

A Comparison of Rational Emotive Therapy and Tibetan Buddhism: Albert Ellis and the Dalai Lama

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Abstract

This article explores conceptual and methodological similarities between Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Tibetan Buddhism (TB). The authors examine some of the values and concepts they share. They compare the two systems on a number of issues: philosophical underpinnings, concepts of what causes human psychopathology, techniques to bring about change, outcome expectancies and goals. The purpose of this exploration is to increase awareness of the need for Western psychotherapists to develop a comprehensive science of the mind to help humans overcome difficulties and to live more fulfilling lives.

Keywords

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, REBT, Tibetan Buddhism (TB), comparison, similarities

What do Albert Ellis and the Dalai Lama have in common? This article examines some of the values and the concepts that they share. It will illustrate that Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Tibetan Buddhism (TB) have similarities in a number of areas such as how and what they study, their philosophical underpinnings, their concepts of what causes psychopathology, techniques to bring about change, and outcome expectancies and goals.

In the way of background, psychotherapists became more aware and interested in the commonalities between Eastern Buddhism and Western psychotherapy in the 1960s. Two pivotal works fostered these realizations. In his book, *Psychotherapy East and West*, Watts (1961) compared concepts and methods of Eastern Buddhism with Western psychotherapy and demonstrated how both possess deep human wisdom. In his book, *The Relaxation Response*, Harvard physician Herbert Benson (2000, 1975) defined the relaxation response as a physical state which invokes deep physical relaxation, and is the opposite of the fight-flight response. He used a staunchly scientific approach to show that meditation, as well as prayer, hypnosis, and yoga were diverse forms of the relaxation response. Benson demonstrated that the Tibetan Buddhist's meditative practice produced beneficial effects to the mind and body. Since the 1960s, publications comparing Eastern and Western ways of thinking have dramatically increased (Tweed & Lehman, 2002) as a new era has been ushered into Western mainstream literature with increased attention to mind-body interconnectedness and attention to similarities between Buddhist constructs and REBT (Thompson and Waltz, 2007).

Gaining greater recognition now is Tibetan Buddhism, promoted by the Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhists and exiled previous political head of Tibet. Scientists have collaborated with Tibetan practitioners, resulting in an increasing belief, both scientific and popular, that Tibetan Buddhism is more than a religion but a form of inner mental science that can enhance the quality

of life (Dalai Lama, 1991; Goleman, 2003). Most recently, the Dalai Lama has participated in a number of mind-body conferences with a wide variety of world renowned neuroscientists. They explored how to focus and control concentration and attention, activities Buddhists have practiced for thousands of years (Mind-Life Institute, 2008).

At a surface level, Buddhist philosophies and Western psychotherapy seem to be worlds apart. However, if we strip away dissimilar vocabulary and attend to the conceptual meanings, it becomes readily apparent that some forms of psychotherapy have much common with particular forms of Buddhism. For example, conceptual concurrences between Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Tibetan Buddhism (TB) exist. Albert Ellis himself, in his last few years of life, saw the similarities between REBT and TB and wrote about them. He pointed out how both systems help people to consistently work at forgiving self, others, and tolerating an often times harsh world (Ellis, 2005).

As this article compares these two systems, and this exploration will contribute to hopefully, this exploration will the development of a comprehensive "inner science" (Dalai Lama, 1991) or science of the mind to help humans to live more fulfilling lives. We will compare REBT and TB, specifically, on their methods of study, philosophical underpinnings, theory of pathology, goals of treatment, theory of change, methods of change and the role of therapist.

■ Method of Study

Both REBT and TB encourage people to think critically and to pursue truth. The scientific method is encouraged, and thought to be necessary. According to REBT people might strive to learn to "train themselves through rigorous thinking about and working against some of their strongest inborn and environmental tendencies" (Ellis 2005, p 64.). People can acquire skills allowing them to debate their irrational thoughts and acquire a realistic view of the world. According to TB, the "Dharma can only gain in strength and universality by open-minded,

impartial research which is neither credulous nor dogmatically skeptical." Buddhists conduct scientific research into religious experience, near death experiences, out-of-the-body experiences and other areas of exploration, even rebirth (Wilson, 1986). Personal reasoning and experience are one's ultimate truths. Both REBT and TB encourage the individual to approach living his or her life from a scientific perspective and to use empirical, logical methods of inquiry.

■ Philosophical Underpinnings

Both REBT and TB encourage human beings to pursue happiness and eliminate suffering, when possible.. They have an existential humanistic orientation, and stress holism.. At the same time, both recognize human limitations.. They consider that humans are frail and need to accept human nature for what it is with an unconditional acceptance of reality. Although humans are frail, they also possess the potential to improve themselves. Both systems adhere to the idea that humans are self determined and create their own mental health and mental illnesses as well as espouse ethical humanism and self actualization.

For REBT, self actualization means attaining total rationality. The motivation for doing this is to promote one's own well being. It is in each person's best interest to treat others well and to respect others rights, because it makes one's own life easier. For TB, the highest motivation is to become selfless and spiritual. TB claims the achievement of selfless happiness occurs by focusing on service toward others (Ellis, 2001a, 2001b). The person who is progressing toward enlightenment, the Bodhisattva, is a noble and courageous figure, who ceaselessly works for the benefit of others whereby he or she sacrifices self interest for other interest (Powers, 1995). One's own happiness occurs but as a by-product of helping others.

■ Causes of Pathology

What causes pathology? Cognition is a central concept in both TB and REBT. Thoughts are a main contributor to happiness and unhappiness in both systems.

In REBT, crooked cognitions cause pathology and take the form of self criticism or non self-acceptance. Human beings tend to make unreasonable demands on themselves, on others, and on the world. When an individual fails to fulfill these demands in the past, present or future, she becomes agitated and damns herself She labels herself as bad, and gives herself (and others) a negative global rating. This lack of self acceptance interferes with achieving her basic goals. A second cognition that can result in pathology occurs when a person does not get what he wants. The individual makes a demand on self, on others and on the world that is characterized by an all-permeating attitude and dogmatic insistence that life must be comfortable. When these demands are not met in the past, present or future, the person has negative feelings. Displeasure and dissatisfaction arise and the person is disturbed (Ellis &

Dryden, 1987; 1997). Overall, bad mental health is caused by cognitions which breed low frustration tolerance and distort reality. Through their own thinking and through avoidance of reality, people create their own psychological disturbances.

Specifically, REBT uses the A-B-C framework. A is a set of activating events which results in cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral consequences—or so the person delusionally believes. In actuality, it is not the activating event (Not-A), but the belief (B) about A and how a person evaluates the event that disrupts inner peace and brings about turmoil. REBT identifies a number of specific irrational thoughts and attitudes that are harmful and cause pathology.

In TB, the Four Noble Truths are at the heart of human pathology or what TB calls human suffering (Kabatznick, 1998). The four noble truths are 1) the truth of suffering, 2) the truth of the origin of suffering, 3) the truth of the cessation of suffering, 4) the truth of the eightfold path, or activities that overcomes suffering.

The first two Noble Truths are similar in content to the REBT tenets discussed above. The first Noble truth is that suffering, dukka, is inevitable (Burt, 1982). Nothing is permanent. Change and loss are omnipresent. Being born into this world means you will face sickness, old age, death of self and loved ones and experience the sadness that accompanies these events. In everyday lives, unpleasant events occur. There are three types of suffering which include 1) physical and mental suffering, 2) the suffering of change, and 3) the suffering of cyclical existence in which sentient beings are prone to suffering because they are influenced by contaminated actions and the afflictions of self and others.

The second Noble truth is about the causes or origin of suffering. These are attachment to desire and the tendency to grasp pleasure and to avoid and reject pain. By nature, humans possess a blind demandingness which leads them to ask more of themselves and the universe than it is ready to or even able to give (Burt, 1982; Dalai Lama, 2001). The more you grasp, the more you suffer.

What REBT calls poor mental health or psychological disturbance, TB calls unhappiness or suffering. While REBT claims the roots of disturbance lie in the tendencies to think irrationally and cling to self defeating habits and TB claims that at the root of unhappiness is the difficulty of accepting suffering and its inevitability. One can conclude from both that life is not fair. Also, people do not accept the reality of life. (Kabatznick, 1998). When individuals make demands on the world by attaching themselves to irrational ideas about self, others, or the world they become unhappy or disturbed when these demands are not met in the past, present or future. The person's attitude towards suffering, more than the pain itself, affects how a person copes. If a person can adopt an attitude that allows acceptance of reality, then it is possible to counteract feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

Why do humans think in this crooked and self defeating manner? From whence do these tendencies to fight against reality and to be irrational originate? REBT and the TB have similar underlying reasons. Both hold that these problems are part of

the human condition, natural biological tendencies. Both believe it is natural state of human beings to possess thoughts and emotions that are wild and unruly. No matter how competent, intelligent, religious, moral, or well educated and trained, human beings have irrational thoughts and behaviors and seem to fall back into self defeating patterns in both personal and professional lives. *They fail to transcend irrationality.*

REBT does not elaborate on the reasons why people think crooked but rather emphasizes how to stop thinking crooked! The mind has irrational beliefs, absolutist, illusory evaluations of self others and the universe. Specific evaluations are couched in terms of must, should, ought, have to, got to. Core irrational conclusions include awfulizing, I can't stand it, damnation. The emphasis is on the present, past and future lives are not mentioned.

TB claims that the relationships among thoughts, actions and their results lies at the basis of pathology. Every act has consequences. Past actions from this life and previous lives are important. The mind fabricates and creates an ego that has preconceived notions and illusions about the self. Beliefs are marked by rigid absolutism. One clings to expectations, attachments, objects, hopes, dreams, and other tangible and intangible entities. Wrong views, attitudes, and discernments cause disturbance and misery. Ignorance and attachment lie at the basis of disturbance. Not applying skillful effort or not following the right path to become enlightened is at the basis of pathology (Wallace, 1993).

■ The Goals of REBT Treatment and Tibetan Buddhism

In order to achieve happiness in either REBT or Buddhism, the person must embrace a wholesome underlying philosophy. In REBT, the primary goal is to make a profound philosophical change in the areas of ego disturbance and discomfort disturbance. The person needs to let go of his or her irrational thinking and replace it with rational nonabsolutist thinking. The person also needs to truly accept the self, accept the unchangeable and to tolerate discomfort in order to attain long range happiness (Ellis & Dryden, 1987). Self damnation can be transformed into self acceptance which means not rating one's self poorly or not at all (Ellis & Dryden, 1987).

In TB, nirvana is the ideal goal, which is the total elimination of all negative thoughts and emotions, and their underlying false perceptions (Dalai Lama, 2000). How one perceives life as a whole plays an important role in what attitudes about suffering are adapted. If a person believes suffering is negative, a sign of failure, and must be avoided at all costs, this attitude contributes toward anxiety, intolerance and a feeling of being overwhelmed which, of course, results in even more suffering. However, if a person believes suffering is an inevitable and natural part of existence, this attitude brings about less distress and a greater tolerance of life's adversities. The philosophical view of life is that freedom from suffering comes from letting go of attachments to desire. When a person seeks happiness in things which are impermanent, he is headed toward suffering. Happiness eludes the per-

son as he or she chases the unattainable, wasting precious time and energy. A person needs to develop awareness of what the person is doing and, why, and to control and regulate the mind, or thinking. A cognitive reorientation which incorporates the four noble truths and the Eightfold Path is needed to overcome suffering, and is discussed below.

■ Techniques for Change

The REBT therapist applies emotional, behavioral, and cognitive interventions vigorously to help clients make the philosophical and cognitive change and to work at undisturbing themselves. It is difficult to effect profound philosophical change in an instant. The therapist begins to help the client bring about inferentially and behaviorally based change. The therapist uses major treatment techniques of challenging harmful cognitions and disputing self defeating beliefs. Specifically, first, the therapist seeks and detects the irrational beliefs, especially musts, oughts, shoulds and have tos, which lead to self defeating emotions and behaviors. Then the therapist debates with the client. Debating involves questioning in a way that helps the client give up irrational beliefs. The therapist also uses discrimination. Discriminating encourages the client to distinguish between wants, preferences, likes and desires and needs, demands, and imperatives. The therapist can use an array of eclectic techniques to bring about change such as stress management, relaxation, meditation, visualization, and any method that facilitates the client's ability to think rationally. Relaxation techniques are not a necessary part of REBT, but are certainly encouraged.

The REBT therapist encourages the learner to scientifically study the constructs, to not accept without questioning, and to decide independently who is the best teacher. The client seeks the most compatible therapist. However, the person can be his or her own therapist since the philosophy of REBT may serve as a guide.

What techniques do Tibetan Buddhists use to reach their goals? To move from a transitory life of crushing miseries to true happiness, means constant, strenuous, alert self-examination while renouncing what a person may foolishly prize now, including self, all the ignorant cravings and blind urges (Burt (1982). The state of happiness, Nirvana, is free of all suffering, frustration, and pain. To reach Nirvana, and end suffering, the person follows the path of self improvement by following the Noble Eightfold Path. This takes a lifetime of effort and work (Dalai Lama, 2000). TB methods are geared to cultivate the mind so the person can give up attachments and understand the long term consequences of ethically wholesome and unwholesome behavior activities (Wallace & Wolhelm, 1993). Meditation is a key factor that includes a range of practices and goals that keep the mind calm and help to develop an understanding of the four noble truths.

The Noble Eightfold Path is a blueprint, like a treatment plan, to end suffering. Suffering is desire based on ignorance, and the plan shows the way to let go of attachments. Taking the Noble Eightfold Path means cultivating wisdom, ethics, and meditative absorption or concentration. It includes 1) correct view, 2) correct intention, 3) correct speech, 4) correct action, 5) correct livelihood, 6) correct

Table 1. Comparison: REBT and Tibetan Buddhism

Feature	REBT	TB
Goals	Philosophical attitude: replace irrational thinking with no absolutist thinking	Nirvana: replace negative thoughts and emotions underlying false perceptions
Method of study	Critical thinking Scientific, logical methods of inquiry	Critical thinking Scientific, logical, methods of inquiry
Philosophical underpinning	Self determination: create own psychological health and disturbances Rational, flexible, tolerant Existential-humanistic, holistic Unconditional acceptance of reality Ethical Humanism: emphasize self interest over others Help self first, respecting others makes life better for me	Personal reasoning and experience provide ultimate truth Self determination: create own happiness and inner peace and disturbances Rational, flexible, tolerant Existential-humanistic, holistic Unconditional acceptance of reality Ethical Humanism: emphasize interest of all sentient beings over self interest Self interest, a by-product of helping others: Bodhichitta
Roots/pathology	Bad mental health cause: negative thinking Underlying irrational beliefs distort reality, cause psychological disturbance Negative feelings of dissatisfaction occur when people do not get what they want. Biological tendencies: think irrationally, cling to self defeating patterns, fail to transcend irrationality, low frustration tolerance, avoidance of pain Why is not important, deal with present life only, no mention of past or future lives Mind has irrational beliefs: illusory, absolutist evaluations of self, others and universe Specific evaluations: couched in terms of must, should, ought, have to, got to Core irrational conclusions include awfulizing, can't stand it, damnation	Unhappiness cause: negative views Underlying false perceptions of reality causes negative views Negative state caused by tendency to grasp, desire, want, to distort reality. Natural state: wild and unruly thoughts and emotions, Four Noble Truths: suffering, origin of suffering, cessation of suffering, truth of the Eightfold Path Every act has consequences, past actions from this life and previous lives, genetics may be karmic seeds Mind fabricates, creates ego: preconceived notions about self illusions fabricated in mind Clings to expectations, objects, possessions, hopes, dreams, and other tangible and intangible things. Holding wrong views, bad attitudes, wrong discernment, greed, wishing to harm others, faithlessness, resentment, jealousy, anger, disturb our mind and cause misery of rigid absolutism
Methods to achieve good mental health/nirvana	Cultivate rational thinking By debating it through Socratic method Gain control of mind through cultivating rational thinking/beliefs Practice A-B-Cs of REBT Detect /dispute irrational beliefs using cognitive, emotional, behavioral methods	Control negative, delusional thinking through meditation on compassion Gain control of mind through cultivation of insight/understanding/discipline, purify negative thinking and emotions, remove attachments Practice meditation using the Eightfold Path of right thought, understanding, concentration effort, action, speech, livelihood

effort, 7) correct mindfulness, 8) correct meditative absorption (Powers, 1995).

Meditation practices are part of the Practice of the Eightfold Methods. One other notable method, among many we will mention is the Seven Point Model, with focal points that inspire compassion and kindness. For example, a focal point is to meditate on the thought that all sentient beings have been our mothers in the past. Furthermore, one could think about the kindness of all beings, how to repay kindness, and how to generate love and compassion. Other thoughts are to consider one's universal responsibility to all and to think about the Bodhichitta, a being who embodies the altruistic ideal.

The path to enlightenment is often found with the help of a teacher. Much like finding a suitable REBT therapist, the person searches for a compatible teacher. The teachings, are more important than the teacher here also. The TB teacher encourages the learner to scientifically study the constructs, to not accept without questioning, and to decide independently who is the best teacher.

■ Outcome Criteria for Good Psychological Health or Happiness

According to REBT, good psychological health begins with scientific thinking and nonutopianism. It is marked by self interest, self direction, self acceptance and self responsibility for one's own emotional disturbance should it arise. Healthy characteris-

tics include acceptance of uncertainty, flexibility, high frustration tolerance and social interest. The healthy individual commits to creative pursuits, takes risks and engages in long range hedonism. Healthy, appropriate emotions include concern not anxiety, sadness not depression, regret not guilt, disappointment not shame / embarrassment, annoyance not anger.

Tibetan Buddhism considers the final goal to be the attainment of Buddhahood for the benefit of all other sentient beings. A Buddha is a person who has is free from ignorance and has broken through the cognitive barriers that impede understanding. Through mental training comes omniscient and the person is a happy and possessing open thinking, travels the Eightfold Path, accepts impermanence, and is altruistic with compassion and wisdom (Powers, 1995).

Both include the cause of pathology as primarily cognitive in origin. Both conclude that profound philosophical changes are needed to be happy and to eliminate suffering. To effect such change, it is necessary of effect inferentially and behaviorally based change thought the use of a teacher therapist, who acts as a guide, but the change must come primarily from the learner. In both, the therapist/teacher challenges the client to confront harmful cognitions, to dispute self defeating beliefs, to acceptance a high level of frustration tolerance to be a psychologically and/or spiritually healthy human being (Ellis & Dryden, 1987; Powers, 1995). The client's role is to work at undisturbing his or her

self, to undergo profound philosophical change, confronts harmful or delusional/illusional cognitions, disputes self defeating beliefs, and accepts reality completely and thus, develop a high level of frustration tolerance to be a spiritually and psychologically healthy human being.

■ Major Differences

We have discussed the similarities between REBT and TB. There are, of course, many differences between them. Table 1 summarizes and highlights some of the major similarities and differences. It would take volumes to identify and describe them entirely. REBT is a psychotherapy developed by one founder, Albert Ellis, in this century, and is more circumscribed and limited in scope than TB. TB has existed since the 7th century and is based upon a number of Eastern philosophies, upon monastic discipline, and led by a succession of spiritual leaders. TB is now better known in the West since the 14th Dalai Lama fled from Communist China to take refuge in Dharmasala, India and spread the teachings. Thus, REBT's scope is limited to psychotherapy in contrast to TB which prescribes the way to achieve happiness, a continuous life journey. Another major difference worth noting is that REBT stresses a more materialistic, less spiritual view of life than TB. REBT clearly advocates individualism and self-interest tempered with interest in "the other." Helping others is a pragmatic goal which serves the best interests of the individual. It is preferable to have good relationships with others than to live

in conflict. TB clearly values altruism, the desire to dispel suffering in the world, and compassion as a primary goal. Self interest, happiness, is served indirectly by achieving altruism and helping others. The loftiest desire is to become a Bodhichitta, that is, to attain one's own enlightenment in order to benefit all others.

■ Final Thoughts and Recommendations

One theme that arises from both REBT and TB is that it is as important to devise a science of the mind as it is to develop a physical science. REBT and TB both delineate practices that promote control over the mind and emotions through increased concentration attention, and analysis of thought process. All of this leads to a greater inner peace.

REBT practitioners might more fully integrate TB's meditative, quieting response as a way to reduce unproductive and self defeating cognitive chatter. As Benson (2000) found among the Tibetan monks he studied, meditation can produce a mental and physical state of deep relaxation that can help to increase the ability to control thoughts and actions and can increase the human resilience and inner strength that REBT attempts to promote. Thus, TB's meditative methods can increase the effectiveness of REBT by helping persons to increase self control and self acceptance.

TB's goal is to promote happiness among sentient beings and to foster spiritual development and inner peace throughout the world. TB might find greater acceptance into the Western world if its techniques were shown to be compatible with and promoted by established western therapeutic systems. Insight into the human mental condition based upon a critical understanding of the processes of disturbance and good psychological health and the means of progressing from one to the other can advance the goal of achieving inner peace. Furthermore, if everyone were at peace within his or herself, then it would increase the probability of outer peace, world peace, which is something TB endorses.

The purpose of this paper has been to document the similarities of REBT and TB and expand the understanding of each. Integrating useful elements of the two systems may allow the development of a more comprehensive therapeutic method. Combining the methods and techniques of both systems

might enhance a person's ability to use his or her inner resources and to assist him or her to accept and adjust to life's challenges.

We end with quotes from the Dalai Lama and Albert Ellis. They are so similar in meaning and beliefs.

The Dalai Lama stated,

"If we have a positive mental attitude, then even when surrounded by hospitality, we shall not lack inner peace. On the other hand, if our mental attitude is more negative, influenced by fear, suspicion or self-loathing, then even when surrounded by our best friends, in a nice atmosphere with comfortable surroundings, we shall not be happy. So, mental attitude is very important.: it makes a real difference to our state of happiness" (Dalai Lama, 2001, p.6).

Albert Ellis has written that he reread philosophy and was reminded of the constructivist notion that Epictetus had proposed 2,000 years ago: People are disturbed not by events that happen to them, but by their view of them. The ABC theory of REBT follows the views of several ancient philosophers—and holds that activating events (A's) in people lives contribute to their emotional and behavioral disturbances or consequences (C') largely because they are intermingled with or acted upon by people's beliefs (B's) about these activating events (A's).

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