

## EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY & BUDDHA PHILOSOPHY: IT'S RELEVANCE IN NURTURING A HEALTHY MIND

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### ABSTRACT

The term "existentialism" have been coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s and adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre. The label has been applied retrospectively to philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Søren Kierkegaard and other 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers who, despite profound doctrinal differences, generally held that the focus of philosophical thought should be to deal with the conditions of existence of the individual person and his or her emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts.

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, posthumously regarded as 'the father of existentialism', maintained that the individual solely has the responsibilities of giving one's own life meaning and living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom.

Over the last century, experts have written on many commonalities between Buddhism and various branches of modern western psychology like phenomenological psychology, psychoanalytical psychotherapy, humanistic psychology, cognitive psychology and existential psychology. In comparison to other branches of psychology, less have been studied and talked on the commonalities between Buddhist philosophy and modern existential psychology that have been propagated in the west.

Buddha said that the life is 'suffering'. Existential psychology speaks of *ontological anxiety* (dread, angst). Buddha said that 'suffering is due to attachment'. Existential psychology also has some similar concepts. We cling to things in the hopes that they will provide us with a certain benefit. Buddha said that 'suffering can be extinguished'. The Buddhist concept of nirvana is quite similar to the existentialists' *freedom*. Freedom has, in fact, been used in Buddhism in the context of freedom from rebirth or freedom from the effects of karma. For the existentialist, freedom is a fact of our being, one which we often ignore. Finally, Buddha says that 'there is a way to extinguish suffering'. For the existential psychologist, the therapist must take an assertive role in helping the client become aware of the reality of his or her suffering and its roots.

As a practising psychiatrist, clinician, therapist we often face patients with symptoms of depression where aetiology is not merely a reactive one, not an interpersonal conflict, not simply a cognitive distortion! Patients mainly present with some form of personal 'existential crisis'. Unless we understand and address these existential questions, we probably, will fail to alleviate the symptoms of depression, by merely prescribing drugs, in these patients!

**Key Words:** Existential Psychology, Buddha Philosophy, Depression

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The term "existentialism" have been coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s and adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre. The label has been applied retrospectively to philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Søren Kierkegaard and other 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers who, despite profound

doctrinal differences, generally held that the focus of philosophical thought should be to deal with the conditions of existence of the individual person and his or her emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, posthumously regarded as the father of existentialism, maintained that the individual solely has the

responsibilities of giving one's own life meaning and living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom.

Over the last century, experts have written on many commonalities between Buddhism and various branches of modern western psychology like phenomenological psychology, psychoanalytical psychotherapy, humanistic psychology, cognitive psychology and existential psychology. Mid-twentieth century saw the collaborations between many psychoanalysts and Buddhist scholars as a meeting between "two of the most powerful forces" operating in the Western mind. In comparison to other branches of psychology, less have been studied and talked on the commonalities between Buddhist philosophy and modern existential psychology, that have been propagated in the west. This article attempted make a bridge between our ancient Buddhist Philosophy and 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Western existential thinkers.

**Existential approach: the 'Fourth Force' in psychology:**

**Psychoanalysis** was an important force, which saw human beings as driven by their past experiences. People behaved in ways that stemmed from feelings about their childhood or other experiences. **Behaviourism** saw human beings as strongly moulded by their conditioning. People behaved in ways that were dependent on rewards and punishment. **Humanistic psychology** rebelled against both the conditioning and medical models. It saw human beings as basically good. People could develop by being true to themselves. Environment was crucial. **Existential psychology** saw human beings as neither good nor bad. People shaped their lives by the choices they made and each choice had consequences. They could take responsibility for choosing their attitude and actions.

**A Brief History of Existentialism<sup>1</sup>**

In 1964 'Life Magazine' traced the history of existentialism from [Heraclitus](#) (500BC) and [Parmenides](#) over the argument over 'The Unchanging One' as the real and 'the state of flux' as the unreal. They searched and noted existential views in the preaching of Old Testament Psalms and Jesus Christ. Other important predecessors of modern existentialists were [Jacob Boehme](#) (1575–1624), [Rene Descartes](#) (1596–1650) and [Blaise Pascal](#) (1623–1662).

The starting point of existential philosophy traced back to the nineteenth century through the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Several people then created the bridge from philosophy to psychology and on to psychotherapy. These included practitioners such as Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss. The approach reached a world-wide audience, however, with the work of Viktor Frankl and Rollo May.

**Existential Psychology: Some important contributors:**



**"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced".**

**Soren Kierkegaard (1813–55)<sup>2</sup>** was a Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic, and religious author. He gave the notions of angst, despair, and the importance of the individual.

He was a lonely, hunchbacked writer who denounced the established church and rejected much of the then popular German idealism. During his lifetime there were few takers of his ideas. As Kierkegaard lived by his own word he was lonely and much ridiculed during his lifetime. But when it comes to the absurdity of existence, war is a great convincer; and it was at the end of first World War two German philosophers, [Karl Jaspers](#) and [Martin Heidegger](#), took up Kierkegaard's ideas, elaborated and systematized them. After World War-II, with the human condition more precarious than ever, with humanity facing the ultimate absurdity, existential philosophy has reached to its present state with significant contributions from many 20th-century philosophers.



**"God is dead and we have killed him".**

**Nietzsche (1844–1900)<sup>3</sup>** took existential philosophy of life a step further, who used to call himself as "immoralist". His starting point was the notion that 'God is dead', that is, the idea of God was outmoded and limiting and that it is up to us to re-evaluate existence in light of this.

Nietzsche's concept "God is dead" applies to the doctrines of Christendom. He claimed that the Christian faith as practised was not a proper representation of Jesus' teachings, as it forced people merely to believe in the way of Jesus but not to act as Jesus did.

He encouraged people to transcend the mores of civilization and choose their own standards. The important existential themes of freedom, choice, responsibility and courage were introduced for the first time by him.

By the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a crisis was coming to the Western psyche, and Nietzsche was its most famous prophet. Global economy in the world of Freud and Einstein meant everything was relative: your race, your ethnicity, your profession, your religion. Once these had been skin that was impossible to shed, but now they were clothes someone could take on and off, in a

universe where not even matter and time were constant!

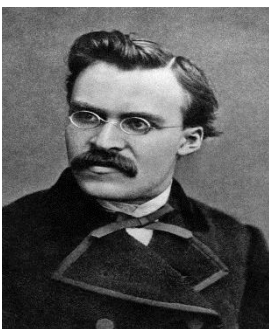
**Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)**<sup>4</sup> applied the phenomenological method to understand the ‘meaning of being’. He explored human beings in the world in a manner that revolutionizes classical ideas about the self and psychology.



**“If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life - and only then will I be free to become myself”.**

His thinking has contributed to such diverse fields as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, political theory, psychology and theology. He recognized the importance of time, space, death and human relatedness.

**Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883–1969)**<sup>5</sup> was a German psychiatrist and philosopher who had a strong influence on modern theology, psychiatry and philosophy.



**“My path was not the normal one of professors of philosophy”**..... As published in *‘Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre’* (1956).

Jaspers set about writing his views on mental illness in a book which he published in 1913 as *General Psychopathology*. This work has become a classic in the psychiatric literature and many modern diagnostic criteria stem from ideas contained within them.

In 1921, at the age of 38, Jaspers turned from psychology to philosophy. Most commentators associate Jaspers with the philosophy of existentialism. **He**

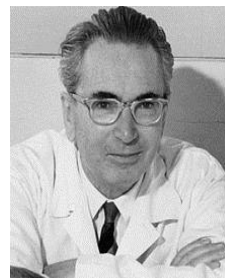
**rejected explicit religious doctrines, including the notion of a personal God.**



**Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966)**<sup>6</sup> was born in Switzerland in 1881. Ludwig studied under Carl Jung and was good friends with Sigmund Freud. Binswanger was further influenced by existential philosophy, particularly after first World War, through the works of Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Buber, eventually evolving his own distinctive brand of existential-phenomenological psychology.

Whilst some of Ludwig’s writing is considered abstract, his work laid the foundations for existential psychology. Placing a strong emphasis on building a good relationship with clients, he focused on enabling them to take responsibility for the lives.

Ludwig was particularly known for developing Daseinanalysis. This stems from the German word ‘Dasein’, for which there is no direct English translation. Some people translate it as ‘existence’. Others go further, explaining it in terms of ‘being there’.



**“What is to give light must endure burning.”**

**“Man is not free from his conditions, but he is free to take a stand towards his conditions.”**

**Victor Emil Frankl (1905 –1997)**<sup>7</sup> was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor.

Frankl said “Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

He was the founder of **logotherapy**, which is a form of existential analysis. His wife Tilly died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Frankl’s mother Elsa was killed by the Nazis in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and his brother Walter died working in a mining operation that was part of Auschwitz. He chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate in a best-selling book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which led him to discover the importance of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even the most sordid ones, and thus, a reason to continue living.

Frankl validated his hallmark conclusion that even in the most absurd, painful, and dehumanized situation, life has potential meaning and that, therefore, even suffering is meaningful. He became one of the key figures in existential therapy and a prominent source of inspiration for humanistic psychologists. He often said that even within the narrow boundaries of the concentration camps he found only two races of Men to exist: decent and unprincipled ones.

He recalled two prisoners who talked of committing suicide. Both men used the typical argument: that they had nothing more to expect from life. The challenge was to show the men that life was still expecting something from them.



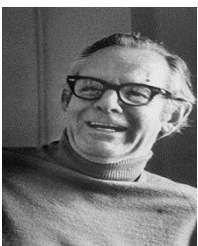
**“We are not individuals locked up inside our bodies. We live in a shared world, and we illuminate each other. Human existence is shared existence.”**

**Medard Boss (1903-1990)<sup>8</sup>** was born in St. Gallen, Switzerland, worked for the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler.

Medard immersed himself in the writings of the existential philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Binswanger. Some people see Medard as one of the founders of existential psychology.

Medard added several dimensions that encouraged patients to take responsibility for shaping their futures. He wrote later that the therapist's aim was to enable the patient: “ ... to appropriate as his own the innate potentials which up until treatment had been hidden, disturbed, or distorted.” Medard encouraged a person to be fully open to experience. One approach he used was ‘Attunement’. This meant enabling a patient to tune into the moods they were experiencing.

**Rollo May (1909- 1994)<sup>9</sup>** was born in Ohio. He brought together many strands of the existential approach and presented these to a wider audience in the United States.



“Freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mould ourselves.

“Human freedom involves our capacity to pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight”.

*“Joy, rather than happiness, is the goal of life, for joy is the emotion which accompanies our fulfilling our natures as human beings. The first thing necessary for a constructive dealing with time is to learn to live in the reality of the present moment. For psychologically speaking, this present moment is all we have”.*

**Existential Psychology: Description of few concepts in brief<sup>2,4,6</sup>**

**Phenomenology** is the careful and complete study of **phenomena**, and is basically the invention of the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Phenomena are the

contents of consciousness, the things, qualities, relationships, events, thoughts, images, memories, fantasies, feelings, acts, and so on, which we experience.

**Existence:** Kierkegaard once compared human beings with God but found us lacking. God is traditionally understood as being omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal. We, on the other hand, are abysmally ignorant, pitifully powerless, and all too mortal. Our limitations are clear. **Dasein**, Literally, means "being there", many people use the word **existence**, or **human existence**. The main quality of Dasein, according to Heidegger, is **care**.

**Anxiety:** Existentialists are famous for pointing out that life is hard. The physical world can give us pain as well as pleasure; the social world can lead to heartbreak and loneliness as well as love and affection; and the personal world, most especially, contains anxiety and guilt and the awareness of our own mortality. And these hard things are not merely possibilities in life, they are inevitable. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and other existentialists use the word **Angst, anxiety**, to refer to the apprehension we feel as we move into the uncertainty of our future. Existentialists often talk about **nothingness** in association with anxiety: Anxiety is not some temporary inconvenience to be removed by your friendly therapist; it is a part of being human.

**Guilt:** So, existentialism is not an "easy" philosophy. It provides a lot fewer ways of avoiding responsibility for one's acts. You can't blame it all on your environment, or your genetics, or your parents, or some psychiatric disease, or booze or drugs, or peer-pressure, or the devil. **Death:** Existentialists are sometimes criticized for being preoccupied with death. Sartre says, in his play **The Flies**, "life begins on the far side of despair."

**Authenticity:** Unlike most other personality theorists, the existentialists make no effort to avoid value judgments. Phenomenologically, good and bad are as "real" as solid waste and burnt toast. So they are quite clear that there are better and worse ways of living life. The better ways they call **authentic**. To live authentically means to be aware of yourself, of your circumstances (thrownness), of your social world (fallenness), of your duty to create yourself (understanding), of the inevitability of anxiety, of guilt, and of death. It means further to accept these things in an act of self-affirmation. It means involvement, compassion, and commitment.

**Inauthenticity:** Someone who is living inauthentically is no longer "becoming" but only "being." They have traded openness for closedness, the dynamic for the static, possibilities for actualities. If authenticity is movement, they have stopped. **Conventionality** is the most common style of inauthenticity. It involves ignoring one's freedom and living a life of conformity and shallow materialism. If you can manage to be like everyone else, you need not make choices. You can turn to authority, or to your peers, or to the media for "guidance." You can become too "busy" to notice the

moral decisions you need to make. You are fallen and living in what Sartre called **bad faith**.

#### **Brief description of Existential analysis**

**Diagnosis:** Binswanger and other existential psychologists make a point of discovering their client's **world view** (or **world design**). He will, for example, try to understand how you see your **Umwelt** or physical world -- things, buildings, trees, furniture, gravity, etc. He will want to understand your **Mitwelt**, or social world, as well. Here we are talking about your relations to individuals, to community, to culture, and so on. And he will want to understand your **Eigenwelt** or personal world. This includes both mind and body, whatever you feel is most central to your sense of who you are. Binswanger is equally interested in your relationship to **time**. He would like to know how you view your past, present, and future. Do you live in the past, forever trying to recapture those golden days? Or do you live in the future, always preparing or hoping for a better life? Do you see your life as a long, complex adventure? Or a brief flash -- here today, gone tomorrow?

Binswanger also talks about different **modes**: Some people live in a **singular mode**, alone and self-sufficient. Others live in a **dual mode**, as a "you and me" rather than an "I." Some live in a **plural mode**, thinking of themselves in terms of their membership in something larger than themselves -- a nation, a religion, an organization, a culture. Still others live in an **anonymous mode**, quiet, secretive, in the background of life. And most of us live in all these modes from time to time and place to place.

As you can see, the language of existential analysis is **metaphor**. Life is much too big, much too rich, to be captured by anything so crude as prose. My life is certainly too rich to be captured in words that you thought up before you even met me! Existential therapists allow their clients to reveal themselves, disclose themselves, in their own words, in their own time.

**Therapy:** The essence of existential therapy is the relationship between the therapist and the client, called an **encounter**. An encounter is the genuine presence of one Dasein to another, an "opening up" of one to the other.

#### **Gautama Buddha and His Philosophy<sup>11, 12</sup>**

Life of Prince Siddhartha or Gautama Buddha is fairly well known. Born in a Royal family at Kapilavastu, on the foot-hills of the Himalaya, in the sixth century BC, He renounced the world early in life. The sights of disease, old age and death lead to a state of 'existential crisis' in him. He was convinced that the world was full of suffering and he renounced the world early in life.

As an ascetic, he was restless in search of the real source of all sufferings and of the path or means of cessation from these sufferings. He sought answers to his questions from many learned scholars and religious teachers of his time but nothing satisfied him. He practised great austerities, went through intense meditations with an iron will and a mind free from all disturbing thoughts and passions. He endeavoured to unravel the mystery of world's miseries. Finally his mission was fulfilled and prince Siddhartha became Buddha or "Enlightened".

Buddha always tried to enlighten persons on the most important questions of sorrow, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. The answers to these four questions constitute the essence of Buddha's enlightenment. These have come to be known as **four noble truths**. They are: (a) Life is full of suffering (**Duhkha**), (b) There is a cause of this suffering (**Duhkha-samudaya**), (c) It is possible to stop suffering (**Duhkha-nirodha**), (d) Forth noble truth about suffering is that **there is a path (marga)**- which Buddha followed and others can similarly follow- **to reach to a state free from misery**. He called it the Eightfold Path to liberation.

**Eightfold Path (astangika-marga):** This gives in a nutshell the essentials of '**Buddha Ethics**'. This Path is open to all, monks as well as laymen. Detail description of these 8 fold path is beyond the scope of this essay. These include Right views, Right resolve/aspiration, Right speech, Right action/conduct, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness and Right concentration. The first two segments of the path are referred to as **prajña**, meaning wisdom: (1) **Right views**- understanding the Four Noble Truths, especially the nature of all things as imperfect, impermanent, and insubstantial and our self-inflicted suffering as founded in clinging, hate, and ignorance. (2) **Right resolve/aspiration**- having the true desire/determination to free oneself from attachment, hatefulness, and ignorance.

The next three segments of the path provide more detailed guidance in the form of moral precepts, called **sila**: (3) **Right speech**- Abstaining from lying, gossiping, and hurtful speech generally. Speech is often our ignorance made manifest, and is the most common way in which we harm others. (4) **Right action/conduct**- Right conduct includes the '**Pancha-Sila**', the five vows for desisting from killing, stealing, sensuality, lying and intoxication. (5) **Right livelihood**- Making one's living in an honest, non-hurtful way.

The last three segments of the path are the ones Buddhism is most famous for, and concern **samadhi** or meditation. Despite the popular conception, without wisdom and morality, meditation is worthless, and may even be dangerous. (6) **Right effort**- Taking control of your mind and the contents thereof, effort to develop good mental habits. When bad thoughts and impulses arise, they should be abandoned. This is done by watching the thought without attachment, recognizing it



for what it is and letting it dissipate. Good thoughts and impulses, on the other hand, should be nurtured and enacted. (7) **Right mindfulness**- Mindfulness refers to a kind of meditation (**vipassana**) involving an acceptance of thoughts and perceptions, a "bare attention" to these events without attachment. This mindfulness is to be extended to daily life as well. It becomes a way of developing a fuller, richer awareness of life. (8) **Right concentration**- One who has successfully guided his life in the life of last seven rules and thereby freed himself from all passions and evil thoughts is fit to enter into deeper stages of concentration that gradually take him to the goal of his long and arduous journey— cessation of suffering.

### **Existential Psychology and Buddhist Philosophy Compared: Gautama Buddha – Forerunner of Modern Existentialist?**<sup>12, 13:</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept "God is dead" applies to the doctrines of Christendom, though not to all other faiths. He claimed that Buddhism is a successful religion that he compliments for fostering critical thought. Nietzsche admired Buddhism, writing that it "already has...the self-deception of moral concepts behind it -- it stands, in my language, beyond good and evil." However he still believed that Buddhism was a form of oriental life denying nihilism.

Arthur Schopenhauer was influenced by oriental religious texts and later claimed that Buddhism was the "best of all possible religions." Schopenhauer's view that "suffering is the direct and immediate object of life" and that this is driven by a "restless willing and striving" are similar to the four noble truths of the Buddha.

William Barrett held that Heidegger's philosophy was similar to Zen Buddhism and that Heidegger himself had confirmed this after reading the works of DT Suzuki.

Jean-Paul Sartre believed that consciousness lacks an essence or any fixed characteristics and that insight into this caused a strong sense of Existential angst or Nausea. Sartre saw consciousness as defined by its ability of negation. This conception of the self as nothingness and of reality as lacking any inherent essence has been compared to the Buddhist concept of Emptiness and Not-self.

If we closely watch the lives and teachings of Buddha and many of the modern day existentialist-psychologists, we are surprised to see many commonalities between them. Keeping this view in mind, Buddha can very well be said as the fore-runner of modern existential thoughts! Buddha was very much a rebel, like many of the modern existentialists, of the then existing religious belief in ancient India. He denounced existence of God, denounced the religious text 'Veda'! His teachings also have many commonalities with modern existential thinkers.

Buddha said that the life is suffering. Existential psychology speaks of *ontological anxiety* (dread, angst). Buddha said that suffering is due to attachment. Existential psychology also has some similar concepts. We cling to things in the hopes that they will provide us with a certain benefit.

Buddha said that suffering can be extinguished. The Buddhist concept of nirvana is quite similar to the existentialists' *freedom*. Freedom has, in fact, been used in Buddhism in the context of freedom from rebirth or freedom from the effects of karma. For the existentialist, freedom is a fact of our being, one which we often ignore.

Finally, Buddha says that there is a way to extinguish suffering. For the existential psychologist, the therapist must take an assertive role in helping the client become aware of the reality of his or her suffering and its roots. Likewise, the client must take an assertive role in working towards improvement -- even though it means facing the fears they've been working so hard to avoid, and especially facing the fear that they will "lose" themselves in the process.

### **Conclusion:**

In the present essay, I tried to explore the commonalities, if any, between our age-old Buddhist philosophy and modern western existential psychology. I wanted to see whether, as a common psychiatrist, clinician, psychotherapist we can deduce, infer and learn some basic principles which will help us to understand and treat our patients in a better way.

An **existential crisis** is a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of their life: whether their life has any meaning, purpose or value. This issue of the meaning and purpose of existence is the topic of the philosophical school of existentialism and also the basis of Buddha ethics.

Lord Buddha used numerous kinds of therapies in an attempt to alleviate the suffering in his patients. In the story of Kisa-Gotami, Buddha used a cognitive mode of action to overcome the 'existential crisis' a young mother, who lost her infant son. She was devastated with grief. She went to the Buddha carrying the dead body of her son and asked for medicine that would restore her dead son to life. The Buddha told her to get some mustard seeds from a house where there had been no death. Emotionally overwhelmed Kisa -Gotami went from house to house but she could not find a single house where death had not occurred. She gradually got the insight and the meaning of death. She realized that the death is a universal phenomenon. By the end of the day Kisa -Gotami buried her dead son. Although she felt the loss she was able to move away from the pathological grief reaction that impacted her immensely.

## Article

Probably, we all face some 'existential crisis' in some form or other, during our lifetime. Prince Siddhartha had to face it; existential psychologists in the west had to face it. We all try to cope with our crisis situation according to our own available coping strategies, according to our own understanding of life's philosophy.

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Our learning and understanding of Philosophy of Buddha, learning the ideas of existential philosophers of the west, would make us better prepare to deal with our patients of depression presenting with an 'existential crisis'.