

Positive Psychology and the Dharma

‘Buddhism and Yoga are the quintessential positive psychologies. Indeed, they provide the intellectual framework for such a psychology’. Marvin Levine (2000 p.213).

1. Introduction

I want to address a current trend in the psychological literature which is a move away from an investigation and amelioration of a negative mental state toward the question of how we might attain a positive mental state and achieve individual happiness. This trend is referred to as the practice of ‘Positive’ psychology.

Although the psychotherapist’s couch and endless hours of counselling may lead to an understanding of why a person is unhappy and reveal some of the traumas of childhood which have influenced adult behaviour, it has been shown that it does not necessarily follow that this will solve all their problems and that they will subsequently lead a happy and fulfilled life. As Csikszentmihalyi has pointed out: ‘It (the psychotherapist’s couch) had the unfortunate result of providing a false sense of security to people who believed that by exorcising some childhood trauma they would live happily ever after. The self, alas, is more cunning and complicated than that’. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

In the late 1980’s, psychologists started to look at the wider world around them and ask: ‘Who are the happy people in the world and what are they doing to achieve and maintain this happiness?’ It is to the Eastern traditions that many Western psychologists have turned for the answer to these questions. To many Western minds, Buddhism is associated with smiling Tibetan monks who meditate for long hours and seem very happy as a consequence. Studies of monks’ brains whilst they are meditating have shown that the centres for joy and positive sensations are augmented to a greater degree than those of non- Buddhist meditators who are relaxing and just having pleasant thoughts. So the idea of a positive psychology and the achievement of happiness have become linked to Buddhism. (Destructive Emotions 2004, p.25). Indeed, the Dalai Lama has written a book with the psychiatrist Howard Cutler, called ‘The Art of Happiness’, in which it is pointed out that happiness is not an unchanging, fixed characteristic of the human condition, but due to the brain’s plasticity, happiness is a condition which can be enhanced through mental training.

The framework for a ‘positive psychology’ has included a ‘cut and paste’ from Eastern and Western traditions in an attempt to produce a cohesive theory of happiness and its attainment. I am going to briefly look at the work of some leading psychologists in the field and discuss the relevant Dharma teaching on the attainment of happiness and attempt a brief assessment of the notion that the Dharma provides a framework for a positive psychology.

2. *The concept of perfection*

The Western world has been dominated by the Platonic view of perfection. Somewhere 'out there' is the perfect ideal and everything has to conform to this model of excellence. For example, there is the concept of the perfect chair, so a chair-maker has this in mind when designing and making a chair and the finished product is judged against this concept.

However, the vision of the perfect model is not confined to products alone. We each have a culturally influenced, consensual view of the perfect person, against which we continually judge other people and ourselves. Advertisers create and prey on our need to comply with cultural perfection in all aspects of our lives. We are constantly bombarded with visual stimuli which promise that the purchase of the 'right' goods will help us to achieve the perfect lifestyle. However, the search for *physical* perfection may lead to eating disorders such as anorexia or the yo-yo phenomena of constant dieting in women and the 'hero' drug-induced sports physique culture in men. The drive to attain the model of the perfect professional with the perfect lifestyle and the bank account to sustain it may lead to heart-attacks and stress-related diseases. Failure to attain levels of perceived perfection may lead to low self-esteem and depression or even suicide. (See Welwood 2000, 'Toward a Psychology of Awakening' where he discusses depression as a 'loss of heart').

We now live in societies which take an individual's pleasures and pains as benchmarks of its success: 'that exalts the self and deems personal fulfilment a legitimate goal, almost a sacred right.' (Seligman 1998, p.10). When we apply a model of perfection to personality and the mental state, we start to use such emotive words as 'balanced' and 'happy'; 'stable' and 'mature' and move into the realm of the emotions, behaviour and habitual responses. We have the belief that there is a state of perfect happiness and balanced personality in which we *should be* living and anything which does not match up to this suggests a measure of failure on the part of the person and indeed of the society itself. We are now culturally indoctrinated in a democracy to believe that we have an inherent right to be happy and contented and leading the 'perfect life'. This state is regarded as the most desirable; the pinnacle of all our life-long endeavours. The failure to live in this perfect state may have disillusion and unhappiness; depression and ill health as a consequence. Our motivation and consequent behaviour become driven by the neurotic need to avoid this negative state and attain happiness and stability.

The neurotic need and the consequent drive is not, however, just a mental state. The biological systems of animals have evolved to ensure survival of the organism in a particular environment. It could perhaps, therefore, be argued that the mental drive to have balance and stability and 'happiness' is another aspect of the body's biological need to ensure its survival, and is not just a *desirable* mental state but an essential one for the optimum survival of a species. The work of Martin Seligman over the last 25 years has shown that pessimists suffer from more ill health and set backs in life than optimists. He found that the defining characteristic of pessimists is that they tend to believe that bad events will last a long time; that negative events are their own entire fault and that this attitude undermines everything that they do. However, they are more careful risk-takers than optimists and will spend more time making important decisions; a useful characteristic if the survival of a tribe is at risk.

3. *An Alternative View*

Now I want to look briefly at an alternative view of the interpretation of happiness and how an individual might attain this state.

In the Dharma we have to be careful when we use such words as ‘the attainment of happiness’ and ‘the achievement of perfection’ because we associate these concepts with the person of a Buddha and the state of Enlightenment.

The Dharma teaches us that all human life is suffering; it helps us to understand the nature of our suffering and proposes those behaviours and mental training which will lead to an end of our suffering. Buddha taught us that suffering is a state of mind brought about by our self-centred view of life and if we wish to be free of this suffering then we have to train our mind to view ourselves and our world in a different non self-centred way. This would seem to be an apparent paradox – to concentrate on and train one’s own mind in order to let go of the Self but of course this has to be done as it is the only way of understanding and liberating the mind from grasping, self-centred emotions.

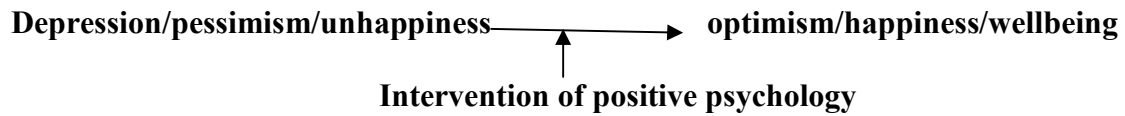
The Dharma explains how a life centred on grasping attainment and self-centred achievement can never lead to happiness because even if we achieve a desirable state, we will then become neurotically obsessed with maintaining it! This in turn will lead to negative behaviours and destructive emotions whose motivation is the fulfilment of the sense of Self and its attendant desires. This cycle of events is termed ‘Dukkha’ in Sanskrit or ‘Samsara’ in Tibetan.

It can be seen that the Western ideal of perfection and its achievement and maintenance of self-fulfilment and self-esteem will be in direct opposition to the Buddhist approach of freeing the mind from grasping at a self-centred view of the world.

The Buddhist tradition recognises that the Mind has compassion and wisdom at its very foundation but the very nature of the human existence in samsara and the yearning for perfection, veil or cover over our natural unborn nature and what arises and becomes the code for our behaviour, is the satisfaction of the Self and its total self-centred approach to fulfilment. Therefore, the Buddhist tradition is focused on *training* the Mind to let go of its self-centredness and neurotic need to seek samsaric perfection and allow the true nature of the Mind, compassion and wisdom, to arise and be the dominating motivation for behaviour in the human realm.

It has been the impressive results of Buddhist mind-training techniques that have drawn some Western psychologists to understand and adapt Eastern methodologies into a movement for ‘Positive’ psychology and the achievement and maintenance of happiness.

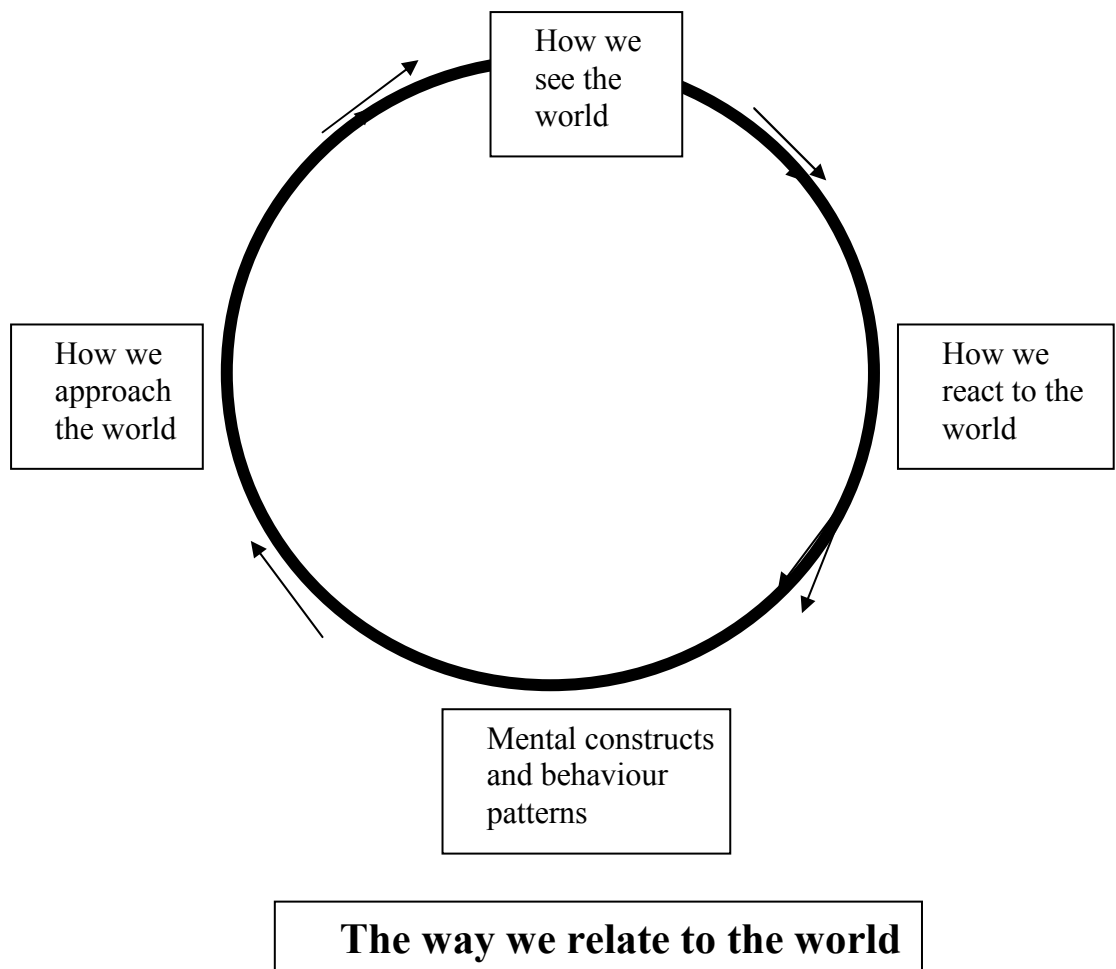
4. Positive Psychology



From depression and unhappiness to optimism and happiness: the move towards a ‘positive psychology’ really started in the 1990’s with such psychologists as Martin Seligman and his work on pessimism and optimism and Csikszentmihalyi’s work on achieving ‘flow’ in creative endeavours. Seligman’s work on pessimism had shown a strong correlation between pessimism, depression and a weakened immune system and he sought a method which could be used to counteract this tendency and promote optimism and by inference, a happier state of mind and better health. Csikszentmihalyi looked at the way in which one might increase creativity and greater productivity in life and developed a theory of ‘*Flow*’, a ‘psychology of engagement with everyday life’.

Seligman proposes that just as pessimists have a ‘learned helplessness’ and their self-centredness gives them an exaggerated feeling of responsibility for negative events, it is possible to develop a ‘learned optimism’. That is, learn to look objectively at emotions and events and understand the role that emotions and habitual responses have taken in a situation and use a conscious, *trained* optimistic explanatory style which puts an event in a greater, overall perspective and allows the Self to accept failure as well as success. This approach is very successful with the treatment of depression, which Seligman describes as a ‘disorder of thinking’ as it halts the continual rumination about the Self and the lack of ‘joy’ in Life and encourages a person to be more ‘other-centred’. The aim is to change a person’s explanatory style of their interpretation of life events. Seligman also found that as a person’s chronic pessimism/depression lessened, so their immune system became more efficient and a person’s health dramatically improved.

The following diagram illustrates how we approach our life experiences and how we relate to the world. (Brazier, C. 2003, p.93).



We will be coming back to this diagram in a more complex form but for the moment I want you to fill in the spaces between the boxes with the emotions and behaviours that you think are associated with each phase.

If we look at our responses to the spaces between the boxes, we can see how a defensive self-preservation pattern of behaviour can not only be built up, but continually reinforced. Positive psychology sets out to make these patterns positive and optimistic and full of 'flow' and to reduce the negative emotions and behaviours which are a characteristic of pessimism/depression. The ultimate goal is 'happiness'

Changing a negative, self-centred explanatory style into one of working positively with the mind and subsequent behaviours, is known as 'cognitive behaviour therapy'. Seligman puts the reasons for its success down to the fact that: 'In an era when we believe the self can change itself, we are willing to try to change habits of thought ... The self chooses to do this work out of self-interest, to make itself feel better'. (Seligman 1998, p.91).

The concept of 'flow' developed by Csikszentmihalyi is focused on 'excellence in life' rather than mere happiness. His thesis is that by fully engaging in whatever we are doing we create a physical and psychic energy which enables us to lose subject and object in an activity; to be fully in the 'flow' of what we are doing. He says that: 'When we are in flow, we are not happy, because to experience happiness we must focus on our inner states, and that would take away attention from the task at hand'. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 p.32). 'Flow' is an *optimal experience* and requires effort both in the mind-training and in the development of appropriate skill; which Csikszentmihalyi feels most people are not prepared to do but would rather watch television or slump into an apathy-induced relaxed state engendered by alcohol or drugs.

Csikszentmihalyi is rather dismissive of the state of 'happiness', pointing out its vulnerability to mood and circumstance, maintaining that a sense of happiness which follows 'flow' is more enduring as it is something which we have created ourselves and which leads to an increase in the complexity and growth of conscious awareness. Most people report 'flow' when engaged in their favourite activity such as gardening, listening to music, cooking, driving, and walking or at work. When samples of typical Americans are asked: 'Do you ever get involved in something so deeply that nothing else seems to matter, and you lose track of time?' One in five will say that they do fairly frequently but 15 percent say that this never happens to them. (When 6,469 Germans were asked the same question, 23% said often and 40% sometimes, so it could be said that 63% of some Germans are 'flowing' at some point during the week!)

Americans 20%:Germans 63% French? English?

What is interesting is that 'flow' is rarely reported during passive leisure activities such as watching television.

So if one wanted to sum up Csikszentmihalyi's 'recipe' for being in the 'flow' it would be:

- Have clear goals
- Immediate feedback
- Skills ready to take advantage of opportunities
- An openness and energy which allows 'flow' to become a part of everyday life
- To control our attention so that we can control experience and hence the quality of life.

Csikszentmihalyi emphasises again and again in his work that 'flow' requires effort and discipline and the enjoyment of an activity for its own sake so that what matters is not the result but the engagement and control of one's attention.

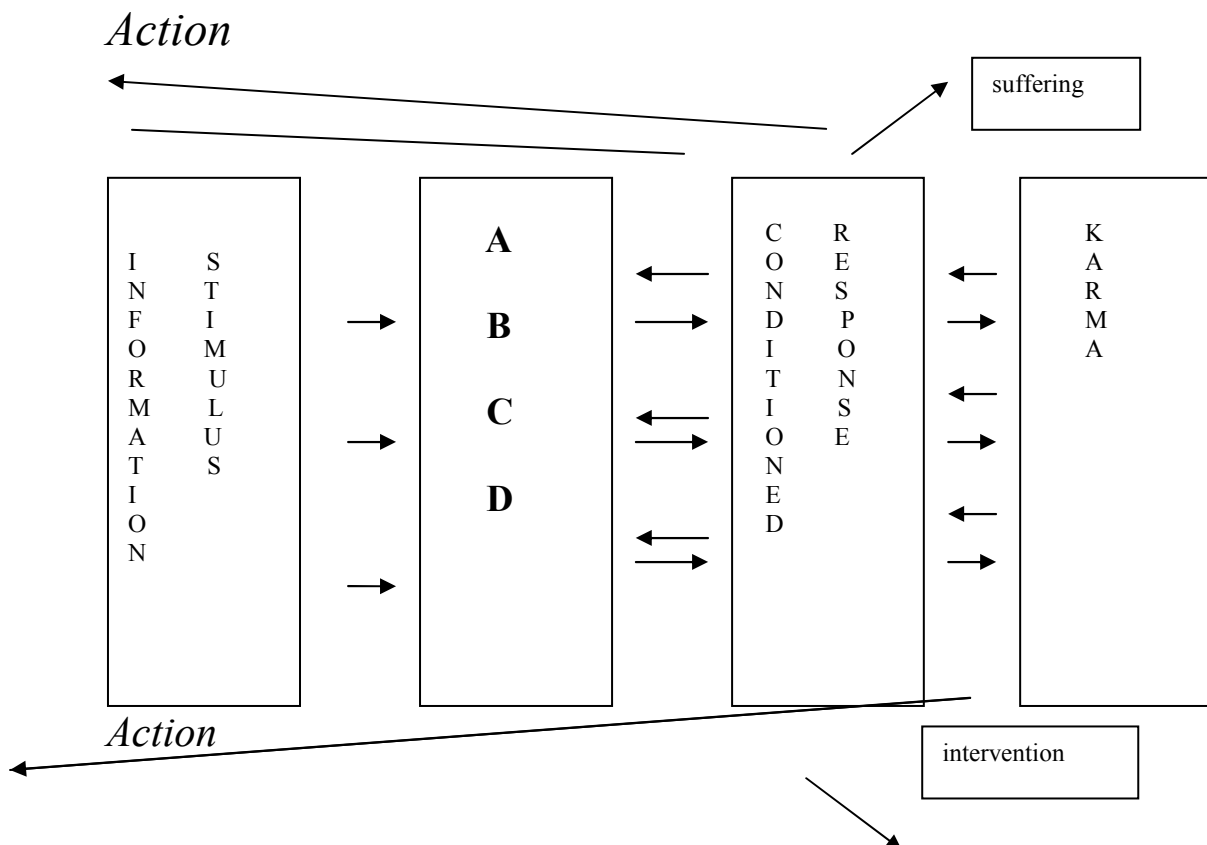
5. The Positive Psychology of Buddhism

'Buddhism will come to the West as a psychology' Chogyam Trungpa (1974)

When I was reading the work of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi I was continually aware of many parallels between this positive approach to psychology and the Dharma. Indeed Csikszentmihalyi refers to Buddhism many times. He maintains that the real challenge in the world in which we are now living is to 'reduce entropy' in one's life 'without increasing it in one's consciousness'. He goes on to say: 'The Buddhists have a good piece of advice as to how this can be done: 'Act always as if the future of the Universe depended on what you did, while laughing at yourself for thinking that whatever you do makes any difference.' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997,p.133).

For those of us in the Dharma, the advice to be aware of and in control of oneself and one's situation is familiar from the teachings. However, as Csikszentmihalyi points out, what contemporary science and indeed a positive psychology is doing, is to give us a systematic expression of these facts in a 'language that has authority in our times'. I think that this is a very important point in our cynical, science-centred world of today.

Having given you a brief outline of some of the work of two of the most influential psychologists in the field of positive psychology, I want to introduce you to the work of Marvin Levine who has directly related the practice of a positive psychology to the practice of the Dharma. Levine's book 'The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga' is a 'good read'. He matches the Dharma teachings to modern conditions encountered by most therapists and psychologists such as anger, depression and stress. Based on Levine's work, I have developed the following diagrams which I hope will illustrate the links between an understanding of behaviourism (stimulus-response); cognitive behaviour therapy and the Dharma teachings on cause and effect.



.....
Cause and Effect

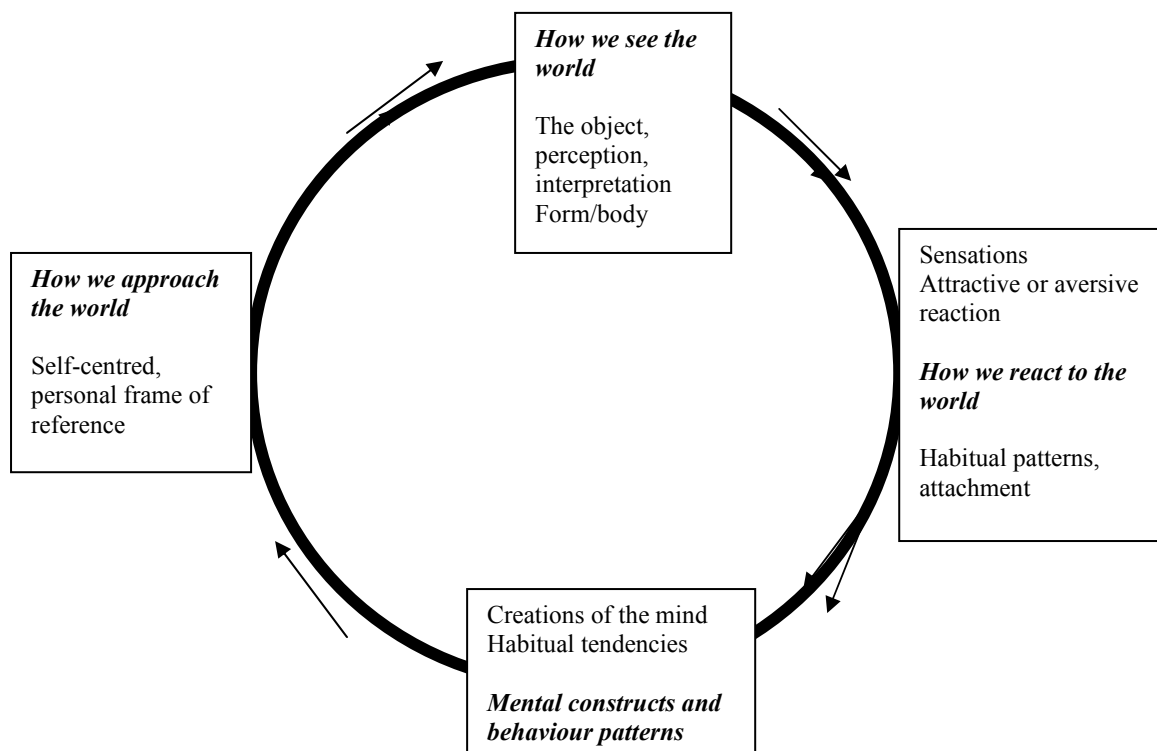
Psychological understanding

++++
Buddhist understanding

- A = Self needs
- B= Fears/Ignorance
- C= Cravings/attachments/jealousy
- D= Aversions/anger/agitation

As you can see, both Buddhism and psychology acknowledge that a stimulus produces an affective sequence which is influenced by habitual conditioning. However, Buddhism has a different long-term perspective, recognising the role that karma plays in our motivation and behaviours.

In the diagram below, I have changed from a linear perspective to a circular view of how we might consider the role of the emotions in our behavioural response to stimuli.



The way we relate to the world - a development of diagram 1
(Based on a model by Caroline Brazier 2003)

I would like you to spend a few minutes filling in your own interpretation of the stimulus-response pattern.

An understanding of the above frameworks determines/influences the response/intervention on the part of the therapist. A psychological understanding will stop at the level of the 'response' and subsequent action and modification is focussed on eliciting a positive ie: desirable response, that will be of benefit to the individual in the amelioration of a current problem; whereas a Buddhist understanding of the framework is in the greater context of karma and the alaya and the desirable response is governed by the longer time span of lifetimes as well as the present.

From both a Buddhist and a psychological perspective, we know that we each build up our own reality based on our responses to 'world events' around us. When a person's views and behaviours are such that they are unable to function appropriately in the society around them, then we consider that they are dysfunctional in some way and a psychopathological intervention is considered necessary, either pharmaceutically or therapeutically, or often a mixture of both. So the question we then have to ask ourselves, is whether either of these two methods of intervention are going to have sustainable positive results. Is it enough just to relieve the disillusion and distress and possible destructive behaviour by dulling the mind with the temporary relief of drugs? Will hours on the psychotherapist's 'couch' which gives someone the possible reasons for their condition also give them the tools to build a positive approach which enables them to function in a society?

It seems to me that all the work in cognitive psychology which has shown us great insights into how the mind *functions* is still not giving us great insight as to how the mind really *works*. It is Buddhism that addresses the links between perception, emotions and conditioned responses. Consider this quote from Eckman 2005:

... while discrepant from the modern research tradition on emotion that has isolated emotion as a process for explicit study, (the Dharma) is actually quite consistent with what we know about the brain and emotion. Every region in the brain that has been identified with some aspect of emotion has also been identified with aspects of cognition (e.g., Davidson & Irwin, 1999; Rolls, 1999; Damasio, 1994). The circuitry that supports affect and the circuitry that supports cognition are completely intertwined. This anatomical arrangement is consistent with the Buddhist view that these processes cannot be separated.

An understanding of this completely intertwined circuitry is the aim of many of the meditation practices in Buddhism. The Dharma teachings are focused on leading to a profound understanding of the relationship between cognition and the emotions and the construction of a 'Self'. The Self responds with attraction or aversion to events and behaves according to its constructed, conditioned responses. The practice of the Dharma is the practice of understanding and changing the way in which the Mind interprets, through emotionally-tainted perceptions, and responds to events with the Self as the central reference point for all thoughts and behaviours. This is referred to as 'attitude' and 'view' and the training is through the development of wisdom and compassion.

If the goal of a positive psychology is the creation and maintenance of 'happiness' we have to ask ourselves if this is a realistic goal or indeed desirable if it means that we become on the satisfaction of the Self. Who sets the goals and assesses their

desirability? Are they: good health, a comfortable lifestyle, a stress-free workplace, a freedom from depression, feeling good because we are better than our contemporaries? Where does positive psychology address the desirability of the pursuit of happiness and provide an evaluative framework for its success and beneficial effect for the cultural context? When I am asking myself and others questions such as these, I often use Ghenghis Khan as an example and ask if his values and criteria for success would have been the same as ours? What would have been his criteria for happiness? Or in our modern world, what would be the criteria for happiness if we are a group of nine year old children working 14 hours a day in the mines of South America?

Can we say that the Dharma has no cultural influence in its teachings, that they are universal and by relating to the inner world of the emotions and an understanding of their influence over our attitudes and behaviour, then its practice is the only sure way of achieving a lasting happiness? This leads us to question what we mean by 'happiness' in a Dharma context. The Buddha taught the Middle Way as the only true way to achieve an emotional stability where we are not being pulled this way and that by the attractive and aversive forces of an imagined Self. So perhaps in a Dharma context it is not a question of a constant subjective assessment of whether we are 'happy' or not but whether we are in a state of non-clinging; in a state of 'flow' with the reality of our existence.

To conclude, let us look at the quotation from Marvin Levine that I gave at the beginning of this talk.

'Buddhism and Yoga are the quintessential positive psychologies. Indeed, they provide the intellectual framework for such a psychology'.

The practical framework of the Dharma is in providing a tried and tested methodology for bringing about and sustaining change. The intellectual framework of the Dharma for positive psychology is the 25 centuries of working and training the Mind and consciously changing ways of thinking and behaving; of acknowledging the role of the emotions in the construction of conditioned responses; of showing that impermanence and suffering are the daily context of the human existence but that change is possible and that it is something which each individual can bring about for themselves.

Whether positive psychology can effectively use the Dharma methodologies outlined above in a non-Dharma context and whether the Dharma practitioner and teacher can use positive psychology within the framework of their practice is a point for discussion. The joint conclusion of a group of eminent psychologists of the Mind and Life Institute and the Dalai Lama is that those Buddhist conceptions and practices which deal with the emotional life can make three distinct contributions to psychology. (Ekman 2005). The first is *conceptually* by highlighting finer distinctions in emotional experience; the second is *the methodology* for practicing the enhancement and enrichment of internal experiences; the third is *the practices themselves* as a therapy not just for the emotionally disturbed but for an improvement in our capacity to deal with life and death happily. How can psychotherapists translate these three contributions into practical applications for the relief of suffering in their clients?

My own view is that through the exploration of the Dharma as a framework for positive psychology, it is possible to develop ways in which Buddhists and psychologists can work together for the benefit of beings. The way to happiness and realization takes an understanding of how the Mind and the imagined Self are intertwined with our emotional cognition and the responses we make to events in our constructed individual worlds. As Buddhists we have the example of the great realized masters such as Jamgon Kongtrul and Patrul Rinpoche to show us the practices and the methods of mind-training; for non-Buddhists there are the eminent psychologists in the field of positive psychology such as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi. For those of us who are psychologists and psychotherapists in the Dharma, we have the advantage of the methodologies from both disciplines. However, I feel it is important to make a clear distinction between the Dharma as we practice it for the benefit of ourselves and other sentient beings; psychology which is an intellectual pursuit and psychotherapy which relates to the mental suffering of others. To work in the Dharma is to work with and on one's own experience; to work in psychology is to find theoretical reasons for one's experiences and to work in psychotherapy is to work with the experiences of others.

References

- Brazier, C. (2003) – *Buddhist Psychology. Liberate your mind, embrace Life.* Constable and Robinson. London
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997) – *Finding Flow.* Basic Books, Inc. New York
- Ekman, P. et al (2005) – *Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives on emotions and Wellbeing.*
- Goleman, D. (2004) – *Destructive Emotions and how we can overcome them* Bloomsbury. London
- Levine, M. (2000) – *The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. New York
- Maslow, A. (1970) – *Motivation and personality (2nd ed.)* Harper & Row. New York
- Rogers, C. R. (1961) – *On becoming a person.* Houghton Mifflin. Boston
- Seligman, M.E.P. (1998) – *Learned Optimism.* Free Press Inc. New York
- Welwood, J. (2000) – *Towards a Psychology of Awakening.*