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The Psychology of Awakening

Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor
and Guy Claxton

Contents

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Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor and Guy Claxton are all established authors whose books include: by Gay Watson *Resonance of Emptiness*; by Stephen Batchelor *Buddhism Without Belief*; *Jewel in the Lotus*; *Tibet: A Guide*; and by Guy Claxton *The Heart of Buddhism*; *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*.

The Psychology of Awakening

Buddhism, Science and
Our Day-to-Day Lives

Edited by
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Introduction

The Psychology Of Awakening: to Western ears awakening, the goal of Buddhist practice, presents an unfamiliar concept. The idea of developing a psychology in order to cultivate ways to awaken is strange. What is awakening? What are we awakening from, what awakening to? One of the authors represented here suggests that the psychology of awakening is an oxymoron, that psychology and awakening do not and cannot belong together. Perhaps so, if one refers to psychology only in its narrowest sense, as it has been practised and taught throughout most of its short history, as a Western academic discipline sadly removed from subjective experience. Yet psychology, potentially and now more commonly, actually refers to the study of mind in its widest sense, the study of soul, cognition, emotion and consciousness. This study of mind as experienced from within has ever been the concern of Buddhism, a study which is inseparable from practice, a practice of cultivation in the service of awakening.

At this time, both practitioners of psychology and of the path of awakening realise that they have much to gain from each other. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said: ‘There are two general areas for which dialogue between Buddhism and psychology could be very valuable. One is the investigation of the nature of mind itself. The second is the investigation of the nature of mind specifically in relation to therapeutic purposes – how to bring people to better health.’ How to live more peaceably, more wisely, more happily and with an open heart is a goal for all of us.

The long history of Buddhism's phenomenological exploration of experience points towards valid methods of exploring subjectivity which may lead science away from one-sided objectivity and distance towards a science of embodiment and intersubjectivity, a path that contemporary cognitive science, as Francisco Varela describes, is eager to understand. For spiritual practitioners, Buddhism offers not only theory, a philosophy of process much in tune with contemporary Western discourse, but, most importantly, a way. This is a way of practice, a cultivation, a path towards change and clear sight leading to happiness, authenticity and connection. This Buddhist way is fast emerging as a major influence on the development of Western culture. It is the subject of Hollywood films; the Dalai Lama packs Madison Square Gardens and the Royal Albert Hall. Athletes are advised to meditate, business leaders to cultivate 'mindfulness' and 'intuition'. In a time of recession the retreat centre business is booming. The Buddhist view of mind, how it works, how it errs and how to put it right is being recognised as profound and practical by scientists, therapists, aid workers, artists and politicians.

Nor need the giving be only in one direction. Can Western psychology's understanding of 'endarkenment' complement Buddhism's quest for enlightenment? Can scientific studies of consciousness and its relation to unconsciousness also help us to live more happily, more wisely, and can they be used in the service of spiritual progress? Maybe Western science may give to Buddhism a clearer objective map of what is actually happening on a neurological level while meditating. Most importantly the West must bring its own strengths and skills to ancient Buddhist wisdom if Buddhism is to flourish in the West. Just as it changed its outer form and clothing in each culture to which it travelled – Sri Lanka, Tibet, China and Japan – if it is to create a firm foundation in the West, so Buddhism must find its Western dress.

Arising from the deliberations of two international conferences held at Dartington Hall in Devon, these essays come from some of those who are most influential today in exploring this dialogue between Buddhism and the West. They explore the value of Buddhism's powerful vision of human nature and its implications for personal and social life from many different perspectives. They look backward to the history of the dialogue, to successes and failures of understanding and interpretation, they concern themselves with present dilemmas, and they look forward to explore the way Buddhism and Western thought may most fruitfully go forward to mutual understanding and benefit.

Part I is concerned with the more philosophical issues. Christopher Titmuss opens the debate with an examination of the concept of inquiry, which sums up the spirit of the collection as a whole. He emphasises the importance of genuine inquiry, the need to question and put aside all the views and identifications through which, consciously or unconsciously, we filter our experience. Such inquiry, he suggests, leads to an open mind and to liberation beyond the limitations of views and opinions. Geshe Thupten Jinpa, a scholar and long-time translator for the Dalai Lama, who, uniquely, holds doctoral degrees from both Tibetan and Western academic systems, follows with a consideration of the key philosophical presuppositions of the Buddhist psychology of awakening, of the conception of mind which emerges from them, and a comparison of this with Western theories. He suggests that while psychoanalysis aims at bringing about a coherent sense of self, Buddhist psychology aims to transcend the very concept of self. He reveals that Buddhism presents a concept of mind as process, one which is fundamentally positive and compassionate, and considers the implications of this for contemporary psychotherapy.

Stephen Batchelor presents an agnostic approach to Buddhism for the West, supporting Buddhism as a praxis

rather than a religious institution. He proposes a way of life based on deep agnosticism, a passionate acceptance of unknowing in the face of the deepest questions of life and death, looking to Buddhism for a practice of existential confrontation rather than for a source of metaphors of consolation. Gay Watson considers the self that is to be awakened and liberated, finding that, although in theory Western views have come close to the no-self of Buddhism, in practice they have failed to consider the consequences of this knowledge in terms of emotion and possessiveness. Taking a similar theme, but attempting to show that psychotherapy may not be the discipline closest to Buddhism, Fred Pfeil compares Buddhist attitudes to self to those of post-modern theory. Most practically Helena Norberg-Hodge draws on her extended experience in Ladakh to show how Buddhist principles may influence and enhance our economic and ecological activities.

The second section of the book deals more specifically with the scientific perspective. Francisco Varela shows how leading edge conceptions of human beings in cognitive science are coming to resonate strongly with Buddhist views. Guy Claxton describes how Buddhism and psychology come together to account for everyday ‘mystical experiences’ and ‘altered states of consciousness’. Susan Blackmore, explaining the striking parallels between Buddhism and Darwinism, amusingly invites us to awaken from the meme dream. Taking Richard Dawkin’s concept of the meme, the unit of cultural transmission rather than natural selection, she considers the most persistent, and from the Buddhist point of view the most pernicious meme, that of the self. Finally in this section Terence Gaussen reviews research on infant development from neuroanatomy and physiology to emotion, cognition and social development, tracing factors seen to underlie the development of the individual self and consciousness. He

links these new insights to the understanding of suffering, which religious practices seek to overcome.

Unsurprisingly, the greatest number of papers presented address issues of Dharma in action, arising from the interface of Buddhism and psychotherapy, whether in theory or in practice. Papers from both John Welwood and Mark Epstein show how profoundly Buddhist ideas and practices may influence the development of psychotherapy. John Welwood writes of psychological work in the service of spiritual development, arguing the often-ignored point that the paths and goals of Buddhism and psychotherapy while not incompatible are also not identical. He suggests that spiritual practitioners may often benefit from Western therapy, which should not be ignored as unnecessary or trifling within the spiritual path. He clearly addresses the areas of influence of both psychology and spiritual work and shows the ways they may work in harmony. Mark Epstein writes of openness and wholeness, encouraging us to go to pieces without falling apart. Leslie Todres uses vignettes from both psychotherapy and Zen to illustrate the maturation of liberating insight into tacit understanding, and the integration of both into everyday life. Maura Sills describes the practice of psychotherapy itself as a spiritual path, outlining the approach of core process psychotherapy. John Crook considers Zen teachings and practice in relation to a culture of dependency.

The final section is concerned with the applications of Buddhism in therapeutic practice and exemplifies the many different kinds of therapies with which Buddhism is now associated. Opening this section, David Brazier presents a clear exposition of different approaches and uses of Buddhism within psychotherapy. Jon Kabat-Zinn describes the development of his work of mindfulness-based stress reduction in medicine, health care institutions, school, prison and professional sports. James Low writes about structures of suffering from the perspectives of the Nyingma

school of Tibetan Buddhism and Western cognitive-analytic therapy. Also from the point of view of Tibetan Buddhism, Tarab Tulku describes the use of lucid dreaming for therapeutic ends. Joy Manné tells of the use of breathing practices in the context of a psychotherapeutic case study. In more general terms Karen Kissel Wegela describes the intersubjective way of working of contemplative psychotherapy as practised and taught at Naropa Institute. Lastly, Eric Hall explores the Four Noble Truths in the context of counselling and psychotherapy.

Since the writers represent many disciplines and styles, and the book is intended for the general reader, in the interests of simplicity and consistency, we have taken the decision to omit all diacritical marks.

Our thanks go to all the contributors for their work, and also to all those presenters and participants, who helped to make the conferences such significant events. We would like to thank the Dartington Hall Trust for providing such a beautiful venue for the conference, and the Dartington Hall Programme department under Helen Chaloner for their careful and considerate organisation. We very much hope that the work presented here will continue the multivoiced conversation between Buddhism and Western discourse, and further the development of a healthy and strong Buddhism both true to its origins and resonant with our time and culture.

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PART I

Aspects of Awakening: Buddhism Meets the Contemporary Mind

1

Inquiry into Awakening

Christopher Titmuss

IN RECENT YEARS in Britain, the government has produced a number of charters for the public. One concerns health care and another concerns travel on the national railways. These charters provide the public with the opportunity to know the areas of responsibility of a particular utility or service. The consumer then has a right to take steps to address grievance and to have a clear understanding of the arrangement between the service and the consumer or patient. 2,500 years ago, the Buddha also provided a charter – a Charter of Inquiry. This charter provided thoughtful people with guidelines about what they needed to be aware of when exploring religious or spiritual values and beliefs. The Buddha provided a blueprint for the exploration and understanding of our relationship to our views.

In a celebrated talk of the Buddha to the Kalama people, the Buddha gave his Charter for Inquiry. The Kalama people had approached the Buddha and asked him, ‘How do we know who is telling us the truth?’ He replied: ‘Do not accept anything because of

1. repeated oral transmission

2. lineage or tradition
3. it being widely stated
4. it being written in books such as scriptures
5. it being logical and reasonable
6. it inferring and drawing conclusions
7. it having been thought out
8. acceptance and conviction through thinking about a theory
9. the speaker appearing consistent
10. respect for the teacher’

He then goes on to add that ‘know what things would be censured by the wise and which, if pursued, would lead to harm and suffering.’ The Buddha puts the emphasis on ‘inquiry’. The word ‘inquiry’ means to ‘investigate, to explore – with a view to resolution or realisation’.

When we look at this charter, we notice how easily we take up and cling to one or more of the ten points. Repeated oral transmission shows itself in secular and religious culture where the same message is passed on to us day in and day out through those who promote particular ends. How easily we identify with and subscribe to that transmission. Secular values indoctrinate us into believing that elevation of self and acquisition of wealth and luxury goods represents the mark of a successful life. We are even told that this is what it means to live in the ‘real world’.

We may try to compensate for this extreme and narrow vision of life by identifying ourselves with a particular religion. We try to cover all eventualities through the maximisation of pleasure, and comfort for our sorrow and despair through a religious belief including some form of life after death.

We identify with particular views, conventional statements and agreements simply because countless others subscribe to it as well. Politicians, the corporate world, advertising, the media, hearsay and gossip influence our world view and

standpoints. We agree with some, disagree with others and remain uncertain about others. Clinging to specific views generates an intolerance for the alternative outlook of others. Yet often we fail to ask ourselves how we have come by these views, or question the comfort we take from our beliefs, whether secular or religious.

We also invest books and scriptures with enormous authority. Scriptures claim to be the voice of God or the voice of Truth and therefore cannot be questioned. We identify with the views of science and its standpoints about what matters. We then neglect ethical considerations, grasping the constructive face of science whilst ignoring the destructive developments of scientific advancement. Certainly science has a legitimate view, but to claim or imply that science alone has access to true reality exposes an arrogance similar to any that religious authorities propound.

At times we draw conclusions based on inference and analysis and cut ourselves off from a non-conceptual awareness of the nature of things. We forget that for every theory and conviction that we uphold, there are others who will disagree with us, often profoundly.

Finally, the charisma, status, reputation and persuasive power of a speaker all influence us. A speaker may talk articulately and persuasively about an issue with apparent authority and understanding whilst the same issue may be unresolved in his or her life. Even though teachers of enlightenment may speak very well on the basis of their experience and understanding, it does not mean to say that they have insight and wisdom into every area of life. They may repeat some views wisely and skilfully but may need to observe noble silence in other areas. So unconditional respect may be unwise.

By not adopting any of the ten areas in the Charter for Inquiry, we safeguard ourselves from clinging and identifying with a particular standpoint, whether personal,

philosophical, political, religious, social or scientific. It is in this light that we enter a spirit of inquiry while remaining vigilant with regard to what emerges out of it.

We need to understand that nothing whatsoever is worth clinging on to. Most religious teachings have strong elements of belief in them. One common feature uniting religions concerns certainty about what happens when we die. Religions in the Middle East state with conviction there is an afterlife in the form of going to heaven or hell according to our beliefs and behaviour. Or there is the widespread view in the Far East, subcontinent of India and other traditional teachings that we are reborn according to our karma, our deeds. On the other hand, the view of secular culture, under the influence of scientific materialism, states with equal certainty that there is only one existence. We are born once, we die once, with complete extinction at the end of life. Non-existence is one view. *When I am here death is not. When death is here I am not.* But is it necessary for us to carry any view whatsoever about the future – either extinction or continuity in one form or another? Continuity and extinction appear as extreme positions incompatible with the Buddha's teachings on the middle way. A mind preoccupied with the past and future invites extreme standpoints while the inquiry and meditation into the living present reveals the open door to enlightenment.

The Dharma, that is teachings concerned with liberation and enlightenment, encourages us to inquire deeply into the experience of living. It is necessary for us to explore what is, and our relationship to what is. The relationship to the here and now matters far more than taking up views about extinction or non-extinction when we die. Liberation means understanding the emptiness of the I, the ego, the substantial self – and thus resolving the issue of birth and death, past and future.

A young man came on a meditation retreat to Gaia House in South Devon. It was a period of transition in his life. He had the opportunity to go to university, find a job or travel, but most of all, he wanted to develop some deep experience and understanding about who he was and what mattered. I asked him in an interview on the retreat what mattered. He said that he was concerned that his life would pass by and in ten or twenty years he might come to the conclusion that he was wasting his life. So I said to him that at the present moment the future mattered to him and the way that he would relate to the past. I then asked him if he felt that his life had been a waste of time so far.

He said ‘No. So far, I have been doing what I wish to do.’

I asked him ‘What do you want to do now?’

He said ‘I want to live a conscious life.’

I said to him ‘Conscious of what?’

He said, with a smile, ‘Conscious of myself, conscious of my relationships with others, conscious of everything.’

I asked him if he was prepared to make sacrifices to live a clear and conscious life? He said that he was. This young man meditated on the here and now with a depth of dedication and commitment. I could see that he had a strong determination not to fall into habit patterns, fantasy, daydreams and speculation and to stay firmly grounded from moment to moment. Out of this discipline, the heart opens and consciousness awakens.

This young man is an example of the spirit of inquiry that is willing to question the demands and expectations of parents, educators and society upon him. That does not mean that we reject all values. Dharma teachings invite us to discover whether the pursuit of possessions, status and privilege can ever fully satisfy. That exploration will demand from us a great deal of awareness, an inquiry into our priorities, sacrifice and dedication. We will need to understand the nature of interconnectedness that reveals from moment to moment our relationship to the world.

It seems to me that if we take notice of the Buddha's Charter for Inquiry it will save us from getting stuck in a particular place. We can then keep our hearts and minds open. The natural outcome of such an inquiry is an authentic liberation free from self-deception. We neither cling to nor take pride in personal conditioning, social pressures and religious, political and social ideologies. Yet we have not withdrawn from the world, nor live in a detached cocoon. The Buddha's Charter of Inquiry undermines self-righteousness and selfishness. We see the tragic pain and conflict caused through our clinging to and identifying with particular standpoints.

One example of this occurs in the Middle East. Every year I have the privilege of going to Israel. I act as a facilitator with Israelis and Palestinians. There is a genuine spirit of inquiry and exploration taking place in these workshops. In order to inquire deeply, both Israelis and Palestinians have to be willing to make sacrifices. One of those sacrifices is learning to put aside the identification with being an Israeli or Palestinian. Both labels get highly emotionally charged due to a 3,000-year history of living together with conflict and uncertainty. In order to connect with each other, the labels *Palestinian* or *Israeli* must take second place to being a human being, to mutual understanding of suffering and its causes, and to coexistence.

If inquiry is to be a meaningful and profound experience, then it must be free from the propounding of views and opinions to impress others or ourselves. A deep interest in existence transforms our restrictions upon consciousness. If we inquire, we make a significant contribution to the resolution of suffering, finding of wisdom and generating compassion for others. Thus inquiry is not the pursuit of intellectual interests nor aimed to propound particular dogmas. In these teachings living in the real world means the recognition of suffering and working for its dissolution.

For more than twenty years I have been teaching Dharma retreats and insight meditation around the world. In regular afternoon sessions in the meditation hall, I facilitate an inquiry period. The principles of this are simple but effective:

1. Only one person can speak at a time.
2. She or he must speak from an area of direct concern to them or from their experience.
3. This may take the simple form of a question, an obvious form of inquiry. Or the person may have something he or she wishes to speak about.
4. I will then respond to that person. My response may take the form of asking that person questions or replying to their questions. A dialogue then gets underway.
5. My intention is to contribute to their insight and understanding.
6. It is important that we avoid abstractions or intellectual ideas.
7. When the inquiry is taking place I request everyone else to listen fully. That means both listening inwardly and outwardly. Inner listening is attending to the responses taking place in the inquiry. Is there empathy, interest or insight? Is there boredom, agitation or inner confusion?
8. The inquiry with the person may last for five minutes or half an hour. At any time either I, or the person who is speaking, can say thank you to bring the inquiry to a close.
9. When an inquiry with a person comes to its close, there is a period of silence. This period of silence lasts four or five minutes. This enables people to reflect on what was said, to digest, or to meditate on the here and now. It also generates a receptivity to the next person who wishes to speak.

10. After four or five minutes, I will invite another person to speak. Nobody is obliged to speak.

People are willing to speak about all manner of personal issues as well as explore their way of being in this world. I believe inquiry, with or without the aid of another, can dissolve immense problems and pressures, and make significant shifts of consciousness that are enlightening. Inquiry keeps our minds open, making a genuine and authentic difference to our life.

Profound insights can also emerge from reading, but all too often when we read, we only gain some intellectual satisfaction. Such understanding does not make for a real shift in our consciousness. In the East the traditional teachings required a genuine discipline and interest in what was read. It was not unusual for men and women of Dharma practice to have just a few verses from a book to read and reflect on.

There is a danger that the huge number of spiritual books available may inhibit inquiry rather than nourish it. If we are reading a book and a point in it genuinely touches us, we must feel the truth of it and see how it relates directly to our life. At that point we ought to be able to put the book down and just let the truth of that statement run deep into our being. It is this capacity to make the greatest journey in life from head to heart that matters so much. For that to take place, it requires from us a receptivity, a spaciousness and a willingness and ability to absorb. Meditation will heighten our receptivity. There are numerous questions of life that contribute to deep inquiry and the realisation of wisdom and enlightenment. For example:

What is love?
What is my relationship to impermanence?
Where is the clinging?
Is there any substance to the self?

What am I prepared to sacrifice to go deeply?
Am I in touch with my intentions?
What steps can I take to transform any greed, hate and fear within?
Do I want to realise a liberated and insightful life?
Am I willing to sustain inquiry and reflection until there is genuine enlightenment?

Dharma teachings are not a psychotherapy, philosophy or set of religious beliefs. They do not fall into those categories. It is a wonderful thing to explore and inquire into life. No stone is left unturned. When we discover the spirit and the skill in inquiry it means that we are willing to understand all the bitter-sweet experiences of life. It is all grist for the mill.

Genuine inquiry challenges us, makes us face up to ourselves and to see where we get stuck. We have the opportunity to go beyond absolutism, relativism, patterns of clinging and indecision. In liberation we know the limitations of views and opinions. The mind finds its rest in such a liberation.

May all beings live in peace
May all beings be free
May all beings be enlightened

2

The Foundations of a Buddhist Psychology of Awakening

Geshe Thupten Jinpa

I

AT THE HEART of the Buddha's teaching is the message of liberation. This liberative transformation is characterised as *moksha* (freedom), *nirvana* (beyond sorrow) or, simply as *bodhi* (awakening or enlightenment). The Buddha's message of 'awakening' is often articulated in terms of a formula known as the Four Noble Truths. Briefly stated, the Four Truths are: (1) that there is suffering (2) that suffering comes from its origin (3) that there is a cessation of suffering and finally (4) that there is a path leading to such a cessation. According to Buddhism, the key to attaining this freedom is said to lie in gaining deep insight into what is perceived to be a fundamental truth of our existence. By this I am referring to the famous Buddhist doctrine of *anatman*, or 'no-self'. We can identify the key elements of the teaching on 'no-self' as follows:

1. the existence of self as an independent, eternal, and atemporal unifying principle is an illusion;

2. there is no need to posit an abiding principle like the *atman* (or soul) to explain the nature of our experience or the laws of causality;
3. the nature and existence of persons must be understood in terms of the five psycho-physical aggregates[1] which serve as the basis for our personal identity and existence;
4. that the grasping at such a notion of self lies at the root of our suffering and bondage, i.e. our unenlightened existence; and
5. the negation of this self constitutes the essence of the path to enlightenment.

This much seems to be common to most schools of Buddhism. As can be seen, Buddhism draws an interesting correlation between the self and *samsara* (or unenlightened existence) on the one hand, and 'no-self' and *nirvana* (freedom) on the other. The traditional Buddhist teachings on the twelve links of dependent origination is an elaborate illustration of this correlation. On this model, our existence is characterised by a perpetual cycle of confusion and dissatisfaction through interlocking chains of causes and conditions. At the root of all this is believed to lie an 'ignorance', a fundamental confusion pertaining to our own existence and the world. This, according to Buddhism, is the first link in the chain of twelve interlocking factors.

This 'ignorance', or *avidya* as it is called in the Buddhist parlance, is not a mere passive state of unknowing, nor is it a state of universal doubt along the lines of Cartesian universal scepticism. *Avidya* is directly related to one's own sense of self and identity. It is an attachment to a false notion of self, hence it is an active state of 'misknowing'. Unlike mere ignorance or unknowing it is in direct opposition to true knowledge. Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the Tibetan Buddhist thinker and the founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, defines *avidya* as 'that which is the

direct opposite of *vidya*, knowledge'. Like 'untruth' and 'unfriendliness' the negative particle *a* in *avidya* is a negation entailing a direct opposition to *vidya* (knowledge). It is thus a cognitive state, albeit an untrue one which can only be dispelled by generating the corresponding *vidya.* So, it can be said that this 'ignorance' is our deeply ingrained grasping mind that projects and apprehends intrinsic being or essence to our own selves and the various factors of existence.

With respect to understanding the function of *avidya* it is useful to recall a causal sequence which is encapsulated by Nagarjuna (second century CE), the founder of Madhyamaka (the Middle Way philosophy) school, in the following formula:

clinging to the factors of existence → grasping at the self;
grasping at the self → karmic action;
karmic action? birth-death cycle.[2]

The reversal of this causation, which is the process towards freedom, is beautifully captured in the following verses from *The Dhammapada*:

I wandered through the rounds of countless rebirths,
Seeking but not finding the builder of this house.
Sorrowful indeed is birth again and again.
Oh, housebuilder! You have now been seen.
You shall build the house no longer.
All your rafters of evils are broken,
Your ridgepoles of ignorance are shattered.
The fever of craving is past.
My mind is joyful in the unconditioned freedom.[3]

What this causal process tells us is that a belief in the notion of self – i.e. an abiding, autonomous subject – gives rise to a clinging to an essence. This then leads to a pattern

of existence where your whole *modus operandi* derives from a deep attachment to this inner core within you, which is your ‘real self’. Every action is directed towards protecting and nurturing this precious core. Your interaction with others is judged in terms of whether it is beneficial or harmful towards this ‘you’. Depending on how you judge the situation to be, you react either positively or negatively. This is of course accompanied by the occurrence of differing afflictive emotions within you motivating you to act in a particular way. Thus, a whole pattern of thought and action is set which becomes deeply habitual. This entire process need not necessarily be as conscious as the language of mental phenomena such as ‘belief’, ‘judgement’, ‘clinging’, etc., may suggest. In fact, much of this process should be understood as innate and functioning at what could be perhaps described as a precognitive level.

Tsongkhapa makes an important distinction between two types of *avidya*, which elucidates the nature of this so-called fundamental ignorance. One is the *avidya* that is acquired through thought processes such as rational thinking, and the other could be described as ‘the natural, underlying tendencies inherent in all of us which instinctually seek grounding and solidity’ for both the self and the world.[4] All the various metaphysical theories of self can be said to belong to the acquired category in that they are conscious, reactive attempts to certify and affirm our deeply ingrained notions of self and individuality. So, according to Buddhism, the task of the religious practitioner is to see through this deception and to reorient his or her personality so that there is no longer any felt need to seek an absolute ground. Therefore, it can be said that the acquired *avidya* is not the principal object of our critical analysis. The seeker’s true opponent is himself or herself, albeit one’s own sense of self that instinctually holds on to a notion of an abiding, individual core within oneself. This echoes the Buddha’s

dictum that you are your own worst enemy and also your own ultimate saviour.

Given that Buddhism defines its goal of ‘awakening’ in terms of an individual’s journey from a state of fundamental confusion and suffering to that of ‘knowledge’ and freedom, much of the process involved in this transformation can be justifiably characterised as ‘psychological’. It entails first and foremost a thorough understanding of one’s own sense of self and its modes of operation. To a large extent, the process of discovering this can be said to be psychoanalytic in that its primary activity is to explore the psychodynamics of our mind. So the spirit of psychoanalysis does seem to be captured in the basic formula of the Four Noble Truths. First, the patient must be aware that he or she is ill. Secondly, he or she must identify what causes and sustains that illness; in other words, where the root of the illness lies. Only then can a cure be sought for the illness. This is how a process of healing begins.[5]

Having said this, I think it is vitally important not to succumb to the temptation of reducing Buddhism to a form of psychoanalysis or therapy. We should be aware of the fundamental differences between Buddhism and modern psychoanalytic disciplines, at least as they are popularly perceived today. To begin with, the goals of the two systems are different. Roughly speaking, psychoanalysis aims at bringing about a harmony between the various elements of individual’s psyche so that a greater coherence can be achieved within the person’s sense of self. In contrast, the aspiration in Buddhism is to transcend the bounds of the very concept of the self itself in that clinging to any sense of ‘core’ is seen as an obstruction. In contemporary language, we could say that what is being asked from us by the Buddhist doctrine of ‘no-self’ is not a mere change of an intellectual outlook, rather it is a radical transformation of our very being. Not only does this require a fundamental shift in our paradigm but also a radical reorientation of our

frame of reference. One could say that, in a sense, Buddhism promises more than psychoanalysis. Furthermore, in Buddhism, there is an understanding that the existential insecurity at the heart of our being is so fundamental that it is beyond the content of any individual person's story. There is also no sense that the roots of many of our psychological ills can be traced to our childhood, although one could accept that certain aspects of them can be accentuated by unhealthy parenting. Therefore, Buddhist meditation tends to be less specific in its focus compared to psychoanalytic approaches. By specificity, I am referring to many of the contingent facts which make up our identity as an individual, such as gender, ethnicity, culture, language, and family environments. In addition, Buddhist meditation also demands the use of reason and philosophical reflections many of which are of a theoretical nature. This is, however, not to deny that there are significant parallels and overlaps between the concerns and approaches of Buddhism and that of modern psychoanalysis.

So, what *is* this freedom or awakening that Buddhism so consistently speaks of? In other words, how does Buddhism define its concept of awakening? The Buddhist *nirvana* is not just a psychological or epistemological state characterised by a temporary suspension of clinging to a self. More importantly, it is an ontological state, a mode of being where the person has effected a total transformation of his or her being. In such a person there is no longer any psychological and emotional need to grasp at any ground or solidity for security. Paradoxically, the realisation that there is no 'real' core to our being – that there is no essence – is said to liberate the mind! It is this essential *groundlessness* which becomes the source of security. As a Tibetan meditation text puts it: 'My mind, tired of the thoughts chasing after something, now rests at ease in the forest of the ineffable [truth].'[6]

Thus, we see that there is a direct connection between the search for freedom and the quest for the knowledge of the self (or its absence). In addition to the above, it is useful to take into account the mystical and aesthetical perspectives of the Vajrayana[7] Buddhism and its vision of enlightenment. According to this view, full enlightenment must encompass the perfection of not only all aspects of the human psyche but also the individual's 'physiology' as well. Principal amongst the elements transmuted is the sexual energy, which is seen as the key to spiritual freedom. *Nirvana* or 'awakening' here is defined in terms of perfection of the entire being. It is a state of non-duality in every sense of the word. The dichotomies that characterise our everyday existence in the *samsaric* world, such as 'subject and object', 'mind and matter', 'self and other', 'here and there', 'now and future', etc., – distinctions which are inescapable for our spatio-temporal existence – are believed to be totally transcended. In this view, not only must the tendency for grasping at one's own self and subjectivity be eliminated but more interestingly the Vajrayana teachings ask us to also transcend our very perception and identities of ordinary existence. If our deeply ingrained notions of self and individuality are at the root of our bondage, then surely these teachings are right in claiming that the habitual patterns which underlie our perception and the very understanding of the world become suspect as well. According to this view, it is believed that so long as we are imprisoned in our ordinary, 'normal' ways of perceiving the self and the world the tendency to cling at something secure and solid will always remain within us.

In summarising the Buddhist teachings on freedom, I have aimed to be as general as possible so that our understanding does not carry the prejudices which are too specific to an individual Buddhist school. Given that historically so many schools and traditions of Buddhism have evolved, the question could be raised about what

makes a school of thought Buddhist. In other words, what binds all the various Buddhist denominations together as a family? Perhaps a useful way is to perceive that there is a certain ‘orientation’ of mind which is characteristic of most schools of Buddhism. Philosophically speaking, most Buddhist schools share a deep reluctance towards metaphysics. One could say that the Buddhists are minimalists with regard to metaphysical ideas. They postulate only the bare minimum. A form of an Asian Ockham’s razor principle operates in Buddhist thinking. If Buddhists are to be philosophically labelled at all, their emphasis on validity of genuine experience means that we would have to call them ‘empiricists’. In the ethical realm, they emphasise individual responsibility based on an understanding of the natural law of causality and also a deep appreciation of the interconnectedness of self and others. Soteriologically, the Buddhists’ approach is to seek freedom through self-reliance. Salvation through a transcendent being external to personal existence has no real place in Buddhist religious praxis.

I shall now aim to identify and analyse what I see as key philosophical assumptions which underlie the Buddhist psychological theory of awakening. The aim of this enterprise is to bring into sharper focus the powerful metaphysical or religious ideas which appear to serve as the premises of the Buddhist teachings on awakening. This is crucial, for only by appreciating these underlying premises can we have a clearer understanding of what the Buddhist teachings on awakening entail.

II

As I see it, there are two fundamental premises to the Buddhist concept of awakening. First, there is the understanding that all defilements of our mind which the Buddhists call *klesha* or ‘afflictions’ are, in some profound