

Buddhist Psychology

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Eastern influence on Western thought goes back at least to the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Alexander the Great (4th century B.C.E.) made it as far as northern India, and the Roman philosopher Plotinus made a trip to study the philosophies of the region in 242 C.E.. According to Hall and Lindzey (1978 p. 350), he may have subsequently been an influence on Christian mystics, such as Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. However, it is important to note that the phenomenological emphases of much of Eastern philosophies are such that, if true, we should also expect culturally distinct expressions of the same phenomenon to arise independently. The primary cultural difference seems to be whether or not the experience of the individual is legitimized by the society in which the individual lives or if expression of that experience is considered heresy, as was the case in the West with Christian mystics.

While this influence may have been present so far back, it was not until the time of the Theosophical movement in the 19th century that a real interest in Eastern thought (including Buddhism) emerged. As well, there was an interest in pre-Christian systems of belief, leading to latter day druid in England, and in Germany Richard Wagner promoted and capitalized on an intense interest in pre-Christian Germanic mythology (Noll, 1994). To our ears at this point in history, Freud's assertion to Jung that a dogma be made of the sexual theory in order to serve as a "bulwark" against the black tide of "occultism" (Jung, 1963) sounds almost 'hysterical', but within the context of that time this movement was taken very seriously. The Nazi party adopted its swastika emblem from the seal of the Thule society, a German metaphysical group which believed in the myth of Aryan¹ supremacy.

1. Editor's note: The Aryan people are originally recognized in India, as with the swastika, and were later adopted by the Nazis in Germany

Freud may have lumped Buddhism in with all of the theosophical rest. Certainly the attitude of psychoanalysis towards Buddhism can be seen in the title of psychoanalyst Franz Alexander's paper "Buddhistic Training as an Artificial Catatonia" (1961, cited in Hall and Lindzey, 1978, p. 376). Jung saw much of value in Buddhism and Eastern thought in general, but he did not believe that it was suitable for Westerners to practice since it constituted a denial of their own history. He believed that there was truth in the Eastern teachings, but that being the case, we should fashion something uniquely Western (Jung's Analytical Psychology (1968) ?) which could serve as our own culturally specific container for the universal content of these truths (Jung, 1958, cited in Hall and Lindzey, 1978, p. 378). Jung did not seem to

appreciate that Buddhism is not the same in Tibet as India, in China as Tibet, in Japan as China - that is, that Buddhism adapts itself to the culture at least as much as individuals adapt themselves to Buddhism (Dalai Lama, in Lama Surya Das, 1993). Indeed, the question of just what American Buddhism is or will become is a question currently being asked by the American Buddhist community. That we can even speak so easily of Buddhist psychology is in part because in the west we have a great facility for taking things apart and analyzing them as though this were not unnatural.

Buddhism as a religion is distinguished by faith in the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma (Law -natural, spiritual, and teachings), and the Sangha (originally community of monks, but more generally the Buddhist religious community).

The formula "I take refuge in Gautama the World-honored One, in the Law, and in the Order of Monks. World-honored One, from this day to the end of my life, recognize me as a believer who has taken refuge" occurs time and again in the earliest Buddhist scriptures and means that *even without theoretical understanding*, a person who has faith in the Three Treasures is a true Buddhist.

(Mizuno, 1987, p. 39, my italics)

Further, the religion contains beliefs in supernatural phenomenon (such as rebirth) and entities (such as devas and demons and their associated realms) which could never be entertained by empirical science (unless the devas and demons consented to visit the lab). These beliefs do have some influence on the psychology and philosophy of Buddhism as we shall see, but as Joseph Goldstein notes, "if you do not find it credible, no matter; you do not have to accept any of the Buddhist cosmology in order to attain full liberation." (1993, p. 128)

While Buddhism is a relatively new force in the West, it predates Christianity. Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) lived and taught 500 years before Christ. Like Christ, Buddha taught orally, and encouraged expression of his ideas in the local dialect. Many of the earliest writings were in Pali, later translated into other languages, such as Sanskrit. So from the very beginning we have the problem of translation and retranslation. There is a similar problem to that of ascertaining the nature of the earliest Christian Church in that writings appeared well after the death of the founder. Thus there are no expressions of Buddha's teaching which can be taken as verbatim.

About 300 to 500 years after the death of the Buddha there was a splintering of his followers into different groups (the sectarian period). It is in this period that everything was pulled together into an orderly system of belief consisting of the three "baskets" (*pitaka*) of teachings- the sutras, the precepts, and the commentaries on the sutras. The *Abhidhamma* ("about the Law") is the latter of the three (Mizuno, 1987, p. 21). While one can find psychological truths in all three baskets ("In the Buddhist doctrine, mind is the starting point, the focal point, and also, as the liberated and purified mind of the Saint, the culminating point" (Nyanaponika, 1962, cited in Hall and Lindzey, 1978, p. 358)), and they influence all later Buddhist thought and writing, it is not until the collection of writings in the *Abhidhamma* that we come across explicitly psychological works. Buddhist Psychology, then, may be said to be about 2,000 years old, predating Western psychology as a 'science' by more than eighteen and a half centuries.

Western psychology and Buddhist psychology differ in many ways. In the West, following from Freud to the present, a great deal of importance has been attached to development

through childhood. This is the period when an infant develops into a person (regardless of whether they are viewed as starting 'tabula rasa' or with genetic predisposition). In Buddhism there is a greater importance placed on death (esp. Tibetan Buddhism (Dalai Lama, 1994)), since the law of cause and effect (*kamma*, or 'action') determines how one moment conditions the next. Consequently, the moment of death is very important. This is an area where it is difficult to separate the psychology from the religion. A concept like 'tabula rasa' is totally unthinkable in a Buddhist context, since each child is born with an accumulation of *kamma* which will have a profound effect on their development.

Having introduced the concept of *kamma*, I think it is very important to note that within Buddhist understanding, *kamma* is *not* totally deterministic. It conditions existence, it has even been argued to determine probabilities (e.g. rebirth as an animal making probable a slippery series of incarnations down into a hell realm (Dalai Lama, 1994, p. 44)), but a person still possesses agency and through their actions may soften or mitigate the effect of negative *kamma*, while enhancing the circumstances for the unfolding of positive *kamma* (as well as the reverse) (Goldstein, 1993, pgs. 123-138).

A story which reflects the concern for the moment of death and *kamma* is one about a real villain whose last thought on the gallows was of the single positive action he ever committed through the course of a bloody life - the giving of food to one of Buddha's disciples. He was reborn into a higher (*deva*) realm. There he practiced Buddhism diligently, because he was probably the fellow with the worst *kamma* in that realm, and he knew it. He also knew to take advantage of his opportunity (agency), because that negative *kamma* was still there waiting for conditions to be right to manifest (Goldstein, 1993, p. 128).

Kamma might be more easily understood in the West as cause and effect. This is a simplification, but one which affords a broad applicability in the here and now without the religious (or even necessarily moral) element. A common Western moral injunction -- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you - has strong karmic overtones. However, the karmic equivalent might be phrased more strongly -- As you do unto others, so they shall do unto you. Thoughts and feelings are of karmic consequence, therefore negative karma can accrue to a victim due to their negative response -- they are, in a sense, victimized twice. A karmic golden rule corollary might be -- As is done unto you, so you shall do unto others (again with the qualification of probability). In Western psychology we can discover this with studies into the likelihood of those suffering child abuse growing up to become abusers themselves. The power of this simple concept of *kamma* is immense and observable as being at work in the world, but from the perspective of Western psychology (at least in mainstream academe), this falls into the category of 'folk wisdom'. However, an understanding of *kamma* affords the individual the very practical opportunity to enhance or mitigate the expression of *kamma*. Ignorance is most definitely NOT bliss.

Another difference between Buddhism and Western psychology is that in Buddhism there is not the same concern with mind/body, nature/nurture sorts of dichotomies. There is a distinction made between biological, situational, and psychological states, but they are viewed more holistically (Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 373). Likewise, thoughts are a variety of mental objects or states, but so are the five senses related to corresponding sense objects, for a total of six senses (Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 360) to the Western five with thoughts (mind) being a thorny other which either has to be an epiphenomenon or at best an emergent property, lest we fall prey to the spectre of dualism. Interestingly, the Buddhists seem to have managed to avoid the problem of dualism within a religious context.

Part of the problem Western science has with dualism is that it is very much at odds with the much longer established Western religion. In the Judaic tradition (which has contributed to Christianity), there is a personified God who is other. He is not only other to the person, but to his entire creation. He is not inherent in Nature, merely its creator and overlord. Furthermore, he's bestowed a soul on every individual which is essentially on loan, to be destroyed if we fail to conform to his commandments, or even worse, by some accounts, to be eternally tormented if we fail. The body is disposable - so much so that if any part of it offends, we're advised to cut it off (Bible: Matthew 5:29,30)! It is this soul, typically endowed with all our cognitive abilities (the mystic Eckhart's minimalist description being an extreme Christian exception (Eckhart, 1996)), which is important and separable from the body. Whilst not accepting a 'soul' separate from the body, science has sought to remain detached from the world (objective), itself its own definer of creative processes (evolution). In allying itself with these general tendencies in 'science', psychology has gone to the devil. That in the West science and religion should be seen as being in opposition to one another is not surprising, since science seeks to usurp the throne of God.

Buddhism is an atheistic religion, something of an anomaly from a Western perspective. There is no God. A distinction may be made here between the early Pali canon and Abhidhamma, and later more elaborated Buddhisms where Buddha is a godlike being, or the Pure Land Sect where chanting the name of the Bodhisatva of Compassion will assure one rebirth into a deva realm. However, even in these, Buddha is a supernatural teacher, not a mighty creator god and supreme judge. There is no need for a judge when kamma acts like a natural law, when the 'judgment' is already contained in the action. And even in the most elaborated Buddhism in the end there is just One. The world of a thousand and one things is illusion. This is expressed in the dependence of everything on everything else, expressed in the law of interdependent origination. Nothing, *absolutely nothing*, is separate and distinct ultimately. To believe so is to be deluded, and from a Buddhist perspective, the extreme reductionism of Western ways of seeing is delusion. Mind/body? Nature/nurture? Apollonian/Dionysian? Creator/Creation? Not so.

The sharpest and most challenging contention of Buddhism, though, is that we don't have a soul. Phrased in more psychological terms, there is no self. This needs to be understood as a consequence of the Buddhist understanding of impermanence. Buddha made the astute observation that *everything* is impermanent. This is easy to understand from the perspective of contemporary Western science. Even the Himalayas once weren't, until an island continent we know as India today crashed into Eurasia in much the same way Indian thought has smacked into the Western thought beginning the creation of who knows what sort of Himalayas of understanding yet to come. But it will be different.

As apparent as the truth of impermanence is everywhere else, it is a difficult one to accept within the field of personality. We would still like to cling to the belief that there is something of us that is permanent through life. The Jamesian 'me' may change, but must the 'I' change too (James, 1890/1964)? Is there no changeless transcendental knower?

A compromise may be offered in the understanding of the self as a process. Processes may have identity, at least for convenience. More importantly, from kamma it is understood that one moment conditions the next. There is continuity. I experience guilt when I remember an unskillful action taken by me in the past. Even if I am deluded in believing myself to be my self, there is no denying that the unskillful action was an event occurring in an ongoing process. This process is not determined -- conditioned, perhaps, but there is agency, there are feelings, and there is cognition. This process has all the properties of the trilogy of mind, and

satisfies all the criteria of the ethico-legal perspective of personhood (Paranjpe, 1995). Therefore, while there may be no permanent unchanging self, there is still a person who is eligible for responsibilities and privileges as a participant in human society.

Without full functioning in all three areas, there are limits as to the amount of responsibility that can reasonably be expected, and therefore limited expectations for moral behavior, as well as potentially a restriction of rights and freedoms as a society seeks to protect both the person who is deficient and itself from harm (Paranjpe, 1995). Where these criteria are met, as I have argued is the case with the person as process in Buddhism, we should reasonably expect to find some expression of morality.

Buddhism has a strong concern with ethics, and these are expressed throughout the writings. The most fundamental teaching to all variety of Buddhisms is the Four Noble Truths which are concerned with suffering and transcendence of suffering. While this could be looked upon as a straight forward description of life, it is this focus and concern for liberating others (esp. in Mahayana Buddhism) which provides a foundation and impetus for moral interest. More directly concerned with ethical conduct is the Eight Fold Path of right views, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and meditation, as well as numerous precepts (both Abhidhamma and Mahayana) (Mizuno, 1987, pp. 129-143).

While there is an emphasis on altruistic behavior in Buddhism, ethical conduct is also critical for personal development and well being. One of the keys to the experiential understanding of Buddhism is meditation, but it is maintained that without the practice of virtue, there will be no advancement through meditation.

While there are many specific forms of meditation, Hall and Lindzey (1978) and Gunartana (1991) place the various forms into two main groups; concentration (*Samatha*) and mindfulness (*Vipassana*).

Concentration meditation is perhaps the method most strongly etched in the public imagination. This is the form where the meditator focuses in on a single thing to the exclusion of all else. This could be a syllable or series of syllables chanted over and over as in a mantra, a religious image, the breath, or even a quality such as compassion or loving kindness. The object should be something healthy so that the effect of this concentration is to increase positive factors and diminish negative ones. There are several stages that the meditator passes through. At the stage of "access" concentration, there are feelings of rapture, energy and equanimity, but these factors vary in strength. When they become stable, the meditator experiences a strong shift from normal consciousness, called *jhana* (or *samadhi* in other Buddhist and Hindu traditions). This state is characterized by bliss, rapture, and the absence of all other thoughts and feelings. There are eight stages of *jhana*, with bliss being replaced by strong equanimity at higher stages (Hall & Lindzey, 1978, pp. 369-370). Hall and Lindzey (1978) and Gunartana (1991) maintain that the results achieved by this method are lost outside of meditation when the meditator returns to everyday consciousness.

The effects of mindfulness meditation last beyond the sitting (Hall & Lindzey, 1978). Indeed, the nature of mindfulness meditation is such that an objective of the meditator may be (as in Vispassana meditation of the Theravada tradition) to achieve this state of meditation permanently. This is achievable without bumping into any walls because the objective in mindfulness meditation is full awareness of one's experiences. In formal sitting, these experiences will be typically thoughts arising in the mind. These thoughts are noted and let go. There is no attempt to suppress the arising of thoughts, and there is also no pursuit of thoughts

which arise, no linking of thoughts together into chains of thinking. Another experience which comes up in formal meditation is emotion. These are regarded in exactly the same way, noted, but not suppressed and not wallowed in. For those sitting in the full lotus position (especially beginners not accustomed to this position), opportunity is afforded to work with attending pain in a neutral, non-judgmental manner (Goldstein, 1993, pp 44-46). Mindfulness of the physical can be formally worked with further in walking meditation. Here every movement is in awareness (not a method for the novice in a hurry to actually get somewhere!). And this is a natural bridge towards mindfulness in every activity. At this stage it isn't really a formal meditation anymore, but rather a permanent and (in advanced practitioners) quite natural way of being in the world (Goldstein, 1993). Hall and Lindzey emphasize various stages in this type of meditation as well (1978, p. 370). While Goldstein (1993) uses *Vipassana* as a global overall term, and translates this as "insight", Hall and Lindzey reserve that term for a second stage where one has achieved this state of uninterrupted mindfulness. The first stage is characterized by getting caught in thought trains, losing one's mindful awareness, and returning again and again to it. This is viewed as being quite natural, and the point is not to force anything, but rather to gently return to awareness.

The third stage is *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvana*). Hall and Lindzey describe this as a state in which "there is no experience whatsoever" (1978, p. 371). Not even of bliss or equanimity. A person who has achieved a permanent state of *nibbana* is an *arhat*, "the ideal type of the healthy personality" (Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 372). Characteristics of an arhat are:

1. *absence of*: greed for sense desires, anxiety, resentments, or fear of any sort; dogmatism...., aversion to conditions such as loss, disgrace, pain or blame feelings of lust or anger; experiences of suffering; need for approval, pleasure, or praise; desire for anything for oneself beyond essential and necessary items.
2. *prevalence of*: impartiality toward others and equanimity in all circumstances; ongoing alertness and calm delight in experience no matter how ordinary or even seemingly boring; strong feelings of compassion and loving kindness; quick and accurate perception; composure and skill in taking action; openness to others and responsiveness to their needs.

(Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 372)

How a person who has gone beyond experience altogether, beyond feelings of bliss and equanimity, can feel "delight", and "compassion and loving kindness" Hall and Lindzey do not make clear.

The Mahayana sect viewed the Abhidhamma ideal of the arhat as being too much concerned with the personal liberation of the individual and not enough with concern for the well being of others. Consequently, while agreeing with most of Abhidhamma teaching, their ideal is that of the *bodhisatva* who, in addition, vows to work for the liberation of all sentient beings and will not accept her own liberation from the cycle of birth and death until such time as that is achieved (Mizuno, 1987, p. 28).

In actual practice, there is nothing to prevent a combination of both concentration and mindfulness methods, and this is common in the Theravada tradition (Gunartana, 1991, p. 4). One of the earliest sutras is the *Anapanasati Sutta* (in Hanh, 1996, pp. 3-10) which outlines a concentration method centred entirely around the breath. This sutra seems to contradict Hall and Lindzey's (1978) and Gunartana's (1991) contention that concentration methods are not enough to effect permanent change, since this sutra teaches that concentration on the breath is

a key to enlightenment in and of itself. The breath may be a special case, however, as Gunartana (1991) advocates its use as a "*primary focus*" (1991, my italics), and Goldstein uses it in the method he outlines (1993). While not advocating pin-point focus on it, for him it is something to which the meditator can return again and again. Also it can be a very good relaxing technique at the beginning of mindfulness meditation. Goldstein also sees great value in meditating on loving-kindness. He relates how a deeply revered teacher of his, Dipa Ma, "used the loving-kindness practice to develop deep states of concentration, and then used deep concentration to develop insight and wisdom through the power of mindfulness." (Goldstein, 1993, p. 142). Concentration and mindfulness methods should not be seen as mutually exclusive.

It should be clear by now that Buddhist psychology is very phenomenological, concerned with the inner experience of the individual, as opposed to mainstream academic psychology which exclusively values empirical evidence, where 'empirical' contains the implicit qualifications of repeatability by anyone with the minimum prerequisite of familiarity with the methods, and that the results of experiments can be published and read by anyone who wishes. Verification of Buddhist methods can be obtained ultimately only through personal experience.

In truth, there is a strong cultural bias as well, since the experiences and findings of Buddhism can be shared between people who have had similar experiences in the same way experiments can be replicated and publications understood by people in the scientific community who share similar training and experience. Likewise, in Buddhism those not as far along on the path look to the authority of teachers, just as the authority of peer reviewed journals is important to the scientist who, if only for practical reasons of time and resources, does not replicate all the experiments he reads of so that he can see for himself. 'Lay' persons in the scientific West are actually more at the mercy of the authority of scientists than Buddhist lay persons who can see for themselves with the aid of a cushion and perhaps a copy of Goldstein's *Insight Meditation* (1993).

'Empirical' evidence for the claims of the meditation are scant, but Hall and Lindzey cite a couple of examples -- Yogis don't blink and Zen masters never stop. The yogic concentration is so intense that Yogis can be senseless to external stimuli (Ananda et al., 1961, cited in Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 374). Zen mindfulness meditation with its awareness of everything in the moment, each event seemingly happening for the first time, do not exhibit habituation over many repetitions of a stimulus (Kasamatsu & Hirai, 1966; Hirai, 1974, cited in Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 375). These results are exactly what we would expect. Likewise, surveys of experienced meditators show an accentuation of positive factors and a diminishment of negative ones (Ferguson & Gowan, 1976; Goleman & Schwartz, 1976; Nidich et al., 1973; Schwartz, 1973; Pelletier, 1974; Seeman et al., 1972; Lesh, 1970; Leung, 1973; and Garfield, 1974, cited in Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 375).

This short paper is in danger of not being short, and yet there is so much more to explore. For example, there is in Abhidhamma the theory of positive and negative factors which are mutually exclusive. From this there arises a theory of personality where personality may be said to be the expression of persistent traits. There are similarities here between Buddhist psychology and something as non-phenomenological as trait/factor theory in the West. Likewise George Kelly comes to mind in considering dichotomous traits, especially the dichotomy corollary to his fundamental postulate (Kelly, 1955, in Feist, 1985, p. 587). And there are also ancient examinations of cognitive processes which resemble work done recently in cognitive psychology.

While the content of Buddhist psychology is of great value, the most important thing it has to offer the West is a different way of seeing, a valuing of the phenomenological and personal experience. If the content is based on a discovered reality, it may be that the method is more important than the content which can be discovered thereby. It is not as though this approach has been totally absent in the West, but it has been a minority position - heresy in the time of the Church and heresy in this time of Science.

As the world opens and different peoples are reunited for the first time since the dispersion out of Africa way back in our evolutionary history, the authority of entire cultures and histories different from those Western will demand consideration, and in the exchange I optimistically believe we will all benefit. Buddhist psychology as a discipline distinct from Buddhism as a religion can make more broadly available much of value. While there may be no 'Self' in this psychology, it is very much one compassionately concerned with persons.

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