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Logotherapy and Eastern Religions

JOSEPH B. FABRY

When Viktor Frankl presented his concepts of logotherapy to American audiences, he was told that they offered a new approach to mental health, at least as compared to psychoanalysis. But, he recalls, "on my tours in Asia, in India and Japan, I was told... that what I was saying were old truths one might find in the ancient Vedas, in Zen, or in the writings of Lao Tzu."[1]

I have tried for a long time to identify the old truths that are similar in the healing approaches of logotherapy and the Eastern religions. I finally turned to Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man* to find some answers.[2] With the consent of Smith, who is familiar with logotherapy and who made a filmed interview with Frankl, I am offering some aspects of what might be called the "Eastern" roots of logotherapy.[3]

Hinduism

I shall limit myself to a brief comparison of the central affirmations of Hinduism and logotherapy, their ideas on the nature of man, and ways proposed by both schools of thought to reach their central affirmation.

"If we were to take this enormous outlook [of Hinduism] in its entirety and epitomize it in a single central affirmation, we would find it saying to man: You can have what you want."[4] This is also the central affirmation of logotherapy, saying to man: You have an innate will to meaning and the freedom to use it. You have the defiant power of the human spirit.

What does man want? Logotherapy says: meaning. Other goals, such as pleasure, are only by-products of having found meaning; still other goals, such as wealth and power, are mere instruments to find the end: meaning. Hinduism lists four wants of man.[5] The first two—"pleasure" and "worldly success" (the latter including wealth, fame, and power)—are described as the goals of the Path of Desire. It is natural for man to have them, but basically they are for the immature; they are "like toys." More significant are the other two goals, those making up the Path of Renunciation, which has to be understood as the "sacrifice

Joseph B. Fabry is the author of *The Pursuit of Meaning—Logotherapy Applied to Life.* He studied with Viktor Frankl and teaches and lectures on logotherapy at universities, growth centers, and human-service organizations. He has developed his own logogroups. He is President of Logos West and of the Ministry of Ecology.

of the trivial now for a momentous then, the turning away from an easy this to a beckoning yet-to-be."[6] The first of these two higher goals is "duty," which has an unpleasant sound to modern Western ears, especially for the young. If we replace the word with "demand of the moment," it comes close to what logotherapy prescribes and also what Hinduism has in mind: "Countless persons have passed beyond the wish to win into the wish to be of service, beyond the wish to gain to the wish to give. Not to triumph but to do their best, to acquit themselves as men in whatever task life puts before them, has become their deepest objectives."[7] "For to live a man must believe in that for the sake of which he lives."[8]

For the person pursuing only the Path of Desire (pleasure and worldly success) "eventually there comes over him a suspicion that he is caught on a nonstop treadmill, having to race faster and faster for rewards that mean less and less,"[9] a statement closely approaching the definition of the existential vacuum.

But Hinduism does not consider even commitment and transcendence man's highest want (need, desire). "Pleasure, success, and duty are never man's ultimate goals; at best they are means which we assume will take us in the direction of what we really want. What we really want are things which lie on a deeper level."[10]

What man really wants is "infinite being, infinite knowledge, and infinite joy [defined by Smith as 'the opposite of frustration, futility, and boredom] . . . to gather them together in a single word, what man really wants is liberation (*mukti*)—complete release from the countless limitations that press so closely upon his present existence."[11] This highest goal—the second of the two higher goals—comes close to the idea of Ultimate Meaning; the ultimate goal in logotherapy. There is, however, a significant difference: Logotherapy grants that some men may find their ultimate goal in such religious beliefs as incarnation or afterlife, but it also allows those not so inclined to find meaning through channels confined to one life on earth. These persons cannot hope to reach complete release from the limitations of daily living, but they have the freedom to find meaning within the limitations of life, including pain, guilt, and death.

But even here we find similarities, because Hinduism, too, allows for limitations of the things man desires at his deepest level. Limitations to joy, for instance, are listed as "physical pain, the frustration of the thwarting of desire, and a boredom with life as a whole."[12] Physical pain that cannot be avoided can be conquered by one's attitude. It is Frankl's contention that "suffering ceases to be suffering as soon as it has been given a meaning." Smith phrases the Hindu point of view in almost identical terms: "When seen to have a purpose, pain can be accepted."[13] Psychological suffering, which arises from the thwarting of specific desires, can be overcome by transcendence, "a vision of wholeness. . . . When the point is grasped, who cares about details?"[14] Boredom with life can be overcome if man finds meaning, which, however, in Hinduism extends beyond his present physical existence.

Another parallel between Hinduism and logotherapy is their image of man. "The Hindu concept of man rests on the basic thesis that he is a layered being."[15] Logotherapy uses the image of dimensions rather than layers, but the concepts are similar. The three dimensions of logotherapy—the body, the psyche, and the

noös—correspond to the four Hindu layers—the body, the conscious personality, the unconscious, and "Being itself, infinite, unthwarted, eternal."[16] What is man in the Hindu world of thought? "A body? Certainly, but anything else? A personality that includes mind, memories, and the propensities that have accumulated from his own unique pattern of life experience? This, too, but anything more? Some would say no, but Hinduism disagrees. Underlying man's personality and animating it is a reservoir of being that never dies, is never exhausted, and is without limit in awareness and bliss. This infinite center of every life, this hidden self or *Atman*, is no less than *Brahman*, the Godhead. Body, personality, and *Atman-Brahman*—man is not completely accounted for until all three are infinite in our being."[17]

Here we have, in Hindu terms, the definition of the noös, the uniquely human dimension that can never get sick, and without which no human being is complete because it is indeed the center of life.

The *Atman*, as well as the noös, has therapeutic possibilities. "Hinduism agrees with psychoanalysis that if only we could dredge up a portion of our lost individual totality—the third part of our being [the unconscious]—we would experience a remarkable expansion of our powers, a vivid refreshening of life. But this is only the beginning of its hypothesis. If we could resurrect something forgotten not only by ourselves but also by mankind as a whole, something that provides the clue not simply to our private compulsions and idiosyncrasies but to all life and all existence, what then? Would we not have discovered something of historical moment? Would we not become true boon-bringers to humanity?"[18] This has Jungian undertones, but also the seeds of Frankl's conviction that the unconscious not only contains suppressed compulsions from our psychological dimension but also yearnings of our spirit-noös. As Frankl has said, therapy before Freud largely disregarded man's psyche; therapy today largely still disregards his spirit. Mental health requires attention to all dimensions of the human being.

Hinduism and logotherapy also have common points in the means of reaching our central affirmation. Hinduism outlines four paths, depending on the kind of person we are. The reflective person reaches the Ultimate Goal through knowledge (*jnana yoga*); those primarily emotional, through love (*bhakti yoga*); those essentially active, through work (*karma yoga*); and those who are basically experimental, through psychological exercises (*raja yoga*). Logotherapy maintains that human beings can find their ultimate goal of meaning through activities, experiences, and attitudes. The parallel is not complete and must not be forced. But it is noteworthy that logotherapy appeals to the learning capacity of man (*jnana*), that the most meaningful experience is considered to be love (*bhakti*), and that work, activities, parallels not only *karma* but also the Hindu commitment "to complete personal responsibility."[19] "*Karma* decrees that every decision must have its determinate consequences, but the decisions themselves are, in the last analysis, freely arrived at."[20] This is exactly logotherapy's position, too. For Hinduism, Smith explains the situation through a simile: "The consequences of a man's past decisions condition his present lot, as a card player finds himself dealt a particular hand, but is left free to play that hand in a

number of ways." Frankl uses the simile of a chess player. There is no one best move in chess; at every moment of the game the player is free to choose his move; the wisdom of the move is determined by his and his opponent's previous moves and, in turn, influences the moves of both in the future.

For the final way to the Ultimate Goal (*raja yoga*), Hinduism recommends eight stages, an approach not shared by logotherapy. Instead, the individual is left free to find his own paths and stages, even if they lead through suffering, which, if unavoidable, may be the deepest learning experience on one's way to growth and meaning.

Buddhism

Smith lists seven characteristics of Buddha's teaching, all of which are shared by logotherapy.[21] Buddhism, according to its founder, is: empirical, based on personal experience; scientific, aimed at discovering the cause-effect relationships that order existence; pragmatic, concerned with the problem of solving man's predicaments; therapeutic, aimed at helping the sufferer; psychological (in contrast to metaphysical), centering on the nature of man, his problems, and the dynamics of his development; democratic, open to everyone, regardless of social position; directed at individuals, encouraging each person to make his way toward enlightenment, confronting his own predicament.

In following these directions, Buddhism presents a philosophy of life that dissociates itself almost entirely from the common aspects of religion, such as authority, ritual, theological speculation, tradition, God's sovereignty and grace, and miracles.[22] Logotherapy, never claiming to be a religion, shares with Buddhism its concerns with healing rather than saving men's souls.

As a therapy, Buddhism looks at the symptoms of man's troubles, diagnoses them, makes a prognosis, and prescribes a cure. Buddhism accomplishes these goals through the "four noble truths," which Smith calls "the basic postulates from which almost everything in [Buddha's] teaching logically unfolds."[23] The first noble truth, which identifies the symptoms of man's trouble, is *dukkha*, suffering; it includes sickness, old age, fear of death, unescapable traps, and separation from what one loves. In the terminology of logotherapy, this is "unavoidable suffering." *Dukkha* is caused, according to Buddha, by selfish desire, *tanha*. Logotherapy instead speaks of "hyper-reflection" and the false expectation that life owes us pleasures that we can pursue directly. The prognosis, in the Buddha's terms, is the overcoming of *tanha;* in logotherapy's terms, it is dereflection and the pursuit of meaning rather than pleasure. Finally, the cure, as prescribed by the Buddha, is the eightfold path that includes right knowledge (logotherapy: awareness of one's noös); right aspiration (logotherapy: will to meaning); right speech aimed at truth and charity (logotherapy: search for meaning through awareness and love); right behavior (logotherapy: self-transcendence); right livelihood (logotherapy: meaning through work and activities); right effort, stressing human will (logotherapy: self-detachment); right mindfulness (logotherapy: response to the meaning of the moment); and right absorption

(logotherapy: awareness of Ultimate Meaning). It would require a separate essay to spell out these parallels, but this brief terminology must suffice to indicate to what extent this modern existential psychology of logotherapy is rooted in ancient wisdom.

Equally striking is the emphasis of the Buddha on the teaching that the cure is not the responsibility of the guru, but of the patient. "The Eightfold Path... is a course of treatment. But it is not external treatment passively accepted by the patient as coming from without; it is not treatment by pills or cult or grace. It is treatment by training."[24] Logotherapy insists that no therapist can prescribe meanings as he might a pill; he can only widen the visual field of the patient as to the full spectrum of concrete meaning potentials waiting to be fufilled by him.

Taoism

The wisdom of Taoism that has been rekindled in logotherapy centers on the word *Tao* itself, which can be translated as "the Way." Smith points out that Tao is the pivotal concept of Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism. It has three meanings, and all can be found in the pivotal concepts of logotherapy as well.

"First, Tao is the way of ultimate reality. This Tao cannot be perceived for it exceeds the reach of the senses. If it were to reveal itself in all its sharpness, fullness, and glory, mortal man would not be able to bear the vision... Ineffable and transcendent, this ultimate Tao is the ground of all existence."[25] It is not difficult to identify this Tao with Logos, the unreachable Ultimate Meaning, or Supra-Meaning, as Frankl calls it because it lies in the suprahuman dimension and therefore is not comprehensible to man, at least not in rational terms. Or, as he recently phrased it, "The more comprehensive the meaning is the less comprehensible it is."

"Though Tao ultimately is transcendent, it is also immanent. In this secondary sense it is the way of the universe; the norm, the rhythm, the driving power in all nature, the ordering principle behind all life."[25] In this sense, Tao is related to the noetic dimension in man that stretches toward and thirsts for Logos, and uses its will to meaning to allow the individual to find his place in the principle behind all life.

"In its third sense Tao refers to the way man should order his life to gear in with the way the universe operates."[26] Here Tao points the way to practical living and approximates what in logotherapy is called "the meaning of the moment," which every person can find and must respond to if he wants to be in tune with the universe and lead a meaningful life.

To be in tune with the universe, Lao Tzu recommends *wu wei*, a "creative quietude... [which] combines within a single individual two seemingly incompatible conditions—supreme activity and supreme relaxation."[27] This concept is related to the logotherapeutic ideas that a person can find meaning in creative activity and in receptivity as to experiential values, but also in surrender to and acceptance of an unchangeable fate. Therapeutically, this concept is used by the Japanese logotherapist-internist Hiroshi Takashima in recommending to

his patients that they fight their disease where it can be conquered, but "live with their disease" where no cure is possible.

To be in tune with the universe, Lao Tzu recommends something that seems to anticipate our present ecological concern: Nature is to be befriended, not conquered. Logotherapy, too, lends itself to ecological efforts by insisting that man, in his search for meaning, place himself within, and not above, the realities of the universe.

This brief attempt at pointing out relationships between logotherapy and some of the old wisdom of Oriental religions by necessity stays close to the surface. If this essay does no more than stimulate efforts in pursuing a field of research that promises rich discoveries, it will have served its purpose.

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