

What does Advanced Integrative Therapy (AIT) have to do with what the Buddha Taught?

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For many years the Pali and Sanskrit words used by Buddhists made little sense to me and the English translations also confused me. Recently I discovered a book published in 1985 entitled Buddhism Made Plain by Antony Fernando with Leonard Swidler. The authors translated important Buddhist terms from the Pali and Sanskrit texts into English in a way that finally made sense to me. The following summary explains what I learned from their translations and how a method of therapy called Advanced Integrative Therapy (AIT) could make what the Buddha taught more accessible.

I will refer to the Buddha (the enlightened one) by his last name: Gautama. Gautama focused on how to live this life without concern about god or an afterlife. He taught that we liberate ourselves from much unnecessary suffering when our mind perceives life as it is, not as we think it should be. We free ourselves from mentally anguishing ourselves over unrealistic expectations of ourselves, of others, and of life events. Liberating ourselves of these unrealistic expectations requires discipline and determination but provides the enormous benefits of a more peaceful life.

Gautama taught that self-denial is as harmful as self-indulgence. He recommended a middle way between these extremes leading to wisdom and tranquility. He spoke of four Noble Truths:

1. We all unavoidably experience physical suffering and mental anguish at times.
2. In addition to unavoidable physical pain and suffering we cause ourselves added mental anguish and emotional turmoil by growing *excessively* attached to what we find pleasurable.
3. We can end our mental and emotional anguish if we let go of our *excessive* attachment to pleasure. Pleasure itself does not cause our mental and emotional suffering; our *excessive* attachment to pleasure does!

4. We can learn to relinquish our excessive attachment to pleasure and the ways we torture ourselves by our self-sabotaging beliefs by following an “eightfold practice”:

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Thought
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Work
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Focus

A brief description of each practice follows with an emphasis on Fernando and Swidlers’s new definitions of the Pali and Sanskrit terms as well as new research in the field called energy psychology. This combination can give us new insight into how we can practice what Gautama taught more effectively.

1. Right Understanding

Three concepts important to understand in order to free our selves of our obsessive attachments include:

Impermanence: All physical and emotional pleasures remain fleeting in nature. Everything and everyone remains ever changing and evolving.

Over-attachment: Wanting physical or emotional pleasures causes little problem; only when we desire or expect these pleasures to last indefinitely and cling to them excessively do we cause ourselves disappointment.

Conditioning: Many of us develop a false self to protect ourselves from disapproval and other painful experiences as we grew up. This false self germinates from a set of conditioned reactions as a result of negative, sometimes traumatic, experiences over which we had no control and are often stored in our unconscious. These unconscious conditioned reactions dictate most of our perceptions, thoughts, emotions and behaviors trapping us like automatons having no *true* awareness or choice. These conditioned reactions subjects us to emotions that control us in dysfunctional ways such as comparing ourselves to others, feeling jealous of others, feeling either inferior or superior to others or putting up a false front to others.

Understanding that these conditioned reactions control a large part of our lives provides the first step toward emancipating ourselves from unnecessary self-induced suffering.

Many of us do not like to hear this message and defend ourselves from admitting to such an uncomplimentary assessment of our selves. Most of this has occurred and continually occurs outside of our conscious awareness. To understand and acknowledge these truths about our selves initiates the search for our true selves, and it opens the door to engaging in the other seven practices.

2. Right Thought

Healthy thinking emanates from the first practice of accurate understanding. Only when we understand that everything changes and we have little control over our conditioned reaction can we begin to think in realistic ways.

Our thoughts are manifestations of our beliefs. Our beliefs can be conscious or unconscious. Our unconscious beliefs dictate how we think and act as much or more than our conscious beliefs. By becoming aware of our unconscious beliefs we learn how to think in more healthy, realistic and mature ways. New methods of uncovering and transforming our unconscious dysfunctional beliefs have arisen since Gautama's time, which can more effectively free us of their detrimental effects on our emotions and behaviors. We will explore these methods shortly using new discoveries from the field of energy psychology.

3. Right Speech

Truthful speech follows healthy thinking. Guatama focused on four types of truthful speech: Instead of lying to gain profit or creating false impressions to win approval, speak the truth respectfully. Instead of speaking ill of others, express gratitude and appreciation. Instead of expressing harsh criticisms that brings hurt to others, speak with kindness and courtesy. Instead of gossiping about those not present or engaging in frivolous chatter, speak about what is beneficial and what has heart and meaning.

4. Right Action

Constructive action follows from accurate understanding, healthy thinking and truthful speech. Gautama emphasized three forms of conduct that lead to maturity and freedom. Rather than harming or killing others, exercise a reverence for all life including animal and plant life. Rather than taking what does not belong to you, act with generosity to others. Rather than exploiting others sexually, engage in healthy enjoyment of sexual pleasure with a willing partner out of respect and caring.

5. Right Work

Beneficial work emanates from constructive action. We can contribute to the common good as well as make a good living. Rather than making money no matter how much the work harms others or exploits our natural resources, strive to make a living through meaningful service and the ecological use of our natural resources. Gautama valued benefiting human kind in our work more than participating in rites and rituals in places of worship.

6. Right Effort

Gautama taught that the goal of our efforts should be to continually strive to develop our selves into healthy, mature people and to be a positive force in the world rather than seeking excessive money, power or pleasure.

He also taught *how* to focus our efforts by engaging in healthy thinking. He believed that we have very little control over our thoughts. Our intense desire for sense pleasures often control our thoughts and therefore require constant effort to think in a healthy, more functional manner. He outlined steps for exercising this effort by letting go of our unwholesome thoughts and replacing them with more wholesome thoughts, imagining the potential negative consequences of acting upon our unwholesome thoughts, or removing ourselves from the environment that stimulates the unwholesome thoughts.

Cognitive psychologists have researched these methods over the last few decades and found mixed results. Recent research has discovered that many dysfunctional, distorted or self-sabotaging thoughts come either from early parental influences or from unresolved developmental traumas that we endured early in life. These dysfunctional thoughts require new therapeutic methods that transform the dysfunctional beliefs into more reality-based

functional beliefs by treating the underlying developmental traumas. These new methods have proved more effective than what Gautama knew about in his day.

7. Right Mindfulness

Paying conscious attention to what we do, think and perceive frees us from projecting our wishes, desires and expectations onto others and events. Responding to what is actually happening frees us to live in the reality of the present rather than our projections from the past. Without this conscious attention we remain mostly a set of conditioned reactions over which we have little control. Often our mind wanders away from what we are doing in the present moment. When we remain aware of what we do *as we do it* and also *remain aware of ourselves* doing it we are being “mindful”. Many people find the concept of mindfulness difficult to understand because one needs to experience it to understand it.

In order to achieve true liberation from our self-induced suffering we must attend carefully to our internal and external reality. Awareness of our thoughts and actions *as we think and act* guides us toward self-mastery. Most of us lack the ability to integrate our minds with our actions in this way for any period of time. We become distracted or fragmented as we multi-task. Full attention to what we do, “mono-tasking”, *as we do it* takes significant effort and discipline. It leads to greater efficacy and increases our ability to make true choices rather than unconsciously following the conditioned reactions from our past.

Right mindfulness also includes an awareness of our true motives underlying our actions. For example, if I decide to share a poem I have written for a friend I ask myself if I seek to impress her with my literary talent, or if I wish to seduce her sexually, or if I want feedback on its structure, or if I wish to convey how I genuinely feel about her in a creative way, or if I have a combination of one or more of these motives at play.

Guatama taught that this awareness of our underlying motives can prevent us from behaving unconsciously from our conditioned reactions. These conditioned reactions and their accompanying negative emotions underlie the unnecessary mental and emotional suffering we impose on ourselves.

8. Right Focus

Three practices can aid us to focus our minds in ways that would benefit our development of mindfulness. The first trains the mind to calm down and focus, the second expands the mind's capability to experience reality in all its forms and ever-changing nature, and the third develops character qualities that will bring us internal peace and healthy relationships. Meditation provides the training ground for each of these practices.

In the first meditation practice we observe the activity and agitation of the mind in its usual state. The method trains the mind to keep coming back to a common focus like our breath, a mantra, or an object. Jack Kornfield likens this practice to toilet training a puppy. Another analogy considers the mind as a wild horse, which needs breaking and training so the rider can guide it to where he wants the horse to go rather than the horse going wherever it wants to go.

Using the breath as the focus, for example, we consciously make an effort to stay aware of the in-breath and the out-breath as the mind and body inevitably distract us from this focus. We gently and persistently bring our awareness back to the breath. Over time this practice trains the mind to stay more focused and breaks the pattern of constant flitting from one thought to another like a chickadee in a tree. This eventually brings more relaxation and peacefulness to the mind and body and leads to more rational, mature behavior less vulnerable to past conditioned reactions. Many people, however, lose interest after a while and give up, leaving the mind and its conditioned reactions to continue its domination.

The second meditation practice trains the mind to view reality in the present moment *as it is*. Many believe that learning to calm and focus the mind as in the first method provides a prerequisite to training the mind to view ever changing reality objectively. This practice focuses on having an expanded awareness of the physical sensations in our bodies, the thoughts in our mind, our immediate sensory experience, and the ever-changing nature of these experiences. We learn how often we misinterpret reality with our wishes, desires, feelings, irrational thoughts and projections by continuing to bring our mind back to the reality of the present moment just like we learned how to bring our mind back to our breath in the first form of meditation.

An additional method focuses on various qualities to develop in our selves: loving kindness and compassion toward others, equanimity within

our selves, and the impermanence of all life including our own. Specific methods assist each of these forms of meditation (see Jack Kornfield's Meditation For Beginners).

New Discoveries

Recent discoveries in the field of energy psychology have revealed new methods of uncovering and transforming our dysfunctional, distorted, irrational, or unrealistic beliefs and the thoughts emanating from those beliefs. There are two primary origins of these beliefs. The first well-known origin comes from the teachings of our parents, teachers, religious leaders and many other authority figures. Developmental psychologists emphasize that the values, attitudes, injunctions of the adults surrounding the child get implanted in them like software programs installed in a computer. The child below a certain age has no way to filter out those injunctions in a selective manner. What we hear becomes true to us no matter how false or distorted. We inculcate all forms of biases and prejudices in this way and they take up residence in our minds with or without our awareness.

The second origin, less well known, occurs when we experience very difficult, painful, frightening, embarrassing, humiliating or shocking events in our life that condition us to reacting later to anything remotely similar to those events in dysfunctional ways. Our unconscious beliefs over generalize from the traumatic experience so we treat the new experience as though it of necessity will turn out like the earlier traumatic experience. For example, a client of mine has a mother who was so dysfunctional in her relationship with her husband she called upon my client to take care of her in a way totally inappropriate for a child. As a result he now believes he is not only responsible for her welfare but has generalized that to everyone around him. He takes inappropriate, unrealistic over-responsibility for his boss, girl friend and friends. He does not stop there. He takes over responsibility for things outside his control. Since his mother expected him to do things beyond his capability for someone his age, he now expects himself to do things beyond his capability. He also projects onto others that they will expect unrealistic things of him.

This example illustrates how developmental traumas often underlie unrealistic and dysfunctional beliefs, which are at the heart of what Gautama identified as the source of how we cause ourselves unnecessary mental and emotional suffering.

Fortunately, new methods of identifying these unrealistic dysfunctional beliefs (whether conscious or unconscious) as well as ways to transform them into more realistic functional beliefs have been developed. We also have new ways to identify the negative experiences or traumas that led to the dysfunctional belief, *even if we remain unconscious of them*.

The revolutionary diagnostic method to which I refer involves a procedure called “muscle testing” and the revolutionary treatment method uses energy centers in the body called “chakras” to heal the traumas as well as transform the dysfunctional beliefs into more functional realistic beliefs. These treatments can significantly help us to engage in the eightfold practice, particularly our ability to practice the various forms of meditation so crucial in developing mindfulness.

If you are interested in pursuing this form of therapy, called Advanced Integrative Therapy (AIT), you can find a practitioner in your area by going to <https://ait.institute/> and clicking on “Find an AIT therapist”.

Suggested Reading

Fernando, A & Swidler, L., *Buddhism made plain*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985.

Kornfield, J., *Meditation for beginners*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2004.

Kornfield, J., *The wise heart*. New York: Random House, 2008.