

Buddhism and Psychology

Interesting topic choice -- I felt some resistance to taking this on since I usually try to find some kind of practice angle with each of our topics and didn't find any easy way in. Also, I'm not really sure I know enough about psychology or Buddhism to make a judgement. But the question does seem to come up a lot, and it seems like it could help to get some clarity on my own opinions here.

Seems that we westerners spend a fair amount of energy trying to situate Buddhism in our general worldview -- at first, Buddhism was considered a religion, then a philosophy, and right now a form of psychology. It makes some sense: The Buddha himself is sometimes called the great physician, and there is a lived aspect to Buddhism that is lost on us if we call it simply a philosophy.

However, I don't think Buddhism is a form of psychology. There are a lot of art practitioners inspired by Buddhism, and there are a lot of psychology practitioners (both therapists and patients) inspired by Buddhism -- but it would be silly to say that art and Buddhism are the same, or that Buddhism and psychology are the same.

There is definitely some crossover, but also vast tracts that are covered only by one or the other. For one thing, you can get quite a bit of benefit from psychology without ever grappling with issues such as codependent arising, and you can be a Buddhist without ever really framing yourself as having a "psychology" at all.

Without any disrespect to the very important work of psychology, I personally rankle at the idea that Buddhism is being co-opted into a form of psychology -- it feels to me like a case of cultural assimilation, actually, where very important features of Buddhism are being swept under the rug so that it can seem more palatable/familiar to a western view. Buddhism includes features of reality that should be more familiar to us, but which we Westerners have ignored for a very long time. I guess I prefer to see Buddhism stand on its own.