

**Buddhism and Psychodrama: selected correspondences**

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*Opening the Territory of Mind*

## ABSTRACT

a selective discussion of correspondences between concepts and methods of psychodrama and philosophical ideas and meditation practices of Buddhism. From psychodrama these include primarily role reversal, role theory, spiritual psychodramatic roles and World Sociometry. From Buddhism, focus is on the Emptiness of Self and deity meditation practices of *Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle)* Buddhism.

Some notable ways in which Buddhist beliefs and psychology correlate with and

impact upon psychodramatic theory and practice are: a) The Mind/Heart of Enlightened Compassion with Moreno's vision of World Sociometry; and b) the Buddhist concept of Emptiness with Role Reversal.

One of the chief obstacles both to understanding the conceptual frameworks of Buddhism and Psychodrama and to discovering correspondences between them is that both systems are essentially experiential, not conceptual. On the surface, the practice of action methods primarily in a group environment and the solitary practice of silent meditation might appear to be contradictory. This ignores the reality that a significant amount of Buddhist practice in the *Vajrayana* (aka *Mantrayana*) vehicle/system consists of group chanting. The fundamental aim of both is to produce spontaneous realizations and insights that lead the individual to progressively more integrated states of mind.

Emptiness is one of the most prominent and most often misunderstood elements of Buddhist philosophy. Misunderstandings are partly due to inadequate translation, but also to unfamiliarity with practices. The translation problem is often due to a truncation of the relevant descriptive statement, which is in English “empty of independent, or self-referential existence.” Thus, Buddhist Emptiness does not mean that the Self or any phenomena of the world we perceive with our five senses is pure nothing. Rather, it means that the phenomena we view as apparently separate and distinct are not so. Regarding what we call the Self, which all too often people regard as immutable, having independent reality and ultimately being a possession that belongs to themselves alone, the concept of Emptiness posits that this Self has no inherent or enduring reality. We can't grasp it, let alone hold onto it (as Zerka Moreno quotes Moreno in her essay in *Evolution in Psychotherapy*, 1987, "nobody has ever seen a 'Self'"). However, much of the time we behave AS IF we can. This view leads to

very unsatisfying consequences. Belief in the Self as an enduring and coherent entity means that Others exist separate from one's Self and can therefore be viewed as independent objects, laying the groundwork for appropriation, attempting to grasp the Other to Oneself as an object of desire, or separation, pushing the Other away as an object of repulsion; e.g. becoming immersed in the endless web of projecting Others as friends or enemies, lovers or hostiles, allies or threats.

Buddhist philosophy holds the converse position that all phenomena in the universe are interdependent and mutually coexistent. So, from this perspective, the path to genuine lasting happiness, and mutually satisfying harmonious relationships is to let go of the fiction of Self and foster awareness and appreciation of our connections with all other living beings. One of the often-used meditative techniques for achieving this goal is that known as 'Exchanging Self and Others' - described, for example, by the widely-read 11<sup>th</sup> c. monk Shantideva in his classic *Way of the Bodhisattva*. This is, in fact, the imaginative technique of Role Reversal. Knowing that Role Reversal has a long and honorable history even before Moreno created it as an action method provides psychodramatists with the positive weight of a well-defined and honorable body of spiritual beliefs and practices stretching back at least to the 5th C. B.C. Indeed, making this correspondence explicit provides us with a wider foundation and the satisfaction of realizing that in the arsenal of our methodology is a powerful means for enhancing traditional sitting meditation practices.

Psychodramatic role theory enables us to approach the realization of Emptiness by viewing the so-called, fictional Self not an independent entity but as a dynamic system of interacting parts, which from Moreno we call *roles*. As we investigate the systems of roles through action methods, we discover that our own role repertoire, and correspondingly that of others, is increasingly diverse, complex and in constant flux. Indeed, we can encounter the prospect that our happiness and satisfaction

derives from interacting with others through mutual positive and beneficial role-pairs. We also realize the range of roles through which we are capable of interacting is limited only by our own imagination, and that through spontaneous explorations in the psychodramatic laboratory we can create an increasing variety of roles in both the interpersonal and intrapsychic fields. In other words, the apparent “outer world” of personal and group relationships, and the so-called “inner world” of imagination, or in Moreno’s terms, *surplus reality*.

A major goal of Buddhism is the cultivation, first as internal attitude and then as practice in action through behavior and moral conduct of The Mind/Heart of Enlightenment (in Sanskrit, *Bodhicitta*). A being who has achieved this state is known as a *Bodhisattva*. The principle foundation for developing this awareness is through generating compassion, not only for oneself, but for all human beings, and ultimately for all living beings of whatever form. (see, for example, H.H. the Dalai Lama in *Stages of Meditation*, as well as numerous other works on Buddhist philosophy, psychology and practice).

The core practice of Vajrayana (*Diamond Vehicle*) Buddhism is meditation on a fully enlightened being, who becomes manifest in some particular form. Through repeated chanting of the *mantra* (sacred name of the deity, manifesting through sound) the meditator essentially role-reverses back-and-forth with the deity to accomplish union. The psychodrama version of this process involves concretizing the deity in the form of a psychodramatic role in order to interact with that role through dialogue and role reversal. A typical enactment could be an encounter with the deity role to introduce the latter into one’s psychodramatic role repertoire. Another involves using the deity role of Double during encounter with a difficult antagonist role, in order to pacify anger or guilt and eventually to shift roles into a more compassionate and mutually cooperative relationship. In this way, Vajrayana practice

offers excellent possibilities for expanding one's field of surplus reality and enriching role repertoire.

Moreover, one of the principal Buddhist meditation techniques begins with generating compassion for friends, for strangers and for (perceived) enemies. These meditations correspond with the basic levels of *tele*, namely, attraction, neutrality/indifference and repulsion. In the latter two instances, generating compassion corresponds to practicing a role shift. To the extent the practice is successful, the meditator is actually replacing that role which creates a relationship marked by indifference or rejection (generating irritation, frustration or anger) with a compassionate, empathetic role. Although the meditator may not be aware of this level of the process, this role shift is achieved through increasingly complete role reversal.

Moreover, such a process carried extensively also leads to increasing awareness of the interdependence of human beings, and ultimately all living beings. This is entirely consonant with Moreno's vision of World Sociometry, viz. the "truly therapeutic procedure" that encompasses all of mankind, past, present and future.

With this observation, I conclude for the present this modest glimpse into some correspondences between psychodrama/sociometry and Buddhist thought and practice. The remainder of this investigation is left to be carried out in spontaneous action sessions.

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[\*-especially recommended for those with little previous acquaintance with Buddhism]