

East/West Dialogue: The Importance of Attitude

BY CHARLES T. TART

Contemporary psychotherapists are increasingly looking to non-Western traditions for expanded insight into the phenomenon we call "mind." In the process, many are discovering time-honored theoretical models and therapeutic techniques that offer effective adjuncts and, in some cases, viable alternatives to the standard approaches taken in the West. This kind of cross-fertilization holds the promise of having a similarly rewarding effect upon receptive non-Western practitioners. As a pioneer in the field of transpersonal psychology and altered states of consciousness, as well as a respected researcher and professor of psychology (University of California, Davis), the author of this article expresses his special concerns about this on-going process and suggests a productive attitude that will serve to further these efforts.

[The following comments are made with respect for all beings and in the hope of promoting their spiritual growth and happiness.]

It is fashionable and important to have East/West "dialogues" today, but there has been a problem in many of the dialogues conducted so far: They have had much less long range impact than is possible and needed because they have really been *monologs*, not genuine *dialogs*. Westerners who are psychologists, scientists, and themselves Buddhist practitioners participate in these "dialogues" largely in the form of asking questions of Buddhist authority figures about what traditional Buddhist views are on various topics. In this atmosphere there is a strong, implicit assumption that traditional Buddhists have all the answers, with Westerners often implicitly (and sometimes grudgingly) taking the attitude, "I'm only a mere Westerner, I am confused, you have the perfect teachings, please enlighten me."

From a Western psychological point of view, this common format can be a useful and appropriate attitude for a student of Buddhism to take

towards his or her personal teacher in many teaching situations. Since a number of Western scientists (including myself) are committed students of Buddhism, this respectful attitude will result in some of us attaining a deeper understanding of Buddhism by inviting serious contemplation of ideas and practices that are at first resisted by the Western mind.

Insofar as our shared goal is a *large scale, effective* impact of Buddhism on Western culture, so as to increase the amount of happiness, wisdom and compassion in the world, this traditional one-way approach is, unfortunately, not sufficient as it directly affects only a small number of people and can inadvertently alienate many people important to reach.

Allow me to elaborate.

I stated that I personally am a "committed student" of Buddhism. What does that mean? It means many things, such as the fact that I seek greater understanding and compassion for myself, that I seek "enlightenment." I do so for many reasons: I share traditional Buddhist motives here, in that I want to be of greater help to others in finding happiness and enlightenment and, of course, I want to diminish my own suffering. I also have motives that seem more Western to me, as I seldom hear them mentioned in traditional Buddhist teachings.

I am basically *curious*, for example, I want to explore my mind and others' minds personally and scientifically. I also want to help my Western culture create and regenerate effective spiritual roots to bring happiness and

di'a-logue (-log), **di'al-og**, *n.* [Fr. *dialogue*; L. *dialogus*; Gr. *dialogos*, dialogue, conversation, from *dialegesthai*, to talk, converse; *dia-*, between, and *legein*, to talk.] 1: a talking together; conversation. **2: interchange and discussion of ideas, especially when open and frank, as in seeking mutual understanding or harmony.** 3: a written work in the form of a conversation. 4. the passages of talk in a play, story, radio act, etc.

mon'o-logue (-log), *n.* [Fr. from L.Gr. *monologos*, speaking alone or to oneself; *monos*, single, alone, and *legein*, to speak.] **1: a long speech by one speaker, sometimes one monopolizing the conversation.** 2: a poem or other composition in which one person is represented as speaking alone. 3: a part of a play in which one character speaks alone; soliloquy. 4: a play or playlet for one actor. 5: a type of dramatic entertainment by one speaker only. Also spelled monolog.

spirituality to my culture, as well as having other motivations. Consequently I give great respect and attention to Buddhist teachings, teachers and students because I sense a living spirituality in Buddhism. I try to practice at least some of the teachings I receive. I try to communicate some of the wisdom I hope I have learned in my professional work and writings. I meditate daily, and I occasionally attend longer teaching and meditation retreats.

But I am not “just” a student of Buddhism, “just” a Buddhist. I am many other things, things that embody typical Western characteristics. These factors must be considered and dealt with if Buddhism is to have a major, rather than a minor, impact in the West.

First and foremost, I am a human being. I have hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. I have a cultural and individual conceptual system, a mind operating with beliefs and concepts through which I approach life. I know that the limitations of my mind, both in a personal and a general Western way, create needless suffering and block me from full growth into enlightenment and wisdom. Yet as a Westerner, I am also quite proud of my mind and my culture’s conceptual mind! It has led to wonders and understandings of the material universe never seen in the world before, and contributed to the great improvement in the material quality of life for many people.

I also believe that Western psychology is a useful body of knowledge, despite its limitations, for understanding the mind and relieving human suffering as well as for discovering new and important knowledge about our human nature. Indeed, I believe Western psychology probably has a better understanding of some aspects of the mind than Buddhism does, and so has unique contributions to make to human welfare.

To put it another way, while I have enormous respect for Buddhism and its embodiment in its teachers, I (and most educated Westerners) don’t believe in any kind of “perfect” system or “perfect” embodiment of enlightenment in practice, although concepts of perfection are useful as ideals. Yes, everything is conceptualized as perfect to those who can really live the dharmakaya perspective. But here in the relative realm we are all human beings doing, at best, the most we can to discover and experience truth, to conceptualize truth in as useful a way as possible, and to communicate and to live as well as we can in accordance with our glimpses of higher truths. And as humans living on the relative level we also make “mistakes” or are “inefficient” in completely and

purely embodying what truth we know.

This brings us to an excellent technique (when used correctly) for expanding and improving our knowledge and wisdom, the dialogue.

A true dialogue is a wondrous interaction for helping all parties involved to find greater understanding and wisdom. Insofar as each party approaches a dialogue with the motivation to both *learn* as well as teach/share as effectively as possible, there are great possibilities. Each party must, of course, feel that there is something for us to learn, that there are gaps, imperfections, inefficiencies in our own knowledge—otherwise there is no point in a *dialogue*.

Thus the problem mentioned above. If Buddhism is to have a strong impact on Western culture, it must attract and interact with large numbers of the best minds in the culture. For that there needs to be true *dialogue*, not just monologically teaching the Buddhist view to a relatively small number of sympathetic or curious Westerners. Indeed, most of the best Western minds are not interested in interacting with anyone who believes or acts as if he has all the truth in a perfect way and does not have anything to learn from a Westerner (or is *perceived* to have this attitude, whether he does or not). If either party to an ostensible dialogue is identified with and caught in an attitude of being there to spread their perfect teachings, the possibility of creative, genuine dialogue and consequent long-term impact is lost. This trap is especially strong for many Easterners because the tradition makes the claim that it (and, by implication, its important spokespersons) started in perfection and continues in perfection. Western psychotherapists, as a contrasting example, usually are quick to admit that while their knowledge is powerful and useful, it is far from complete and involves mistakes.

I believe some important, influential Westerners who embody the best aspects of the Western mind are capable of and willing to participate in true dialogue, bringing to it the following attitude:

“Yes I know many important things, but my knowledge is incomplete, provisional, and sometimes wrong. I am open to learning from my respected partners in dialogue. I am willing to honestly reveal the shortcomings in my own knowledge and ask for suggestions, as well as to share parts of my knowledge that may be helpful to my dialogue partners.”

I hope the Buddhists who want to take part in East/West dialogues can also bring to them a similar attitude, something like:

I BELIEVE WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY PROBABLY HAS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SOME ASPECTS OF THE MIND THAN BUDDHISM DOES.

"Yes, we have a wonderful teaching that we are willing to share to help our dialogue partners *and* we also have gaps in our knowledge that we will honestly admit to. We are open to hearing and thinking about suggestions from our respected dialogue partners."

This kind of genuine dialogue has the potential for changing, for the better, both Buddhism and Western culture. After all, what we really seek is truth and enlightenment. Whether it is eventually called "Buddhism," or "Western psychology," or "Western-Eastern neo-Buddhist science," or whatever is quite secondary. As a respected teacher of mine once put it, what is important is the dzogchen *person*, not the dzogchen *teachings*.

Buddhism will change and adapt in its Western manifestations, of course, just as it historically changed and adapted when it entered cultures such as Tibet, China and Japan, for example. Some of the changes will come about through the efforts of Westerners who think they understand

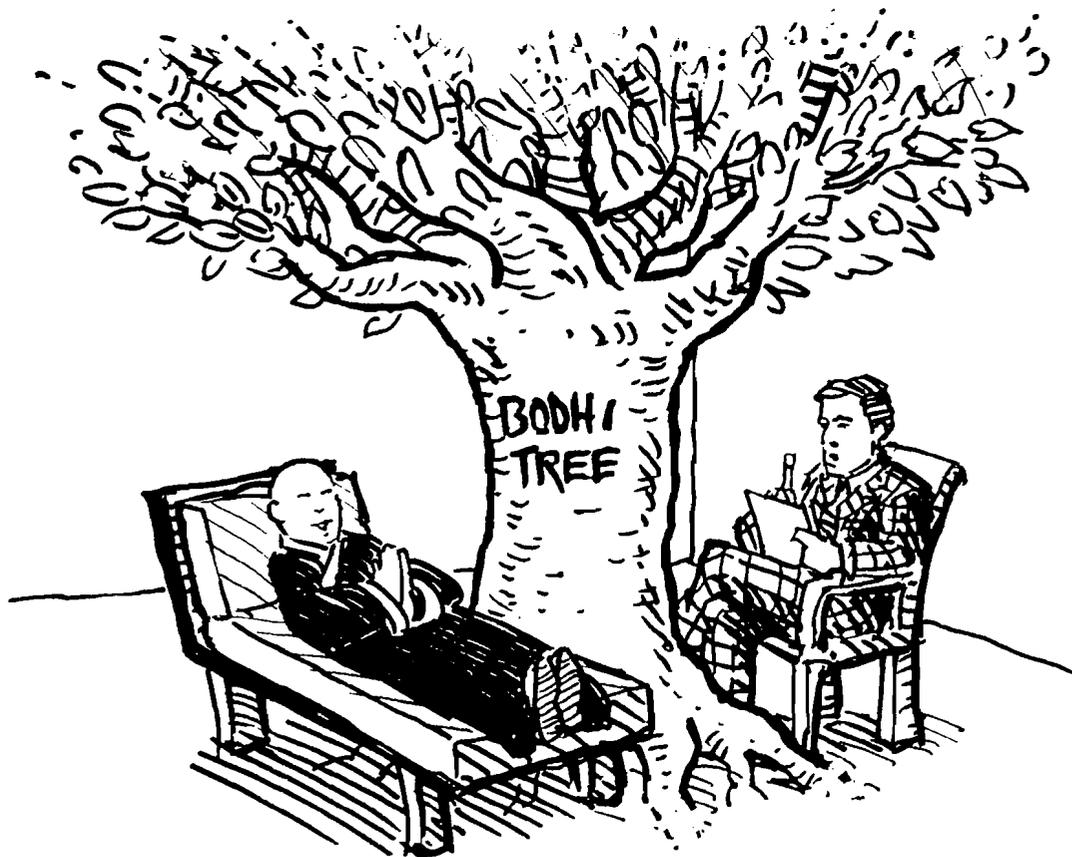
the reality that underlies traditional Buddhism, and so feel free to adapt. Some of this change will be effective in promoting happiness and enlightenment, but some, unfortunately, will be misguided and distract or mislead some people. Traditional Buddhists must devote much energy to maintaining the tradition, especially when political events in the East threaten its survival. But the question is: How much effort by traditional Buddhists will go into making the Western adaptation of Buddhism truly effective? How much genuine *dialog* will take place to promote this?

GENUINE DIALOGUE HAS THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGING, FOR THE BETTER, BOTH BUDDHISM AND WESTERN CULTURE.

I hope it will be quite a lot! We need help from Easterners who are manifesting learning, enlightenment and intelligence in mutually respectful dialogue that touches all our hearts, not just monologs that clash with Western cultural values and don't really effectively communicate. ■

Crazy Wisdom

Illustration by Arne Wong



Therapist: "I sense something may be causing resistance here—blocking the achievement of a successful transference."

Client: "Hum."