own tradition with a certain *claim to absoluteness* to be the best and there are also personal, methodological, philosophical and historical reasons for not collaborating with another tradition. In the wake of the spreading of buddhism in Asia there were many deep divisions, which have mostly persisted for centuries.

Essential Psychotherapy has been developed by asking the above questions and gradually fi ding concrete answers to the concerns and difficulties expressed. Preconceived opinions have been softened, exclusive identification with one's own method has been dropped, and bridges of understanding have been built. Such bridges are easy to fi d as there are many parallels between the insights of buddhist mind training and western psychology and psychotherapy. The systematized descriptions of buddhist teachings (Skt. *abhidharma*), often called Buddhist Psychology, are based on the careful introspection of many generations of practitioners in different countries upon experiencing and liberating the vast variety of human states of mind – always with the question: 'How can the person fi d healing and freedom amidst ever-present challenges?'

It was particularly helpful during exchanges between representatives of psychotherapy and buddhist mind training to always refer to actual experience, in order to overcome conceptual differences. The point is to focus tirelessly on the essence:

From personal experience, what helps me and others to develop into a deeply integrated human being who follows a path of inner

liberation, healing and awakening, which can then be of great benefit to myself and others?

How can we all – not only psychotherapists and buddhist teachers – work hand in hand and learn from each other for the benefit of those we accompany and who accompany us?

## Basic Principles of Essential Psychotherapy

Essential Psychotherapy is a buddhist oriented psychotherapy. But only *essential* buddhist teachings are included; cultural and religious aspects of buddhist practice are deliberately not part of the training, in order to make the approach accessible to all. We work in a process-oriented way and support individually diverse ways of healing with means that support direct experience in the present. We use everything that helps to dissolve suffering and harmonizes with a path of awakening as methods. In addition to therapeutic work accompanied by a professional, great emphasis is placed on the personal practice of mindfulness, awareness, opening the heart, and the development of deep understanding. Wherever possible, daily exercises are carried out to familiarise us – therapists and clients alike – with healing perspectives and states of mind. Thanks to these exercises, which connect us with the wisdom and freedom inherent in us, therapeutic progress can be stabilized and used to proceed further on the path. Everyone chooses their own exercises. Some 'classics' are described in this book: Awareness practice with opening of the six senses, breath-based cultivation of awareness, breathing from the heart (exchanging self and other), the contemplation of one's own priorities, natural resting free from grasping or rejecting, and the practice of the Medicine Buddha.

In this therapeutic work, like in buddhist mind training, we adopt a transpersonal and in-depth psychological approach. This means that our therapeutic work supports a true path of liberation, which frees us from emotional, reactive patterns and leads beyond the 'persona' into authentic being, free of veils. This experience is the same

for everyone in essence, and therefore it is transpersonal. For this, it is important to focus on each persons' innate qualities, rather than relating to their problems fi st.

This is primarily about strengthening qualities, encouraging helpful perspectives and establishing new patterns of behaviour. The analysis of dysfunctional patterns comes second, only *afte* encouraging the qualities. This sort of analysis has a greater liberating impact when it can rely on the resources of a newly found confidence in one's own inherent qualities and of new possibilities in relating to situations.

The Tibetan teacher Jamgon Kongtrul stressed at the previously mentioned conference that

> "In the heart mind of awakening (bodhicitta) lies the power to work with the mind of another."

By bodhicitta he meant the motivation to work with compassion and wisdom for the good of all living beings and to uncover awakened qualities in everyone. This motivation is the driving force of the collaboration between western psychotherapy and buddhism. The following traditional prayer is often used to strengthen this attitude:

> "May all sentient beings be happy and possess the causes of happiness.
> May we all be free from suffering and its causes.
> May we never be separated from true joy that is free from suffering.
> May we dwell in all situations free from attachment and aversion in great equanimity."

The above lines express the four Immeasurable States of mind: Love, compassion, joy and equanimity. They are of central importance for buddhists but are also deeply appreciated and cultivated in the west. They lead to the altruistic motivation to help all living beings without exception to complete health – that is, to awaken to these exact same qualities of heart mind: Love, compassion and joy, paired with a deep

understanding of our being. This is the heart of buddhist mind training and at the same time the heart of buddhist-oriented psychotherapy: an awareness permeated by love.

Therapists, in this context, are people in healing professions who are themselves on a path of healing and share this path with others within the scope of their personal expertise. They have directed their lives towards the development of an alert, all-inclusive, loving awareness and train their mind in many ways, especially through contemplation and meditation. They are dedicated to the development of love, compassion and wisdom. For their own path, but especially for their work as psychotherapists, they develop a basic understanding of the buddhist doctrine with the help of teachers.

Essential Psychotherapy is a buddhist-oriented psychotherapy which continues to develop and from which further expressions will certainly emerge. It touches all areas of human existence, including the different levels of personality, psychodynamics, relationships, and behaviour, as well as the fundamental level of timeless open awareness, also known as the nature of being. Central methods of buddhist mind training and healing are integrated into psychotherapeutic work. Methods that belong to the essence of buddhist teaching and are common to several traditions, are given special emphasis. This is done in the spirit of the One Vehicle or One Path (*Ekayāna*), which Buddha Śākyamuni formulated in the teaching on the four aspects of cultivating awareness (Pali: *satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*):

> "There is only *one* path to awakening – the cultivation of awareness."

The therapeutic basis of Essential Psychotherapy is to be found in the methods of psychosynthesis, focusing, the visualisation techniques of Phyllis Krystal, and behavioural therapy. In all this, an awareness of health is developed, with a view of what it is to be healthy or whole. In therapeutic terms, it is a resource-oriented approach, with Essential Psychotherapy including additional levels of

experience that are more spiritual – especially the transpersonal level of awareness that activates the potential for deeper healing.

The process of healing is characterized by increasing inner freedom. Such freedom is only possible on the basis of an increasing awareness of the processes of perceiving, considering, deciding and acting. Our own process as well as our work with clients, will be much more effective, if we personally dedicate ourselves to daily mind training in study and practice, because this will enable the necessary developments in mental calm, motivation and self-knowledge. Meditation methods must be practiced patiently and regularly over a long period of time. They contribute significantly to the personal development of the therapist and have a great influence on the therapy. But their direct application to clients is limited to simple forms. A deeper application of the methods of buddhist mind training is always reserved for one's own personal path of awakening.

Essential Psychotherapy draws inspiration from buddhist teachings. In doing so, it adheres to the *essence* of its wealth of experience but keeps its distance from the *forms (cultural expressions)* of buddhist practice that have developed in its various countries of origin. In the training, reference is made to buddhist texts without having to become a buddhist oneself. It is about taking the challenging path of being connected to the liberating truths themselves, without having to set oneself apart: "Now I am *this*, not *that*. I'm a buddhist now, not a Christian anymore." To draw boundaries in this way hurts the heart, because it leads to further tension. We polarise, and distinguish ourselves from people who describe themselves differently, even though they may want the same thing and pursue the same search. The gate of the heart should always remain open.

Within the buddhist tradition there are two equally important vehicles, both of which are considered within Essential Psychotherapy. Practitioners of southern buddhism in the School of the Older Ones (*Theravāda*) strive – even though they help others in many ways – to completely step out of the cycle of existence at their death. They want the cycle of rebirths to end as soon as possible. The second school includes the practitioners of the

Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*), sometimes called northern buddhism, who – on the basis of an awakened understanding of the process of becoming – are prepared to accept birth again until all living beings are freed from suffering. They prepare for a repeated, freely chosen re-entry into the cycle of existence. What is important for both vehicles is that we engage compassionately with the suffering in ourselves and in others, as it manifests now, and walk the path of healing or liberation.

End of reading sample.