

## **Erich Fromm's interest in Buddhism**

Ruwan M. Jayatunge

The Social Psychologist and Humanistic Philosopher Erich Fromm was vastly influenced by Freud and Karl Heinrich Marx. He became a follower of Nonanalytic tradition. In later years Fromm started reading Zen Buddhism in depth. He saw Buddhism as a philosophical-anthropological system based on observation of facts and their rational explanation. ("Buddhism and the Mode of Having vs. Being" – Erich Fromm 1975). Fromm believed that Buddhism is a completely rational system which demands no intellectual sacrifice.

Fromm's interest towards Buddhism was obvious. Among the Western scholars Caroline A. F. Rhys David's was one of the pioneers to conceptualize canonical Buddhist writings in terms of psychology. Professor William James was making some comparisons between the consciousness and thought process that was described in the Western Psychology and what the Buddha had taught two millenniums ago. Many former members of the Freud's Psychoanalytic society were reading Buddhist philosophy and making evaluations. By this time Carl Jung had highlighted the mind analysis in Buddhism. Therefore Fromm's interest towards Buddhism was not an abrupt event.

In his 1950 work *Psychoanalysis and Religion* Erich Fromm profoundly analyzed Buddhist Philosophy. He made a distinction between the authoritarian and humanistic religions and interpreted Buddhism as an antiauthoritarian religion that provides for personal validation and growth.

As Fromm viewed, in the Buddhist philosophy there is no surrender to a power transcending figure and as a virtue; obedience does not play a key role. Buddhism is centered around man and his strength. Man must develop his power of reason in order to understand himself, his relationship to his fellow men and his position in the universe. Fromm further says that a humanistic religion like Buddhism is geared to achieve the greatest strength, not the greatest powerlessness; virtue is self-realization, not obedience.

Like Carl Rogers Fromm believed man's ability for self-growth. He refused to believe the Freudian concept that explains man is geared by innate primary destructive forces of libido. Fromm realized that unlike in the Viennese Victorian society sexual repression plays no major part in the Contemporary Society. Fromm once stated that in the modern society people mostly repress their true thoughts and feelings rather than the sexual urges.

### **Buddhism and Psychoanalysis**

The psychoanalytical components in Buddhism have been emphasized by many scholars like Martin Wicramasinghe D.Lit, Laurence W. Christensen etc. The Buddhist Jathaka stories from the Khuddaka Nikaya contain 550 stories and Rev Buddhaghosa, translated most of the Jathaka stories into Pali about 430 A.D. In most of these Buddhist Jathaka stories a powerful psychoanalytical fraction can be detected.

The British Psychiatrist and a renowned Psychoanalyst Dr Douglas H. Burns writes that "The realization of Nirvana requires the maximum possible goal of psychoanalysis—a complete laying bare of the subconscious, the total removal of repression, rationalization and all other defense" (*Buddhist Thought* – Dr Douglas H. Burns P.155)

Some contemporary psychologists see parallels between the Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis.

The primacy of experiencing for both disciplines, particularly concerning the experiencing subject's momentary state of consciousness, forms a central theme for both Zen and psychoanalysis. (Cooper 2001)

Erich Fromm saw a larger perimeter in psychoanalysis and did not limit it to neuroses. Fromm criticized Freud's patriarchal attitude as limiting the development of psychoanalysis as a science. (Maccoby 1994). Fromm suggests that Zen Buddhism has a prolific influence on theory and technique of psychoanalysis.

"...[W]hat can be said with more certainty is that the knowledge of Zen, and a concern with it, can have a most fertile and clarifying influence on the theory and technique of psychoanalysis. Zen, different as it is in its method from psychoanalysis, can sharpen the focus, throw new light on the nature of insight, and heighten the sense of what it is to see, what it is to be creative, what it is to overcome the affective contaminations and false intellectualizations which are the necessary results of experience based on the subject-object split" (*Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, Fromm p. 140).

The psychoanalytical module in Buddhism is very much evident. Buddhism provides psychological methods of analyzing human experience and inquiring into the potential and hidden capacities of the human mind. According to Buddhism mind precedes its objects. They are mind-governed and mind-made. The verse 37 of the Dhammapada explains the dynamics of human mind thus

The mind is capable of travelling vast distances – up or down, north or south, east or west – in any direction. It can travel to the past or the future. Gerald Virtbauer of the University of Vienna makes comparisons between the Buddhism and the Western Psychology.

The first approach is to present and explore parts of Buddhist teachings as a psychology. As many teachers of different Buddhist traditions point out, Buddhism is not primarily a religion based on faith and worship, but a system, or an art to inquire into the human mind. (*Buddhism as a Psychological System: Three Approaches*, Gerald Virtbauer 2008)

### **Search for Meaning**

In 1959 Fromm co-authored an incomparable book titled *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* with D. T. Suzuki and Richard de Martino. In this book Fromm postulates distinct relationship between the Western psychoanalyses and Zen Buddhism. Fromm argued that the human being needs to find an answer to his existence and this urge to search for meaning differs human from other animals. In addition he highlights that human has an inner dynamism that directed towards personal growth. He viewed that living is a process that starts at birth and does not end at death. Fromm states that most of the people die before they are fully born. The notion of fully born according to Fromm is becoming fully functional as a human being.

Fromm in his book *Escape from Freedom* asks series of questions that were originally based on Talmud.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?  
If I am for myself only, what am I?  
If not now, when?

These types of questions were evident in the Buddhist Philosophy. Once when the lord Buddha was delivering a sermon a young girl showed up. Then the Buddha asked a series of questions from her.

Where do you come from?

She said I don't know Venerable Sir, and then the Buddha asked

Where do you go?

She said I don't know.

Do you know?

The girl replied – "Yes"

Finally the Buddha asked

Don't you know?

She said “No”

It was an enigmatic type of answers but the girl was referring to her previous existence when the Buddha asked where do you come from? She did not know from where she came to the present existence. When she was asked where do you go? She replied I don't know, because she does not know where she would go after her death. When the Buddha asked do you know? She said yes because she knew that she was a mortal and she would certainly die one day. When she was asked don't you know? Her reply was no. Because she did not know when she would be dead.

The search for meaning has become the main theme of religion and philosophy. The meaning of life constitutes a philosophical question concerning the purpose and significance of life or existence in general. Dr Viktor E. Frankl in his influential book *Man's Search for Meaning* states that the meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected. (*Man's Search for Meaning*- p.157) In 494 B.C the Prince Siddhartha renounced his wealth and went in search for meaning. He spent six years travelling, exchanging ideas with different mentors and practicing meditation. When he attained the Enlightenment he realized that the meaning of life has been obscured by universal suffering. The Buddha states that:

- All of life is marked by suffering.
- Suffering is caused by desire and attachment.
- Suffering can be stopped.
- The way to end suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha explained that life is permeated with suffering caused by desire that suffering ceases when desire ceases.

### **Human Suffering**

The Buddhist Philosophy deeply explains the causes of human suffering and path for freedom. Therefore Buddhism is not based on pessimism. It is based on realistic principles. The mundane understanding of suffering is related to bearing of pain, inconvenience, and distress that connected with hopelessness. According to the Buddha the word suffering has a deep existential meaning. It is an universal explanation of the true human condition.

To explain suffering, the Buddha used the term “Dukkha” which has a universal meaning. Many Western Psychologists misinterpreted the word “Dukkha” or universal suffering and they viewed it as an agonizing human condition. This was due to the mistranslation done by the French Philosopher Anatole France in the late Centaury. Anatole France translated the word “Dukkha” in to French as *souffrance* and then in to English as *suffering*. Ever since many Western scholars grasped the concept of “Dukkha” incorrectly. Therefore many thought Dukkha symbolizes the dark side of human existence filled with pessimism and despair. However, Fromm was able to grasp the deep philosophical notion of universal suffering or “Dukkha” and he saw human suffering in personal lives, in the society and in the Civilization.

In 1960 Fromm wrote that “Psychoanalysis is a characteristic expression of Western man's spiritual crisis, and an attempt to find a solution”(Fromm et al., 1960, p. 80). Although Freud stated that Psychoanalysis is a method of medical treatment for those who suffer from neurosis (Five Lectures delivered by 1909 by Dr. Sigmund Freud at the Clark University) Fromm did not want to limit Psychoanalysis to the neurotic patients. Unlike Sigmund Freud, Fromm believed in experience rather than interpretation.

Fromm's psychoanalytic technique was essentially different from Freud's psychic archeology. Fromm attempted to create what he called a more “humanistic” face-to-face encounter. He believed the analyst must understand the patient by empathy as well as intellect, with the heart as well as the head. (Maccoby 1994)

Freud assumed that hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are the remnants and the memory symbols of certain traumatic experiences. When Freud went in to individual level Fromm applied Psychoanalytic theory to social and cultural problems.

Fromm saw the human suffering in the individual level as well as within the society. He saw the collective suffering. Fromm was on the view that psychological problems often result when an individual feels isolated from society.

Describing individual suffering Fromm wrote:

“The common suffering is the alienation from oneself, from one’s fellow man, and from nature; the awareness that life runs out of one’s hand like sand, and that one will die without having lived; that one lives in the midst of plenty and yet is joyless” (*Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, E. Fromm et al. pp. 85-86).

Fromm further says that one of the worst forms of mental suffering is boredom, not knowing what to do with oneself and one’s life. Even if man had no monetary or any other reward, he would be eager to spend his energy in some meaningful way because he could not stand the boredom which inactivity produces.

Fromm saw extensive suffering in the society that was resulted from centuries old socio economic systems and loss of meaning. Fromm’s book *The Sane Society* looks in to the dilemmas caused by the industrialization. Many Psychologists believe that Fromm’s publication *The Sane Society* was a respond to Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*. In the *Sane Society* Fromm looked in to a new form of human suffering and man’s escape into over conformity and the danger of robotism in the modern industrial society.

In his book *Escape from Freedom* Fromm describes how freedom can be frightening and therefore, many people run from freedom. For average men freedom is not an emancipation it is a burden. Fromm further postulates that man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve.

### **Know Thyself**

Fromm strongly believed that “Know thyself” is one of the fundamental commands that aim at human strength and happiness. Fromm’s notion “Know thyself” was stated by the Buddha over 2600 years ago. The story of Bhaddawaggiya Princes reveals the importance of knowing thyself.

The Bhaddawaggiya Princes were looking for a woman who stole their valuable possessions. When they met the Buddha the princes asked “Venerable Sir, did you see a woman? The Buddha answered “What is more important whether look for a woman or to look for thyself? (means know thyself). The princes replied that more important is to know thyself.

Knowing thyself or achieving self-realization is one of the virtues of Buddhism. The young apprentice Angulimala was ill-advised by his teacher and he became an addictive killer. He killed nearly 999, men and collected the fingers of his victims. When he saw the Buddha he thought that he could have his next victim. Angulimala ordered the Buddha to stop. The Buddha replied “ I have already stopped therefore you should stop too” The Buddha meant that he does not harm anyone and he was able to stop the cycle of Sansara or the continuous flow of birth, life, death and reincarnation. This phrase created a cognitive revolution in Angulimala. Angulimala had a self-realization that led to a dramatic transformation his personality. He renounced violence.

Finding thyself was one of the key ideas of Fromm. Fromm once expressed that man’s main task in life is to give birth to himself, to become what he potentially is. The most important product of his effort is his own personality. Fromm deemed that attempts should be made to create harmony between the drives of the individual and the society.

### **Human Freedom**

The idea of freedom was unique to Fromm. He assumed that freedom is the central characteristic of human nature. According to Fromm often people escape from freedom. He described three ways in which people escape from freedom:

- Authoritarianism (either submitting power to others becoming passive and compliant or becoming an authority by applying structure to others)
- 2. Destructiveness.
- 3. Automaton conformity.

In his 1968 book *The Revolution of Hope* Fromm writes that man has to protect himself not only against the danger of losing his life but also against the danger of losing his mind.

Michael Maccoby in his 1994 article *The Two Voices of Erich Fromm: the Prophetic and the Analytic* points out that Fromm's model of the healthy individual who transcends and transforms society is the "productive character," the individuated person who loves and creates. Unlike his other character types – receptive, hoarding, exploitative and marketing – the productive character lacks clinical or historical grounding. It is a questionable ideal. (Maccoby 1994)

Fromm believed that human is capable of determining his freedom. He saw Zen Buddhism as a way from bondage to freedom. In his own words Fromm explains: "Zen Buddhism is the art of seeing into the nature of one's being; it is a way from bondage to freedom; it liberates our natural energies; ... and it impels us to express our faculty for happiness and love (p. 115).

Fromm introduced five basic needs and the 5th need he called -A Frame of Orientation – The need for a stable and consistent way of perceiving the world and understanding its events.

The Buddha explained that the virtuous man perceives the world and its events in realistic manner. He achieves self realization the highest plane in the human intellectual structure.

The Ven.Dr. Walpola Rahula explains this condition more gracefully in his book *What the Buddha Taught*.

He who has realized Truth, Nirvana, is the happiest being in the world. He is free from all 'complexes' and obsessions, the worries and troubles that torment others. His mental health is perfect. He does not repent the past, nor does he brood over the future. He lives fully in the present. Therefore he appreciates and enjoys things in the purest sense without self-projections. He is joyful, exultant, enjoying the pure life, his faculties pleased, free from anxiety, serene and peaceful.

Fromm saw humanistic religion such as Buddhism could help people achieve self-fulfillment and understanding. Fromm concluded that the Buddhism could see man realistically and objectively, having nobody but the 'awakened' ones to guide him, and being able to be guided because each man has within himself the capacity to awake and be enlightened.

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