

EXISTENTIAL FUNCTIONS OF MENTALIZATION IN ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS

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Abstract. The construct "mentalization" in our Western psychological knowledge and more specifically in clinical work appeared several decades ago. The focus of the Western understanding and research of the construct and of mentalization-based therapy is put on the psychopathological dimensions of the process of mentalization. This article presents a brief analysis of the existential functions of mentalization in the thousand of years old Asian philosophical-psychological systems in an attempt to highlight some important implications for our Western views. The analysis is based on the paradigm of critical psychology as a concretization of the principles of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy in the field of psychological knowledge.

Keywords: critical psychology; mentalization; Buddhism; Zen Buddhism; Hinduism; existential functions

Introduction

In our opinion, the idea *about* and the appearance *of* the construct "*mentalization*" in our Western psychological knowledge and more specifically in clinical work, is in its essence an attempt, be it consciously or unconsciously, at a civilizational transfer of thousands of years old psychological practices in Buddhism, Zen-Buddhism and other Asian philosophical-psychological¹⁾ rather than religious systems of thought into the living and scientific conditions of our Western civilization. In both Western clinical theory and practice and the above mentioned Asian systems the general methodological base and the subsequent specifications in the process of mentalization were preceded by the special interpretations of the *mind*. However, there are differences in the understanding of *mentalization* as a primal anxiety of existence – the defining of *the mind* as a fundamental category in Asian philosophical-psychological systems has very little to do with the "*theory of mind*" on which the Western version of *mentalization* is based (see Baron-Cohen 2001, Goldman 2012, Wellman 2017 on theory of mind). What is meant is not exclusively the deeply ingrained in the Asian systems fundamental existential

function of *the mind*, rather what is meant is the set of perspectives for *knowing* the mind – the empirical knowledge of *the mind* in the Asian systems differs from the Western empirical practice in this regard.

In the Asian philosophical-psychological systems education in the self-study of *the nature of the mind* and *mentalization* as its immanent characteristic is a cultural norm in the processes of enculturation and socialization of the individual, an expression of their specific “*existential pedagogy*” through which people from an early age and throughout the span of their lives learn how to understand themselves and others in the community. Meanwhile, thousands of years later, the construct “*mentalization*” started appearing in the clinical therapeutic theory and practice of knowledge in our Western civilization, put differently, the emphasis in the Western tradition is on the *disturbances* in *mentalization* and their *pathological* consequences (see Fonagy & Bateman 2008, 2013; Fonagy, Bateman, & Bateman 2011; Fonagy & Luyten 2009 on mentalising and mentalization-based therapy).

As far as the psycho-therapeutical practical dimensions of the interpretation of mentalization are concerned, the practical method in teaching the procedures of *mentalization* in those Asian systems is *meditation*, which is perceived as natural in the process of the whole individual existence till the very end of life, while in our Western civilization, in which the emphasis falls on *disturbances* in the process of *mentalization*, the practical method is, despite certain specific features, a *psycho-therapeutic conversation*, that is, while in the process of *meditation* an identity overlap is achieved between “patient” and “therapist”, in even *mentalization-based* therapy, we have a *subject* who studies and exerts influence, and an *object* of cognition, recipient of influence. We seem to have forgotten the warnings of Carl Gustav Jung that the subject-object split of the world is non-applicable to the sciences dealing with the Soul, let’s say in psychology, since undoubtedly there is total coincidence between the subject and object of cognition in such contexts (Jung 1993).

The difference, related to the practical methods of *mentalization* – *meditation* in Eastern civilizations and *psychotherapy* in our Western civilization is a direct consequence of another difference, which relates not only to *mentalization* but also concerns the basic principles of human existence, to the contents of the respective worldviews and to the way in which the individual and the community are conceived of in the context of reality. The point is that for people in Eastern systems, the existence of the individual is realized as an *identity coincidence* between the two worlds – the metaphysical, invisible, sacred world and the sensory, visible, profane world, whereby through *the mind* and *mentalization* the metaphysical world is established and re-establishes the sensory world in the individual and community existence, that is in my life and in that of others. While individual and community existence in our Western secular civilization is projected as exclusively possible only in the sensory, visible, profane world, since everything else cannot be subjected to logical analysis because it is totally unrelated to *science*²⁾. In this case,

however, objective psychological knowledge should not be interested whether one or another set of conceptions which regulates thinking and the behavior of people in certain cultural and religious communities is *scientific* or *non-scientific* in our own western point of view, rather it should be concerned whether the set constitutes reality in these communities that is transmitted from generation to generation through thousands of years old conceptions, regulating human thinking and behavior (Georgiev 2020).

The logic of the analysis offered below is regulated by the requirements of the paradigm we have proposed (Georgiev 1999, 2020), which is different from the traditional Western academic psychological paradigm and is in its essence the paradigm of *Critical Psychology*³⁾, where an attempt has been made to incorporate in psychological knowledge the principles of the Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Besides, this paradigm presupposes the necessity that a truly objective psychological knowledge should aim to maintain in itself simultaneously the *universal* in human psychological experiences and in fundamental existential facts and their *specific* instantiations determined by the culture characterizing any human community, irrespective of whether these are *religiously* or *scientifically* and *ideologically* delineated communities.

Mentalization in Asian civilizations

There is no doubt, at least in our opinion, that the fundamental idea of Buddhism or Buddhist psychology as the first *phenomenological psychology* in human history, that “everything that happens happens only in the mind, and its nature is the very root of understanding, which brings enlightenment and freedom because it is the very *knowledge of knowledge*” (Chopra 2005, 2007; Dalai Lama 2007; Lazarov 2021; Rinpoche 1993; Rinpoche 2007; Prabhupada 1995, etc.), marks and determines the difference between the three Abrahamic monotheistic, religious systems, including, however, also the modern secular Western civilization, on the one hand, and the Asian philosophical-psychological systems, on the other. In short, it boils down to the fact that whereas for Judaism, Christianity and Islam the belief in the Absolute Creator is fundamental, and for Western secular thinking the *transcendental* but also *existential* functions of the mind as creator of being are, to put it mildly, impossible reality, for the Asian philosophical-psychological systems of basic significance is the continuous learning or self-knowledge, the vital continuous cognizing of *the nature of the mind* within the limits of life itself, of each individual existence. Put differently, through the mind as individual instantiation of metaphysical thinking mentalization is achieved of both personal life and that of others, but reality itself is created, which does not precede, but is the result of the understood existentiality of the personal and communal being (Dalai Lama 2002).

With the fundamental meaning of the understanding of *the mind* as an individual instantiation of metaphysical thinking and immanent *mentalization* of the existential

experiences is the Buddhist, Zen Buddhist, the Hindu, etc. belief that *death is part of life*, which should consequently be conceived of as a *transient*, not a *final state*. Put differently, death is a mirror into which the whole essence of life is reflected and which is thus understood as an *empirical* preparation for what comes *after that*, after death, i.e., the *metaphysical* being *after*. Through knowing the mind life and death are represented together as a sequence of constantly changing transient realities called “*bardo*”. The term *bardo* is used to designate this intermediate state between death and reincarnation, but in actual fact *bardo* happens all the time in both life and death. *Bardo* in a certain sense resembles what we call in western psychology *insight*, even though the two are not coterminous, and for all purposes it names all those moments in the individual existence of a person in which the possibility of freedom and the achievement of enlightenment through *knowing the mind* is significantly increased. It is considered that these moments are charged with great potential so that anything we do during these moments has decisive and extremely significant consequences (Dalai Lama 2007; Rinpoche 1993).

According to the Buddhist psychology of the mind, and not only, the whole human individual existence can be divided into four interconnected realities: 1). Life; 2). Dying and death; 3). After death; 4). Rebirth. These stages are also known as the four types of *bardo*: 1). The natural *bardo* of this life; 2). The painful *bardo* of dying; 3). The radiant *bardo* of dharma, that is, the state after death; 4). The karmic *bardo* of origin. It is very important to keep in mind that the sequencing of these stages in individual existence presupposes the same ordering in the process of learning, of learning their actual content through continuous cognizing of *the nature of the mind* (Dalai Lama 2007; Rinpoche 1993).

The distinctness of the transitional states of *life* and *death*, which determines the deep reflection on the hidden secret message of *impermanence*, according to Buddhist, but also according to other Asian philosophical and psychological existential ideas, brings us to the core of the issue, i.e., *the nature of the mind*. Awareness of *the nature of the mind*, as Buddhist psychology calls the innermost human essence, is in fact the key to understanding *life* and *death*. Because at the moment of death *the ordinary mind* dies together with its delusions and illusions, and in the emptiness thus created its boundless, true nature is revealed. It is this inner nature of *the human mind* that is the basis of both life and death (Dalai Lama 2007; Rinpoche 1993; Rinpoche 2007, etc.).

Certainly, the most revolutionary idea of Buddhist psychology, and of other Asian philosophical and psychological existential notions of the fundamental *life-death* dichotomy, is that *life* and *death* are in the mind and nowhere else. *The mind* is considered the universal basis of all experiences - the creator of happiness and the creator of suffering, the creator of what we call life and of what we call death. *The mind* has many aspects, but two of them stand out particularly strongly. One is *the ordinary mind*, that which possesses a differentiating consciousness, that

which has a sense of dualism. At its core, is what can be associated with “another,” with “every thing,” which the perceiver perceives as external and different from himself, that is, the objects and subjects of the *visible empirical world*. The other presupposes the true nature of the *mind*, its innermost essence, which is not subject to death and change. *The nature of the mind* is the very root of understanding which brings enlightenment and freedom. It can be said that this is *knowledge of knowledge*, that is, knowledge of objects and subjects from the other *invisible metaphysical world*, knowledge through which *the ordinary mind* is established and re-established, that is, *knowledge* of visible subjects and objects, through which existence is *mentalized*, since *the nature of the mind* is the basis of one’s own *life* and that of others. Precisely because of this undoubted existential fact, the fundamental emphasis in Buddhist psychology, and not only in it, is directed towards the vital and continuous cognizing of *the nature of the mind* in each individual existence (Dalai Lama 2007; Rinpoche 1993; Rinpoche 2007, etc.). Zen Buddhism radicalizes traditional Buddhism in terms of consciously identifying the visible empirical profane world with the invisible sacred metaphysical world possible through enlightenment, that is, as Dinev (2019) believes, the attainment of dormant Buddha consciousness that is in all of us: “Zen Buddhism, which derives from traditional Buddhism, differs from it, according to Suzuki, in its simplicity, straightforwardness and pragmatism, as well as its close connection with everyday life... Zen has neither gods nor idols. Anyone can become a Buddha, as long as they want to practice Zen” (Dinev 2019, 13).

In fact, perhaps one of the most important characteristics of Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Asian philosophical and psychological systems, although possibly definable as *religious*, comes down to the fact that they do not resist the sacred by escaping authenticity to preserve *secular* existence – as do the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions, which in a special way separate the *sacred* experience in the temple from the *profane* existence outside it. Or the secular Western civilization, which has totally refused to try to comprehend the possible *metaphysical* dimensions of *the sacred*, which, on top of it all, is identical with *the profane* of *secular* existence, as insistently claimed by the Asian philosophical and psychological systems. Rather, Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. propose that human existence be realized in the sphere of eternity, reality and essence, which for the people in these communities translates as true religiosity. Therefore, when it comes to the possible interpretation of some manifestation of *the religious* in the dimensions of Asian everyday philosophical and psychological systems, it should be understood as training from the early stages of the individual’s enculturation and socialization process, continuing throughout one’s whole life in the *cognizing of the nature of the mind*, through which precisely that identity between the *sacred* and the *secular* is achieved. Of course, this process could be considered *religious*, despite the specifics mentioned, but, whatever the case, it is a cultural norm, which is

fundamentally ingrained in individual existence in an undoubted way, and is not an expression of existential crises and even less of psychopathological manifestations.

It seems obvious that if Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism and other Asian philosophical and psychological systems insistently claim that human existence is realized through constant *learning* and *self-cognizing of the nature of the mind*, while at the same time residing in the *metaphysical* realm of eternity, reality and essence, then *the sacred* must be perceived as actual, real, true even in the very *profane, secular, everyday* life. This, above all, means the transformation, in a patently categorical way, of *the other* sphere, the secular existence of time, happening and illusions, their redefinition as *sacred*, in order to overcome any possible opposition. The necessary redefinition of secular being as sacred can only be accomplished through *self-knowledge* and *cognizing the nature of the mind*, without the need to detach an individual from the reality of life. To understand that *the sacred* is above all actual, real and true, ultimately means that actual, real and true *religiosity* has been understood and knowledge of it has been gained. The more religious a person is, the more real the person is, the more detached from the realm of the untrue, the unreal, from the realm of meaningless happening. Hence the desire of man to *sanctify* his whole life, which can be achieved indirectly, that is, through the very transformation of life into a *ritual*. Although Mircea Eliade offers as an example of the realization of this path the precepts in ancient Hindu teachings, it can be said that the sanctification of profane life through the *ritualization* of daily secular actions is present in all Asian philosophical and psychological systems, “Hunger, thirst, abstinence is for man what is the consecration of the sacrifice (*diksha*)”. Food, drink, and pleasure correspond to rituals called *upashada*; merriment, delicious food and love correspond to the hymns and solemn recitations (*stuta – shastra*). The killing of the flesh (*tapas*), begging, honesty, respect for life (*ahimsa*) and the truth are gifts (offered by the officiating high priests). Obviously, the ideal for the religious person is a state in which everything a person does unfolds in a *ritualistic way*, as a *sacrifice*” (Eliade 2012, 480).

Certainly, the *ritualization of life* as a way to continually achieve *the sacred* in *the secular*, to overcome their opposition altogether, to remove over and over again the tension of their “obvious” duality, further nurtured from the earliest stages of enculturation and socialization, and defining the whole life of the individual in the Asian philosophical and psychological systems, encompasses the fundamental existential continuity of *mentalization* in these human communities as an immanent characteristic of *cognizing the nature of the mind*. In turn, *cognizing the nature of the mind* in Buddhist phenomenological psychology, also in other Asian systems, naturally leads to learning through their practical method, *namely meditation*, through which both life and death are existentialized on a daily basis. This is so because, according to the Asian existential notions of life and death, *meditation* is the only way in which *the nature of the mind* can be gradually cognized and stabilized. Moreover, the repeated co-experiencing of death in *meditation*, for

example, presupposes both its knowledge and the understanding of the fact that biological death is the beginning of another existence – the existence of the true, innermost, cherished *nature of the mind*. Recognizing that these notions of life and death have the potency to cause the same cultural shock as the Western attitudes toward life and death had evoked in him, in the late twentieth century, the Tibetan Buddhist psychologist Sogial Rinpoche stated, “Despite significant achievements in recent years, especially in the humanities and transpersonal psychology, the vast majority of Western scientists continue to reduce the mind and psyche only to physical processes in the brain, which contradicts the millennial experience of meditators and scientists from the East” (Rinpoche 1993).

Remarkable is the way in which the American psychologist Daniel Goleman opens his preface to *The Joy of Living*, a book by the Tibetan Buddhist psychologist Yongey Rinpoche: “We are witnesses to a precedent in the history of science - thinkers have a serious dialogue with scientists. From a purely scientific point of view, this meeting has led to some sobering results. Psychology – my field of work – has always insisted that its roots should be sought in Europe and America somewhere in the early twentieth century. This view proved to be a manifestation of cultural narrow-mindedness and historical short-sightedness. Theories of consciousness and its activity - that is, of psychological systems – have been created since ancient times within the framework of most great religious teachings, which are all Asian” (Rinpoche 2007, 5).

Regarding *meditation as the practical method* of these teachings, through which *mentalization* constantly reproduces its *existential* functions, Daniel Goleman shares truly unique facts from empirical research conducted according to Western standards, “Experts in the Buddhist science of consciousness work with neuroscientists to create research which will document the effect of these various techniques for working with consciousness on the nervous system. Mingyur Rinpoche is one of the Buddhist thinkers who actively participated in these experiments under the leadership of Richard Davidson, director of the *Weissman* Laboratory for Brain and Behavioral Research at the University of Wisconsin. The experiments yielded amazing results. For example, the discovery that the systematic practice of meditation for many years stimulates the individual’s potential for positive changes in brain activity on a scale not suspected by modern cognitive neuroscience. Probably the most amazing result came from studying a group of meditation practitioners, including Mingyur Rinpoche. During meditation on *compassion*, neural activity at a key happiness center in the brain increased by seven hundred to eight hundred percent! In the control participants in the experiment - volunteers, beginners in meditation - the same area is activated by only ten to fifteen percent” (Rinpoche 2007, 6).

Of course, we present here the results of a study on *meditation* mostly from the point of view of our Western understanding of empirical verification and *scientificity*, while for people from Asian philosophical and psychological systems,

the empirical is not limited to our familiar types of *studies*, since the empirical is *unquestionable truth* passed down in a practical manner over the millennia. Yongey Rinpoche himself summarizes in a few words the *existential* functions of *mentalization* through *meditation* as a practical method, which according to the principles of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy and our proposal for a different psychological paradigm - Critical Psychology (Georgiev 2020), ultimately gives us in experience a posteriori what was previously thought a priori in reason, "But the best of all is that no matter how long you meditate or what technique you use, any Buddhist technique for meditation ultimately evokes compassion, whether you are aware of this or not. When you look deep into your mind, you can't help but realize your resemblance to the people around you. When you comprehend your own desire to be happy, you can't help but see the same desire in others, and when you look clearly at your own fear, anger, or reluctance, you can't help but see that everyone around you is experiencing the same fear, anger, or reluctance. When you look into your mind, all imaginary differences between you and others automatically disappear, and the ancient prayer for the Four Immeasurables becomes as natural and constant as the rhythm of your heart: *May all beings have happiness and reasons for being happy; May all beings be free from suffering and from any causes of suffering; May all beings have joy and reasons for joy; May all beings have peace and the causes for peace, free from attachment and hatred*" (Rinpoche 2007, 328).

As for the fundamental belief pervasive in Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism and other Asian systems in the undoubted identity between the *metaphysical* and *physical* worlds, organized so that the former establishes and re-establishes the latter in the individual *mind*, albeit without specifically referring to Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, etc., but rather to metaphysics in general, Max Scheler's insight is symptomatic for a possible understanding of these same Asian philosophical and psychological systems, "Consciousness of the world, of oneself and of God is an indivisible structural whole - just as the transcendence of the object and consciousness arises in the same act of a 'third reflection'." At the moment when that "No" is pronounced in relation to the reality of the world around us, in which the spiritual actual being and its ideal objects are constituted: at exactly the same moment when the behavior open to the world and the infinite longing for limitless penetration into the open sphere of the world appear; at the moment when the human creator breaks away from the methods of the previous animal life of being adapted to or adapting to the surrounding world and takes the opposite path of adapting the open "world" to himself and his life; at the moment when man differentiates himself from nature in order to subject it to his power and to the new principles of art and signs - at that very moment man must place his center outside and beyond the world. He can no longer be perceived as an ordinary member or an ordinary part of the world over which he has so boldly placed himself"

(Scheler 1991, 99). It turns out that it is precisely this path of the *metaphysical* attitude towards oneself, others and the world that Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism and other Asian philosophical and psychological systems offer.

Transferred to the continuous process of *mentalization* this path can be captured by a very short formula, “Only through our sharing in the personal existence of the other is it possible to “know” the existence of what exists through itself. “Knowing” is a basic metaphysical function of existential subjects, through which existing A participates in the essential being of existent B!” (Scheler 1991, 102). It is obvious, at least in our opinion, that the Asian interpretation of *mentalization* and its existential functions is concentrated in this formula.

Conclusion

Mentalization procedures are universal immanent characteristics and existential functions of the Human as such, independent of any possible knowledge. The fact that mentalization is problematized in the knowledge of it in one or another historical situation is completely different from its real dimensions beyond any knowledge of its existential functions. It seems to us that this is a very important clarification, at least for Western societies and cultures, as the problems surrounding the procedures of mentalization may have to find a place in a more general view of existence, beyond the theory and practice of clinical psychology and psychotherapy, which anyway focus mostly on the psychopathological manifestations of mentalization. As far as human existence is concerned, it is obvious, in our opinion, that identification with many external objects, groups and subjects, which is an important characteristic of our individualistic Western cultures (Matsumoto 2002), does not presuppose seeking and finding support within man himself, makes impossible the process of man’s constant cognizing the nature of the mind, through which to mentalize his existence, that is, to permanently existentialize his Subjectivity in relation to others and reality in general.

And one more thing: “Hell is other people!” (Sartre 1993), Jean-Paul Sartre claimed about the life of man in the Western secular civilization, to which, however, he must be able to adapt; meanwhile “Hell – this is me!” is the generalized message of the Asian philosophical and psychological systems, which imposes the necessary order of the inner state of man in Eastern civilizations, made possible through self-awareness of the nature of the mind, i.e., the idea that through knowledge of the invisible, metaphysical, sacred world man establishes and re-establishes the visible, sensory, profane world in the permanent process of mentalization. We believe that it would be worth making an effort to use this Eastern experience, albeit from a specific point of view, in Western societies and cultures, especially given those undoubted mental traumas, caused by the Covid 19 pandemic and their future reiterations, which certainly have and will have lasting consequences for the mental health of people in the Western civilization (Georgiev & Tcholakova 2020). We are

convinced that the current existential crisis necessitates a fundamental rethinking of both the contents of our Western cultural ideas and the being of people in them in all aspects of their existence.

NOTES

1. The “Asian philosophical-psychological systems” construct we propose probably sounds at odds with traditional Western thinking, but the term adequately describes the contents of these systems. On the one hand, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Zen Buddhism carry with them a truly philosophical explanation of the world and man and contain an existential picture of the world. On the other hand, in a very specific sense, they represent also psychological concepts through which every Buddhist, Hindu, etc. can practically transform their daily life so that they can metaphysically and sensually, sacredly and secularly identify in each act, and this is being achieved through ritualizing everyday life.
2. Az D. T. Suzuki (1960) puts it: “Science thrives on dualism; therefore, scientists try to reduce everything into quantitative measurements...Anything that cannot be reduced to quantification they reject as not scientific, or as antiscientific. They set up a set of rules, and things that elude them are naturally set aside as not belonging to their field of study. However fine the meshes, as long as they are meshes some things are sure to escape them and these things, therefore, cannot be measured in any way. Quantities are destined to be infinite, and the sciences are one day to confess their inability to inveigle Reality. The unconscious is outside the field of scientific study...” (Fromm, Suzuki, De Martino 1960, 14).
3. It is important to clarify that the proposed Critical Psychology differs from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and others that strives to combine Freud’s psychoanalysis and Marx’s moral philosophy. The difference is methodological. It is about the fact that our critical paradigm represents a development of the idea of psychological knowledge of Wilhelm von Humboldt, Wilhelm Wundt, Emil Durkheim, Claude Levy-Bruhl, Sigmund Freud (Totem and Taboo), Carl Gustav Jung, and Serge Moscovici. This approach is the basis of the Bulgarian School of Critical Psychology, which has its followers both in Bulgaria and in other countries (see Georgiev, L., Yonkova, K., Nikolov, N., Dobrev, V., Muchai, A., Gaberov, I., Minchev, P., Stoyneva, O., Atanasov, K., 2017. *Tvorcheskite predizvikatelstva na kriticheskata psihologia*. Sofia: UI “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”).

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