

of the original *peepal* tree stands nestled against the temple's western face. Surrounding this hub are beautiful gardens and courtyards where hundreds of pilgrims spend dawn to dusk prostrating and meditating. Wow!

Bodhgaya is also home to monasteries established by Tibet, Thailand, Myanmar, China, Bhutan, Japan, and Sri Lanka. Ven. Robina's pilgrims had the additional treat of receiving teachings at Root Institute for Wisdom Culture.

For my part, the journey didn't end with the flight back home. Friendships were forged that grow stronger despite physical distance. Lessons learnt from travel abroad remind me of how fortunate I am to live in a free and prosperous country. And most precious of all, the seeds of compassion and wisdom so generously offered by our venerable guru keep me on a greater journey to enlightenment, a journey which has no beginning and no end. ●

For details about this year's 'Chasing Buddha' pilgrimage from October 24 to November 20, visit www.chasingbuddha.org or contact pilgrimage coordinator Effie Fletcher at Himalayan High Treks in San Francisco on 1 (415) 551-1005.

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PSYCHOLOGY & DHARMA

Different Visions of Sanity

By Lorne Ladner

I recently found myself sitting in the office where I work as a psychologist, worrying about my own sanity. I was not worrying that I'd become insane but rather that I was overly sane. When I caught myself thinking about how I wasn't crazy enough, I thought, "That's nuts," which naturally made me feel a bit better.

Among Western psychotherapists, there's been a long debate about the value of a "healthy ego" for those striving to practice the Dharma. One of the functions of the ego is to help us to fit into society – to be *well adjusted* to the world around us. Freud explained that the ego's job is to modulate our powerful, instinctual impulses, helping us to meet as many of our desires as we can while also not harming others, not breaking the rules of our society, and perhaps contributing something to those around us. From an ego-centered perspective, mental health could be described as fulfilling as many of your own desires as possible while also finding your place in society, not harming others around you, and perhaps helping others also to fulfill their desires. The ego lives in the realm of desire.

Now, having a healthy ego that allows us to adjust to society is clearly better than simply allowing our negative, instinctual impulses to be continually acted out. For those of us whose instincts naturally tend toward desire, aversion, and the like, it's the ego that stops us from stealing the things we want or striking out against those who annoy us.

As a psychologist, I often work with people who experience terrible suffering because they lack the ability to manage their negative impulses effectively. While someone with a healthy human ego will eat right, invest intelligently, compromise reasonably with her spouse, and develop healthy habits for using free time, those with difficulty managing negative, instinctual impulses (who lack what psychologists call "healthy ego defenses") may eat and/or diet compulsively, hoard their money or spend impulsively, retreat in fear or become enraged when in a disagreement, and develop unhealthy or obsessive habits. Without the ability to effectively manage our impulses, we may often find ourselves overwhelmed, confused, trapped, in conflict with others, and caught in self-destructive patterns. On the other hand, the healthy ego leads one to be reasonable, well adjusted, and effective in a society of other desire-driven egos.

Actually, if you do not believe in the existence of past and future lives, in karma, or in the possibility of

enlightenment, then this ego-centered vision of mental health is reasonable. If the Buddha were wrong about karma, emptiness, and the possibility of enlightenment, then it would be reasonable to spend this one and only lifetime fulfilling your own desires while striving also to help others fulfill their desires.

However, even Freud recognized that the ego-driven life is not ultimately satisfactory; he once wrote (in a letter to Jung) that, "The ego is like a clown in a circus, always trying to stick in its oar to make it look like it has something to do with what is going on." Jung once wrote that the ego grants us only "a more or less illusory freedom" and that it "represents nothing final."

On a practical level, Western psychotherapists have often imagined that one must first have a healthy

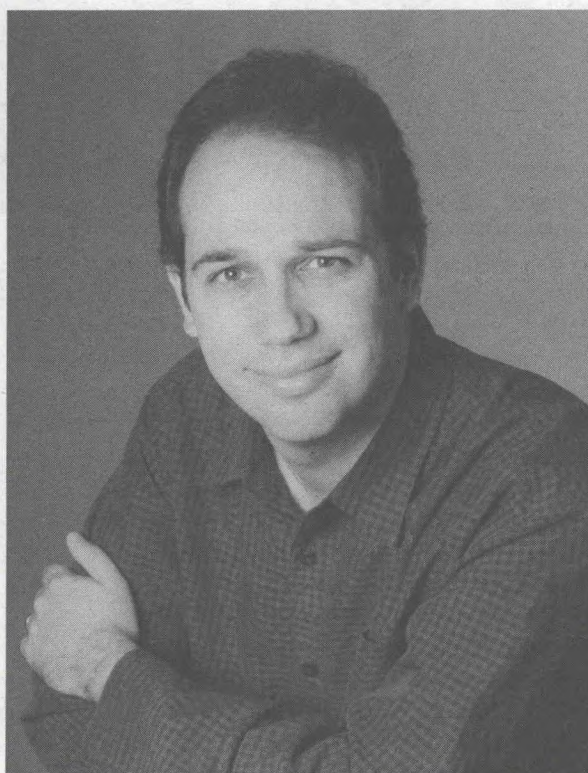
during his early years of labor under Marpa. Clearly a healthy ego that allows us to fit into polite society is not a prerequisite for becoming enlightened.

After Milarepa had meditated for many years, a group of pretty girls came across his emaciated body and expressed concern about his appearance. He noted that, "We are disturbing to each other." From the ego's perspective, anything different is disturbing or threatening. And from the perspective of utter freedom, infinite compassion, perfected wisdom, and enlightened joy, the ego-centered success of being temporarily healthy, attractive, and rich while living in the jaws of impermanence and death is "disturbing," or perhaps even horrific. Lama Zopa Rinpoche sometimes describes it as being as attractive as hoarding vomit.

Ultimately, we are presented with two radically different views of what mental health or sanity is. From an ego-centered view, sanity is being a reasonable person who fits in to society, doesn't harm others, and gets one's instinctual desires met as well as one can. From a Buddhist perspective, issues like fitting in to society or getting one's desires met are irrelevant to mental health. Buddhism presents a vast spectrum of mental illness beginning with the lowest hell realms and presents an exalted vision of mental health encompassing the various paths and grounds of the bodhisattva as well as omniscient buddhahood itself. From the perspective of Buddhist practice, developing sanity and mental health necessarily involves overcoming our delusions and afflictive emotions, cultivating vast positive emotions (such as love and compassion), and gaining insight into the nature of reality.

When I think of the intense suffering of many of my patients – people who suffer from overwhelming depression, anxiety, rage, jealousy, and other negative emotions – I feel thankful for my own transient and relative sanity. And yet when I think of the much more extensive sufferings of samsara and of our potential for enlightenment, then worldly sanity seems to signify being skilled in the eight worldly concerns which are terrible distractions to Dharma practice. At such times, I often recall Milarepa, who sang, "My behavior appears to be that of a madman...but my awareness is truly buddha." ●

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ego to practice Dharma effectively. And yet, one of the original arhats was Angulimala, a mass murderer who quickly attained liberation after practicing the Buddha's instructions. And many of the eighty-four great mahasiddhas of India were living on the fringes of society – rather wild and unstable – before attaining enlightenment. Milarepa, too, was a murderer before meeting Marpa, and even he became suicidal