

Chapter 25

Emotional changes in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and in Buddhist Psychology

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Abstract

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) aims at the elimination of negatively felt emotions in the personal realm, while Buddhist Psychology (BP) targets positively felt emotions in a 'transpersonal' context. Kwee (1996) has proposed a list of basic emotions ranging from low to high levels of awareness and consciousness (i.e. from negative to positive experience): (1) depression, (2) anxiety, (3) anger, (4) sadness, (5) joy, (6) love, and (7) silence. The alleviation of emotional suffering is considered to be a prerequisite for working at having one's positive emotions and happiness come to fruition. Moreover, BP and REBT seem to complement each other: higher or positive emotions increased by meditation might work as a buffer preventing relapse, thus likely making therapy outcome more durable. How can REBT be complemented by techniques that develop higher emotions derived from BP? There are two kinds of techniques stemming from the Buddhist tradition: techniques that replace negative emotions by positive emotions based on the principle of incompatibility of opposite emotions and techniques that directly develop happiness through augmenting positive emotions, like particularly the social meditations known as the *Brahmaviharas* (love, compassion, joy, and equanimity). These BP-techniques fit in a multimodal framework implying adherence to a cognitive-behavioral paradigm.

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the question whether the working of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) can be enhanced by adding techniques derived from the Buddhist tradition. To provide an answer, firstly, a multilevel model of emotions will be presented, which discerns lower, intermediate, and higher levels of experience. Secondly, three kinds of techniques will be perused: (a) techniques derived from REBT that eliminate negative emotions in the personal realm, (b) techniques derived from Buddhist Psychology (BP) that replace negative emotions by positive emotions in the personal realm as well, and (c) techniques that aim to pursue higher emotions in a 'transpersonal' context in a direct way, also derived from BP. Thirdly, an effort will be made to formulate the BP-techniques that aim at developing positive and higher level emotions within a cognitive-behavioral framework.

2. A multilevel model of basic emotions

Kwee (1996) proposed a new taxonomy of basic emotions based on a thorough review of the psychological literature. He tentatively postulated seven basic emotions:

- (1) Depression: ranging from feeling blue to dejection, dysphoria, downheartedness, despondency, low spirits, melancholia, and dysthymia.
- (2) Fear: ranging from worry to apprehension, anguish, anxiety, fright, horror, terror, and panic.

- (3) Anger: ranging from annoyance to contempt, hostility, animosity, fury, rage, amok, and resentment;
- (4) sadness: ranging from pity to sorrow, distress, grief, affliction, agony, mourning, and pain.
- (5) Joy: ranging from feeling pleased to being glad, happy, in good humor, funny, euphoric, and maniacal.
- (6) Love: ranging from tenderness, to fondness, intimacy, compassion, infatuation, eroticism, passion, and ecstasy.
- (7) Silence: ranging from Christ-consciousness to Buddhahood, the Tao, no-mind, cosmic or oceanic feeling, enlightenment, Satori, and Nirvana.

The latter is also indicated as an absolute awareness or inner liberation, equifinality (end-stage), or 'point Omega'. Other terms used are: a state of pure consciousness, in which (while breathing) life and death are transcended into a silence that is neither objective nor subjective and just 'is'.

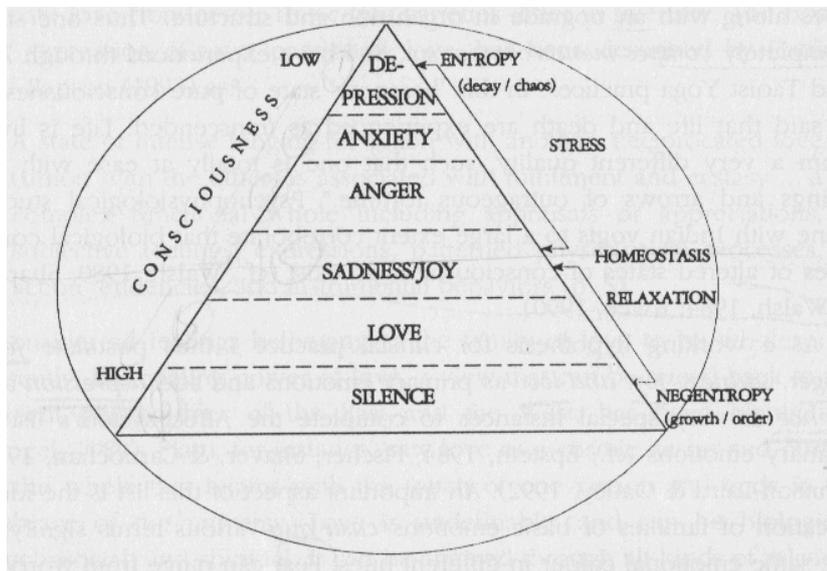


Figure 1 A hierarchically ordered model of basic emotions (Kwee, 1996, p. 259)

Each of these feelings and emotions do not occur separately. Like in the Buddhist teaching of the interdependence of all phenomena (*pratitya samutpada*) they appear and act in concert and in the context of multimodality that is here operationalized in thinking-feeling-acting, which can be more specifically expressed as the 'BASIC-I.D.' (see Figure 1): Behavior-Affect-Sensation-Imagery-Cognition-Interrelations-Drugs (the latter stand for Biology). Thus Affect (a generic term), feeling (relatively less intense emotions), and the basic (or primary) emotions originate, arise, and subside interdependently together with Behavior-Sensation-Cognition-and-Imagery, usually in an Interpersonal relatedness and while also being Biologically wired (implying that the BASIC-I is modifiable by psychopharmacological Drugs and other medication). The basic emotions are comparable to the basic musical notes or colors. Amalgamated with the other modalities basic emotional tones might become feelings that are relatively better characterized as an attitude or belief. Thus for instance: guilt is more of a belief (a relatively fixed cognitive pattern) combined with fear, while jealousy is more of an attitude toward somebody else,

a negative image with an undertone of anger. All feelings can be analyzed using the BASIC-I.D. template, giving us an assessment and insight in the relative loading of each of the modalities (Kwee, 1998).

3. Three kinds of techniques for changing emotions

Here are the three kinds of psychological techniques to emotional change.

3.1 The elimination of negative (irrational) emotions by REBT techniques. These negative emotions and feelings, called irrational in REBT, are experienced as inadequate and considered to be the result and concomitant of corresponding irrational ideation, which is to be detected in order to enable change of the thinking and the resulting unwanted basic affect of depression, anxiety, anger, or sadness. The goal of REBT is to eliminate these feelings by deconstructing the dysfunctional thoughts and constructing new rational ideas that are based on a relative stance. In REBT several kinds of techniques are used in the dialogue between client and therapist (Walen, DiGiuseppe, & Dryden, 1992):

(1) Cognitive disputation strategies are attempts to change the client's erroneous beliefs through philosophical persuasion, didactic presentation, Socratic dialogue, vicarious experience, and other modes of verbal expression. REBT's centerpiece is that it is not the Activating event (A) but our own Beliefs (B) that lead to the Consequence (C): what we feel and how we act. There are three kinds of questions that a therapist poses to dispute clients' irrational thoughts: *logical-causal* (Is it logical what you think? Is it 'true' what you think? How do you know this?); *reality-testing*: (Where is the evidence for these beliefs? Why cannot you stand it? So what if it happens?); *pragmatic/goal-oriented* (Is it worth it? Does that thinking motivate you to reach your emotional goals and help you in what you wish to do?). Other effective cognitive strategies of disputation are based on didactics (mini-lectures, analogies, or parables), exaggeration, humor, and vicarious learning or modeling.

(2) Imagery-based disputation strategies: subsequent to the verbal disputation, the therapist usually asks the client to vividly imagine being in the troublesome situation and visualize the problematic details. This may allow the therapist to see if the emotion has changed. If it has, the therapist questions the client what he is telling himself now as a way to rehearse the newly learned rational beliefs. If the emotion has not changed, there might be other irrational beliefs maintaining the negative feelings, which need detection. In negative rational-emotive imagery clients visualize the problem situation while experiencing the negative emotion after which s/he is instructed to change this feeling through self constructed rational thoughts. More disputation might be required. If the emotion has changed fundamentally in the situation, positive rational-emotive imagery is applied to visualize the attended problem event during which the client feels and behaves differently.

(3) Behavioral disputation strategies: the client is encouraged to behave in a way opposite to what her/his irrational beliefs evoke to do. Behavioral change reflects the newly acquired rational outlook and to which degree it has been internalized. Techniques that are aimed at behavioral change are: homework assignments, risk taking exercises, shame attacking exercises, exposure tactics to stay in the feared situation, role playing, and rational role reversal. REBT aims at eliminating

negative feelings one suffers from by combating negative, irrational, dysfunctional thoughts and by behaving according to the newly acquired ideation. Performance based methods have definitely been proven to be indispensable to ingrain new thinking and to eliminate unwanted affect.

As a cognitive-behavioral mode of treatment REBT postulates that emotional and psychological disorders are largely the result of thinking irrationally, dysfunctionally, negatively, absolutely, or illogically. Furthermore, REBT theorizes that rational and irrational thoughts are incompatible. Humans are able to get rid of most of their emotional and mental unhappiness, inefficacy, or disturbance if they learn to maximize rational and minimize irrational ideation (Ellis, 1994). REBT holds that sustained negative feelings, such as intense depression, anxiety, anger, and guilt, are almost always unnecessary to human living. They can be eradicated if people learn to consistently think straight and to follow up their straight thinking with effective action. REBT is a psychotherapeutic approach that views emotional change from a multimodal perspective of the BASIC-I.D. Changing feelings takes place by changing thought and action: individual behavior and interpersonal interactions. From a multimodal point of view emotions cannot be changed directly, they can only be changed through mediation by the other modalities like cognition, imagery, behavior, interrelations, and brain functioning by psychopharmacological drugs.

3.2 *Techniques derived from BP aiming at replacing negative (irrational) emotions by opposite-positive emotions.* These techniques are based on the BP's observation of many people's experience in for about 2500 years that opposite emotions are incompatible and thus do not occur simultaneously. Although this mechanism had also been applied in behavior therapy that began in the fifties – particularly in Wolpean systematic desensitization, whereby relaxation is alternately and gradually infused to reciprocally inhibit anxiety responses – it was thus already known and practiced in the Buddha's time. Humphreys (1968) explains the Buddhist view on this matter:

Evil has no autonomous existence and is only the absence of the good and it just exists for him, who has become the victim of it. The real evil comes from the human intellect and the beginning of it stems from man gifted with reason, who turns away from nature. Man and nothing else is the real origin of evil. The origins of evil are passion, hate, delusion and fear. It is important to discard these evils. One of the methods to do this is to transform those evils by something better. Hate vanishes not by hate, but stops only by love (p.107).

Goleman (1988), also pointing at systematic desensitization, revealed that the Abhidhamma already described the use of mindfulness as an antagonistic response to counter human existential suffering and stress (*dukkha*) and thus unknowingly applied the learning principle of counterconditioning before common era. Abhidhamma – the third of three canonical books of the Theravada (Early Buddhist Teaching of the Elders) – distinguishes healthy versus unhealthy factors and calls for the strategy that strives at reaching healthy states of mind neither by pursuing them directly nor by fighting the unhealthy ones. The preferred way is equanimity by meditation, which might imply an immersing of stress during mindfulness (i.e. being attentive and aware of the present moment without any judging) will likely reduce stressfulness. Every negative factor has a corresponding positive counterpart. When a positive/healthy state of mind is realized, the

negative/unhealthy one has no chance to appear. Bennet-Goleman (2001) states the principle: one has to harness the negative emotions to positive ends by mindfully embracing them. Thus, the essence of mindfulness meditation is to make use of all experiences, even of the negative ones, as aids that help to progress on the path. In such way all possible disturbances and antagonistic forces will become our teachers.

This way of dealing falls in the broad range of Buddhist approaches to cope with disturbing emotions. Three main strategic stances can be discerned:

- (1) Abandoning the disturbing emotions by arduous mindfulness practice aimed at ceasing the disturbing and unhealthy emotions entirely.
- (2) Transforming the disturbing emotions into positive ones by opposing each negative state with a replacing antidote like loving-kindness.
- (3) Including the disturbing emotion as part of one's path by utilizing negative experiences and turning these 'enemies and foes' into friends.

The latter is a tough challenge, known as the 'steep' path. One learns to regard detrimental emotions as an opportunity to gain wisdom and develop further toward awakening. The underlying idea is that negative emotions are not inherently bad or undesirable but as a fact of life that by frustrating us has to tell us something important.

Thus, in the Vajrayana Buddhist teaching of Tibet the instruction is not to suppress or oppose the energy fuelling the negative, unhealthy, destructive emotions but to transform these by redirecting the very same energy into fueling positive, healthy, and constructive emotions (Conze, 1959). A model and system to this end is known as the Five Buddha Families derived from the Mahayana cosmology – which is in a teaching of emptiness necessarily on the bottom line void – classifying all existing phenomena in five distinguishing categories. The system applies abstruse techniques that are passed on by a lama (guru) to a disciple as a secret and that are capable to positively transmute the detrimental emotions and their corresponding behavioral tendencies: hatred-clinging, greed-grasping, ignorance-craving, pride-downing, and jealousy-separating. Such techniques target the transformation of negative, illusory, and defiled affect into positive, illuminated, and luminous affect of an enlightened mode through various guided visualizations. This might include Tantric (sexual) visualizations of the idealized Buddha embracing his female counterpart in blissful states. The embodiment of such imagery is supposed to accrue positive affect as well as health. All negative affect with the quality of 'neurotic' attachment are thus transformed into liberating ones and eventually wisdom is acquired. See the following scheme that summarizes the above:

Buddha Akshobhya (East / Blue): Loving kindness vs. hate / anger – clinging
Buddha Ratnasambhava (South / Yellow): Equanimity vs. pride / arrogance – downing
Buddha Vairocana (Center / White): Knowledge vs. ignorance / delusion - craving
Buddha Amithaba West / Red): Generosity vs. greed / passion – grasping
Buddha Amoghasiddhi (North / Green): Shared joy vs. jealousy / envy – separating

3.3 Techniques derived from BP aiming to pursue higher emotions in a direct way. The *Brahmaviharas* derived from the Theravada contain contemplative meditations with a social content that stem from the dwelling place of Brahma (that is in the Buddhist context used as a metaphor for something great). Being akin to Brahma – the divine but

transient ruler of the higher heavens (i.e. positive feeling / mind states) in the traditional Buddhist picture of the universe (i.e. all possible feeling states) – they are incompatible with hating and other negative states of the mind. This contemplative practice seeks to embody the sublime states of loving kindness, empathic compassion, shared joy, and meditative equanimity. Therefore, the mind should be abundantly and thoroughly saturated by them. This should be done by aggrandizing these feelings ‘immeasurably’ and by projecting them into the world in an ‘endless’ and ‘beginningless’ way. They are the alpha and omega of Buddhist practice capable to prevent emptiness from sliding into a horror vacuum (depicted in Zen as a circle without beginning or end, called: enzo). Thera (1999) states that these four attitudes are said to be sublime because they excel as the right and ideal manner of conduct towards all sentient beings. They are the great removers of social tension, the great peace-makers in conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of life and the battle of existence. As they level social barriers, they build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity long forgotten, revive joy and hope long abandoned, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism.

These four qualities are also known as the boundless states because in their perfection and their true nature they should not be narrowed by any limitation as to the range of beings they are extended towards. They are advisably non-exclusive and impartial as well as unbound by selective preference or prejudice. A mind that has attained the boundlessness of the Brahmaviharas will not harbor any hatred based on national, racial, religious, or class differences. There are two simultaneous methods of developing the sublime states: by cultivating practical conduct that directs thinking appropriately and by meditation that systematically targets equanimity through meditative absorption. The latter implies arduous practice of meditation that aims to gradually achieve higher states of mental concentration and absorption called *jhana*. The meditations on love, compassion, and joy may each produce the attainment of the first stages of absorptions, while meditation that directly targets equanimity will lead to the *jhana* of equanimity. A mind that has achieved concentration, absorption, and equanimity and that is pervaded by the sublime states of the Brahmaviharas will be pure, tranquil, firm, collected, and free of coarse selfishness. It will thus be well-prepared for the final work of deliverance which can be completed only by wisdom through insight into the acquired essential knowledge of the Buddhist teaching.

The Buddha allegedly has said that what a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, it is to such that his mind will bend and incline. The sublime states will be likely cultivated by repeated reflection upon their positive qualities, the benefits they bestow, and the dangers looming from their opposites. The qualities may be increased by four exercises a fragment of which exemplifies its practice, as follows:

- (1) Loving kindness: First, immerse yourself with love... then imagine a friend and do the same with this friend... Next, turn to someone to whom you are indifferent to, without feeling any attraction or aversion... Visualize this person vividly and send love to him / her... Subsequently, evoke an image of an enemy... see your enemy sharply in your mind’s eye... and send your love to her / him... Then... turn to mankind... to all forms of life... and to the whole universe... Eventually you become the well and embodied spirit of love itself...
- (2) Empathic compassion: Start with raising empathy... and embody compassion... Then vividly radiate this compassion to people who are extremely

unfortunate, who are poor and hungry and have no roof over their heads... visualize them clearly in your mind's eye and send your compassion to them... Next, feel and radiate your compassion to people with other kinds of suffering... to people who live in zones of war... who are chronically ill or have an incurable disease... Uphold a clear image of such people all over the world...

(3) Shared joy: Begin by feeling happy and joyful... then, embody somebody else's happiness... Feel happy because someone's fortunate day or event, it can be a neighbor or a colleague, or perhaps even someone you dislike... Share the joy of whoever appears in your mind's eye and be joyful... This is an antidote against selfishness and will transform egotism... Just imagine somebody who is very lucky and happy and full with joy, it can be a friend or a foe... Aggrandize your joy... feel joy for them and send it to them... and to all happy people...

(4) Meditative equanimity: be ever mindful of the present... from moment to moment... Whatever appears in the mind's eye, do not judge or evaluate it... it might be a thought, a concept or an image... or a feeling, a sensation or an emotion... Only watch... be detached and unmoved... stay calm and serene... Radiate this consciousness of equanimity to friend... and foe... and gradually to all forms of life... Go from love, compassion, joy... back to this imperturbable inner centeredness that cannot be disturbed by trivial externalities...

Note that this exercise is a cognitive-behavioral intervention as they are not only imagined and reasoned why they are relevant but also practiced in daily conduct with the ultimate aim to increase positive affect that corresponds with high levels of awareness. Reality is there where conscious attention is directed and focused at.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Quintessential is the question whether it is possible to reframe Buddhist techniques in a cognitive-behavioral paradigm. Considering the above, the answer must be: yes. The working of REBT can be enhanced by cultivating higher levels of awareness through using techniques derived from BP that seek for the sublime. REBT and BP-techniques can be scrutinized by a multimodal or BASIC-I.D. template and its components can be accordingly subsumed under the categories of action, thought, or feeling. These three kinds of techniques are springboards serving different goals: the changing of negative affect or emotions of lower levels of consciousness (depression, anxiety, anger, and sadness), the substitution of these feelings into positive emotions of higher levels of consciousness (joy and love), and the direct pursuit of these positive affect and feelings leading to serenity and silence (i.e. the arrest of being internally moved), which is known in Buddhist terminology as emptiness or not-self (Kwee & Ellis, 1998)

Clearly, if the person is struggling with intense negative and disordered emotions, the intervention's aim cannot be otherwise but directed to eliminating the psychopathology and its symptoms (medication might be imperative). For clients who suffer from existential neurosis or 'normal' psychological problems of living nobody can escape – the suffering the Buddhist teaching usually targets – replacing negative emotions by positive ones is the preferred strategy and likely helps the person to develop self-actualization. The third way is to be pursued if the person is free from psychological disturbance, does not suffer too much from the slings and arrows of daily misfortune, and lives a relatively balanced life, socially and personally. Here meditation might likely accrue the desired aim of becoming a Buddha. Paraphrasing Wilber (1986), three phases

are discernable: the strictly personal phase, the intermediate phase wherein a shift is worked at from the personal to the transpersonal, and the strictly transpersonal phase. Working in the third phase is only possible if the two previous phases have been passed successfully. The intermediate phase necessitates a successful passing through the first phase of emotional disorder. Thus, if one is for instance seriously depressed, it is strongly advised to first work on alleviation of this pathological suffering and on grounding one's personal balance before embarking on a transpersonal journey.

The choice of intervention can be guided by the type of emotion one is defiled from. The model of basic emotions proposed by Kwee (1996) may prove to be useful for other clinicians in distinguishing the functions of various techniques and the level of consciousness each intervention work on. It helps to formulate indications and provide a provisional answer to the question of specificity: what works for whom under which condition? REBT can be enhanced with BP-techniques to encompass positive, higher, or healthy affect and emotions. It can be fruitfully combined with meditation, contemplation, and concentration to augment targeted effects and to pave the way for experiencing serenity, silence, and emptiness (Soons, 2004). Although practitioners might find the here formulated guidelines useful, still much needs to be done to discover highly accurate indications for emotional change and the shortest road to the sublime.

5. References

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