9.6: Buddhism and Existentialism- The Completion of a Circle

Buddhism is by far the oldest theory of psychology that we will cover in this book. Applied existentialism, particularly the work of Rollo May, is one of the more recent developments in psychology. And yet, these two approaches share a great deal in common, a fact readily acknowledged by May:

…The likenesses between these Eastern philosophies and existentialism go much deeper than the chance similarity of words. Both are concerned with ontology, the study of being. Both seek a relation to reality which cuts below the cleavage between subject and object. Both would insist that the Western absorption in conquering and gaining power over nature has resulted not only in the estrangement of man from nature but also indirectly in the estrangement of man from himself. The basic reason for these similarities is that Eastern thought never suffered the radical split between subject and object that has characterized Western thought, and this dichotomy is exactly what existentialism seeks to overcome. (pp. 58-59; May, 1983)

In Japan there is a form of psychotherapy, known as Morita, which emphasizes the treatment of anxiety. The treatment consists of acceptance, reattribution, dereflection, and active engagement. The dereflection mentioned is the same technique developed by Viktor Frankl. The active engagement continues this effort at distracting the client from their anxiety, hopefully breaking them out of the circle of anticipatory anxiety and subsequent failure described by Frankl. This procedure has proven both successful and, consequently, influential amongst Japanese psychotherapists. A second Japanese technique, Naikan, combines a more traditional Buddhist approach with elements of existential psychology. The client is directed to reflect intensely on their past relationships, and then to consider what they have done for others, what others have done for them, and the difficulties they have caused for others. The goal is to help the client recognize the interdependence of humans, and to appreciate whether or not they, as well as others, have acted responsibly within the relationships. By confronting feelings of guilt and unworthiness, it is hoped that the client will realize that they have been loved and appreciated nonetheless (Walsh, 1995).
Belinda Siew Luan Khong (2003) has examined the role of responsibility in a particular form of existential psychotherapy known as daseinsanalysis (developed by the Swiss psychiatrist Medard Boss and grounded in the philosophy of Heidegger) and compared it to Buddhist practice in the Theravadan tradition. She found that daseinsanalysis and Buddhist practices share much in common, and that both have something to offer to each other:

…An integration of these two disciplines will make their ideas and practices more accessible to communities outside their traditional domains. The daseinsanalytic and Buddhist perspectives relating to personal and social responsibility provide us with valuable philosophical and psychological insights into this very important human phenomenon and show us practically how individuals can be assisted in taking responsibility for every moment of their existence, and to develop a sense of respond-ability to different situations. (pg. 158; Khong, 2003)

Stephen Batchelor, a former Buddhist monk turned author and teacher, has presented existentialism as an interesting approach to the primary problem facing Buddhism in America today (Batchelor, 1983). According to Batchelor, Buddhism in the west is split between those who wish to follow a traditional path (emphasizing meditation and practice) and those who insist upon an academic approach to the analysis and understanding of Buddhism. Between the two approaches lies a great chasm. As we have seen, existentialism draws its deepest and most meaningful philosophy from nothingness, be it the distinction between Being and beings (Dasein, according to Heidegger) or the shell separating the pour-soi from the en-soi (as proposed by Sartre). Drawing primarily from his Buddhist training and the philosophy of Heidegger and Tillich (see below), Batchelor contrasts being-alone and being-with. We are essentially alone at birth and at death, in that we cannot share the experience with others, and this leads to unavoidable anxiety throughout our lives (though not necessarily overwhelming anxiety for most people). As we will see in the next chapter, the first noble truth of Buddhism is that human life is suffering. But just as much as we are alone, we are unavoidably linked to others as well. What matters then, is that we experience authentic being-with-others, and the root of authentic being-with is concern for others (as opposed to the inauthentic distortion of self-concern; Batchelor, 1983).

The genuine welfare of man, of both oneself and others, is found in the optimum actualization of the potentialities of his being. To exist in the fullest possible way in our aloneness as well as in our relations with others is the fulfillment of the inner aim of human life…(pg. 88; Batchelor, 1983)