

The Nalanda Tradition in Contemporary Practice of ABT (Arts–Based Therapy) in India

Introduction

WCCL Foundation is committed to bringing Arts in Healing at community, institutional and clinical level across India. The objective is to develop “India–Specific Arts–based therapy models”. The conceptual framework incorporates ‘Buddhist Psychology and Ethics’ under the tutorship of Buddhist teachers, and adapts ideas from neuroscience & psychology. It is this unique ‘Indian perspective’, which makes the ABT Certificate Course – a nine month modular training in arts–based therapy (ABT) for professionals working in the field – relevant and practical. The ABT Course has been one of the first long–term trainings in the field, based within its own cultural and healing context while maintaining a clear practical and scientific connection with contemporary science and its practices. Based on our experience of applied Buddhist Psychology, WCCL now also offers a ‘Certificate course in Applied Buddhist Psychology & Ethics’ at University of Pune, in collaboration with Dept. Of Pali (UoP) and Deer Park Institute (Himachal Pradesh).

The Nalanda Tradition in Contemporary Practice of Arts–Based Therapy (ABT)

In order to practice ABT, an eligible person has to complete the ABT Certificate Course. As part of this course, all ABT Practitioners are introduced to a systematic training in the study of mind as per the Nalanda Tradition. The subject is formally called Subtle Energy Guide (SEG). Of the 375 hours, Approximately 90 Hours (equivalent to 6 international Credits) are devoted to the SEG in the ABT Certificate Course.

The SEG guide provides the ABT Practitioner with a ‘view’ and a framework to design interventions as per the unique needs of each client. Without SEG perspective, art activity may fall into one of the categories given below:

- 1.**Arts–in–therapy.** e.g. primarily doing a psychotherapy session, but using a little bit of crayons and pre–recorded music.

2. **Art-education, music-education etc.** Using art forms to “teach” clients how to sing, dance, act.
3. **Arts-on-Clients.** In this case, a certain indescribable and immeasurable power is ascribed to the performing art or artist. The Client is a passive recipient of the meritorious results from the performance.

The Indian traditions of Mind Studies interface with new models of neuroscience and psychology. While this gives a holistic analysis of mind, another important inclusion from the Indian Tradition is the study of ethics. Studying ethics enables practitioners to have immense clarity on what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded, without having to resort to moralistic judgments.

The Source

Instead of viewing absence of mental illness as good mental health, Siddhartha (later to be known as Buddha), raised the bar to aspire for a state of mental flourishing, where one arrives at a ‘complete cessation of suffering’. According to Siddhartha, until one arrives at the true nature of reality, one is subject to uncertainty and hence, stress/grief/pain – Suffering.

Later on with systematic training of attention (shamatha), analyzing emotions (vipassana), and mindfulness (contemplating key concepts like impermanence) Siddhartha realized the true nature of phenomenon as it appears perceptually. He noticed that ordinary beings delude themselves by imposing conceptual superimpositions on all phenomenon. Eventually, He taught many techniques to individuals who wished to perceive the true nature of reality without the concepts, habits, labels and destructive emotions that obscure true perception.

The Nalanda Tradition is a lineage of Indian scholars who followed in the footsteps of the Buddha, achieving scholarly renown and liberation. This tradition has been kept alive by a long lineage of Tibetan Buddhist Practitioners, and is now being offered back to India.

Personal Practice – How can a deluded being truly help someone?

India has given us many great and Profound Masters. An enduring quality common to all is the fact that they all have a strong personal practice. From this personal practice and experience, arose theories of mind. A first-hand observation, refinement of their own mind was primary. ABT Practitioners have to undergo a similar path to their own refinement.

Having firmly seized control over their minds, they can guide others more efficiently. As Acharya Shantideva, the great Nalanda Scholar from Saurashtra (now Gujarat) has said:

**Where would I possible find enough leather
with which to cover the surface of the earth?
But (just) leather on the soles of my feet
is equivalent to covering the earth with it. (5:13)**

**Likewise it is not possible for me
To restrain the external course of things
But should I restrain this mind of mine
What would be the need to restrain all else? (5:14)**

(Bodhicharyavtara)

Mindfulness

An ABT Practitioner prepares before sessions by establishing a sacred space using visualizations, invocations and contemplation. Mr. Ghosh, a Mentor to WCCL Foundation calls it 'Re-Connecting to the Intent'. According to him, 'The results of our actions are governed by our motivation. It is important to learn how to be present each day, with the same clients, working on similar sounding issues, without getting jaded.' Various such preliminary practices ensure mindfulness of the ABT Practitioners.

Perception of Self

In certain parts of India, the Ayurvedic Practitioners are called Kaviraj. Healing is considered an art, and those with a unique system of perception are best suited for it. For bringing arts in healing, ABT practitioner must transform their mundane perception into an accurate perception of the world. One of the obstacles to accurate perception is **destructive emotions** (kleshas). These emotional states are transient, but cloud our perception. Like a seed of weed, which does not need to be nurtured, these emotional states are to be identified and analyzed. If a person is prone to anger and violence, it may not be a good idea to offer him/her a cathartic experience, because the emotional states are generated by habit, and more often we practice them, more better we can generate them. Nalanda Tradition offers techniques to deal with destructive emotions. These methodologies are studied by contemporary psychologists like Dr. Paul Ekman, who writes that, "The initial challenge of Buddhist meditative practice is not merely to suppress, let alone repress destructive mental states, but rather to identify how they arise, how they are experienced, and how they influence oneself and others over the long run. In addition, one learns to transform and finally free oneself from all afflictive states." (Paul Ekman et. al. 2005)

With many creative assignments and personal exercises that encourage contemplation and reflection, ABT Practitioners are encouraged to perceive themselves accurately, and develop pliancy and equanimity.

Subtly Guide the Energy in-the-moment

Sometimes, a shaking hand needs to be seen as a rumble of movements! or, angry words converted to a mad playful song! Like an experienced martial artist, the ABT practitioner must perceive the interplay of **subtle energy** between the subject – medium – object. This dynamic process of artistic engagement has spontaneity of its own, much like a conversation between two friends – unplanned and without the burden of expectations. Mr. Ghosh qualifies this level of engagement as being 'Abstract, but with a defined direction'.

It takes immense playfulness and letting go. Preparations for this stage involve a slow melting of the fixated and frozen concepts that

get accumulated in the limitless space of our minds. Staring at the mirage of reality long enough gives practitioners the confidence to create – in the moment. Working on the Self by exploring voice-work, zen painting, personal stories etc., ABT practitioners cultivate lightness. ‘To be able to perceive human beings as a conglomerate of various fields, patterns, forms and systems’ (WCCL Foundation 2009b) allows the ABT Practitioners unprecedented possibilities.

Ethics of Compassion

H.H. Sakya Trizin says ‘Generally speaking, from the smallest insect on up to the most intelligent human being, there is agreement that all sentient beings want happiness and all of them also wish to avoid suffering’ (2007). Not knowing the true cause of happiness, sentient beings keep getting entangled in further suffering. NGO/Caregiving professionals are witness to the endless cycle of suffering that millions of innocent beings go through on a daily basis. Even when one therapeutic goal is achieved, there is no cause for celebration because simultaneously other challenges have already risen. For those working in palliative care situations, there seem to be no ray of hope. Sometimes, even the most obvious solutions do not seem to work. For example, a 2006 report on Africa states that, ‘In the last three decades Africa has cumulatively received more than \$500 billion in aid from the international community....large volumes of aid have not prevented Africa from having the slowest per capita income growth in the world’ (African Development Bank 2006:1)

It is easy to lose faith or hope. “Burn-Out” is a common word. This slow deterioration of strength is understandable. By contemplating reality, ABT Practitioners aspire to build wisdom that sees this samsara for what it is. Simultaneously, contemplating inter-dependence, Practitioners generate compassion, which wishes that all sentient beings achieve happiness and remain free from suffering. Arya Shantideva writes in Bodhicharyavatara that although the problems of beings are limitless, I will continue to help.....

For as long as space endures

And for as long as living beings remain,

**Until then may I too remain
To dispel the misery of the world (10:55)**

Conclusion

ABT Practitioners repeatedly share that they experience immense benefit of Reflection, Contemplation and Meditation in their own personal and professional lives. Motivation levels of ABT Practitioners are visibly high. A survey of ABT Practitioners showed that – of the 72 respondents, 61 were active in field, and doing an average of 4 hours of ABT sessions per week. This means a field penetration of **85%**. Personal capacity is also directly impacted with consistent personal practice. In the year 2012, **4,401** clients were served by 61 practitioners. This indicates a potential of 72 clients being served annually by each practitioner.

In his book titled ‘Destructive Emotions’, Daniel Goleman has written extensively about how Buddhist meditators have shown remarkable control on brain activities during laboratory experiments. The new science of mind is emerging from Indian traditions of introspection and contemplative practice along with a strong empirical support from western science. Pioneering organizations like the Mind & Life Institute (www.mindandlife.org) are creating wonderful dialogues between western scientists and eastern contemplative teachers. Stimulated by a meeting between western psychologists and the Dalai Lama on the topic of ‘Destructive Emotions’, Dr. Paul Ekman, co-wrote a paper titled ‘Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives’ (2005), which was published by the American Psychological Society. Dr. Ekman is one of the 20th century’s most influential psychologists¹ and winner of the American Psychological Association’s highest award in 1991. This study was co-written by Richard Davidson – professor of psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Matthieu Ricard – a French Buddhist monk, and B. Alan Wallace – an American author, translator, teacher, researcher, interpreter, and Buddhist practitioner. The joint conclusion of their study is as follows:

‘Buddhist conceptions and practices that deal with emotional life make three very distinct contributions to psychology. Conceptually they raise

¹ Time magazine named Dr. Paul Ekman as one of the world’s 100 Most Influential People

issues that have been ignored by many, calling on psychologists to make more finely nuanced distinctions in thinking about emotional experiences. Methodologically they offer practices for enriching the potential for individuals to report on their own internal experiences, providing crucial data not otherwise available in that detail or comprehensiveness from the techniques now used to study subjective emotional experience. Finally, the practices themselves offer a therapy, not just for the disturbed, but also for all those who seek to improve the quality of their lives. We hope what we have reported will serve to spark the interest of psychologists to learn more about this tradition' (Ekman et al 2005: 63).

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