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Other-centred Therapy: A Buddhist Paradigm

Buddhist psychology offers an analysis of the self as a defensive, illusory structure, constructed in response to an awareness of the omnipresence of affliction. By creating the delusion of a permanent self, humans isolate themselves from one another, and from experience, in a field of perceptual distortions and repeating behavioural patterns, or karmic tendencies. Whilst the creation of self-structures, or identity, is a universal process for ordinary humans, when this process becomes too powerful, or is based on habit patterns which are overly destructive or limiting, it gives rise to difficulties that are generally identified as mental health problems.

A Buddhist therapeutic approach therefore involves methods which disrupt the rigidity of the mental formations commonly associated with identity and which bring the person into closer relationship with the world and with others. These may be of two kinds: those methods which deconstruct 'the self', and those which facilitate better connection with 'the other'. This paper offers an exploration of a number of methods, some developed at the Amida Centre, and others drawn from other Buddhist therapeutic approaches such as the Japanese therapies Naikan and Morita, which fall into this latter category.

In its view of the self, Buddhist psychology provides a timely critique of some Western assumptions of mental health and offers a distinctly different paradigm for viewing the therapeutic. Other-centred approaches hold a particular place within this field, transcending the need for self-focus in therapy and presenting a practical route to therapeutic change.