

The Brain is wider than the Sky – Emily Dickinson

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
For – put them side by side –
The one the other will contain
With ease – and You – beside –

The Brain is deeper than the sea –
For – hold them – Blue to Blue –
The one the other will absorb –
As Sponges – Buckets – do

The Brain is just the weight of God –
For – heft them – Pound for Pound –
And they will differ – if they do –
As Syllable from Sound -

Meditation and Psychotherapy

How we use the mind to analyze and
understand ourselves

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Meditation and Psychotherapy

- Both meditation and psychotherapy seek to reduce human suffering.
- Both meditation (vipassana) and psychotherapy rely on our ability to “see” ourselves, either through an “observing ego”, or through “awareness”.
- Both meditation and psychotherapy entail a process that takes place over time.

Meditation and Psychotherapy: Comparison

Meditation

- Meditation tries to help individuals cope with universal suffering
- Meditation takes place in a meditation center and at home
- Meditation deconstructs how we create our world
- Meditation focuses on awareness and body sensations

Psychotherapy

- Psychotherapy looks at individual (unique) aspects of suffering
- Psychotherapy takes place primarily in the office
- Psychotherapy often looks at the impact of early experiences on how we interpret our world
- The “talking cure” emphasizes using the “intellect” – thinking through issues

Problems of Intellectualization in Psychotherapy

Owen Renik (2006):

Psychoanalysis is a scientific study of the mind, but “practical clinical psychoanalysis” is a treatment that aims to help the patient feel less distress and more satisfaction in daily life...”

Dewane (2008):

Psychodynamic approaches that emphasize insight imply that a change in attitude will most likely result in a change of behavior...focusing on changing behavior regardless of accompanying emotion is the emphasis...[of ACT], (a mindfulness-based treatment).

Free Association – What is it?

“One more thing before you start. What you tell me must differ in one respect from an ordinary conversation. Ordinarily you rightly try to keep a connecting thread running through your remarks and you exclude any intrusive ideas that may occur to you...But in this case you must proceed differently. You will notice that as you relate things various thoughts will occur to you which you would like to put aside on the ground of certain criticisms and objections. You will be tempted to say to yourself that this or that is irrelevant here, or is quite unimportant, or nonsensical, so that there is no need to say it. You must never give in to these criticisms, but must say it in spite of them...”

Sigmund Freud, 1913

Free association means:

1. You try not to censor any thoughts and look at them all impartially.
2. You continue to follow your thoughts until they lead to (usually) a new insight or underlying awareness of the issue under discussion.
3. No thought is considered irrelevant or unimportant. It is assumed that the unconscious is directing your thoughts at all times.
4. You say whatever comes into your mind, following your thoughts as they arise.
5. The goal is understanding personal psychodynamics.

What is Meditation?

“When we as meditators perceive any sensory object, we are not to dwell upon it in the ordinary egoistic way. We should rather examine the very process of perception itself. We should watch what that object does to our sense and our perception. We should watch the feelings that arise and the mental activities that follow. We should note the changes that occur in our consciousness as a result. In watching all these phenomena, we must be aware of the universality of what we are seeing.”

Bhante Gunaratana, 2002

The Process of Meditation

1. In meditation, one DOES NOT follow ones' thoughts – rather, as soon as the meditator is aware of thinking, the meditator tries to return to the object of meditation. Content is unimportant – process is what one looks at.
2. Whatever arises, whether thoughts, feelings, or perceptions, is viewed impartially. The meditator tries to stay impartial and non-judgmental.
3. The goal is understanding universal processes of living, i.e. impermanence (anicca), no-self (anatta) and suffering (dukkha).

Three Ways in which Meditation Supports Psychotherapy

1. **Affect Tolerance:** The ability to be aware of feelings without having to act on them.
2. **Reality Testing:** The ability to see the world as it really is, with a minimum of projected psychological distortion.
3. **Loosening of Defenses:** Every defense is a distortion of reality to some degree, i.e. rationalization.

Characteristics of “The Healthy Personality”

- Self-acceptance
- Frustration Tolerance
- Emotional Control
- Openness to New Experience
- Being Present in the Moment
- Autonomy
- Mastery of the Environment

Buddhist Concepts of “Mental Health”

If greed, hatred and delusion are “The Three Poisons”, then non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion are the ultimate goal. These equate to:

1. Frustration tolerance
2. Emotional control
3. Being present in the moment

Case Examples

- Mrs. R.: Irritable bowel syndrome, worked primarily on seeing the world as it really is.
- Mr. M.: Anger at son/arguing with wife, worked primarily on tolerating frustration without erupting in angry outbursts.

Using Meditation in Psychotherapy

- Psychotherapist uses meditation to enhance his or her ability to listen, be present, hold affect.
- The therapist teaches meditation to the patient in order to help them work on an issue between sessions and to develop a new skill.
- Buddhist concepts of “mental health” may or may not be discussed.

The Dhammapada

Preceded by mind
Are phenomena,
Led by mind
Formed by mind.
If with mind polluted
One speaks or acts,
Then pain follows,
As a wheel follows
The draft ox's foot.

Wallis (trans. 2007)

Conclusion

1. Both meditation and psychotherapy seek the end of suffering.
2. Psychotherapy helps us to learn about our own unique history.
3. Meditation helps teach us about how the world works.
4. Both approaches can bring about change, i.e. psychotherapy through insight and meditation through both insight (wisdom) and learning new skills. Together, both approaches can help free us from both our personal and our universal delusions.