



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FREEDOM IN BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist psychology, simply put, is concerned with the alleviation of human suffering, distress, and dissatisfaction. However, the Buddhist idea of suffering much broader than what is usually the focus of western psychology. The notion of suffering includes the entire range of human dissatisfaction and anguish and not the clinical disorders described by psychiatry. And it is also important to note that for the most part the Buddha is referring to emotional suffering rather than physical suffering, per se. The emphasis is on the mental aspects of physical pain rather than the pain itself. The Buddha's practical project of the understanding and relief of human anguish was also a potent counterforce to metaphysical speculation which the Buddha eschewed. The pursuit of metaphysical, logical or theoretical issues for their own sake was avoided. Such questions could not be answered and spending time on them simply distracted from the urgency of the message the Buddha wished to share. This could also be understood as the Buddha's advice to leave questions about the nature of the universe, matter, and reality to those disciplines equipped to study and addresses them (e.g., science). The domain of science was the area of human endeavor which could answer such questions. The Buddha was primarily concerned with the human mind and its activity.

The Structure Of The Mind

Buddhists describe the person as composed of five **skandhas** ("aggregates"):

1. **The body (rupa)**, including the sense organs.
2. **Sensations and feelings (vedana)**, coming out of contact between sense organs and objects.
3. **Perceptions and ideas (samjñā)**, especially manifest in our ability to recognize things and ideas.
4. **Mental acts (samskara)**, especially will power and attention.
5. **Basic consciousness (vijñāna)**.

The last four are called **naman**, name, meaning the psyche. **Namarupa** (name-form) is therefore the Buddhist term for the person, mental and physical, which is nevertheless anatman, without soul or essence.

Buddhism also differentiates among six "fields" (**ayatana**) for the five skandhas: sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind, as well as the objects of these six senses.

Mahayana Buddhism adds **alaya-vijñana**, "storehouse" consciousness, to the skandhas. This is similar to Jung's idea of the collective unconscious. What is stored there are called **bijas** or seeds, which are inborn tendencies to perceive the world in a certain way and result from our karmic history. They combine with **manas** or ego to form the illusion that is ordinary existence. By quieting this ego and becoming less self-centered, your mind realizes the "emptiness" (**sunyata**) of all things. Then you have peace.

The Four Noble Truths

The **Four Noble Truths** sound like the basics of any theory with therapeutic roots:

1. Life is suffering. Life is at very least full of suffering, and it can easily be argued that suffering is an inevitable aspect of life. If I have senses, I can feel pain; if I have feelings, I can feel distress; if I have a capacity for love, I will have the capacity for grief. Such is life.

Duhkha, the Sanskrit word for suffering, is also translated as stress, anguish, and imperfection. Buddha wanted us to understand suffering as a foundation for improvement. One key to understanding suffering is understanding **anitya**, which means that all things, including living things, our loved ones, and ourselves, are impermanent. Our peculiar position of being mortal and being aware of it is a major source of anxiety, but is also what makes our lives, and the choices we make, meaningful. Time becomes important only when there is only so much of it. Doing the right thing and loving someone only have meaning when you don't have an eternity to work with.

Another key concept is **anatman**, which means that all things -- even we -- have no "soul" or eternal substance. With no substance, nothing stands alone, and no one has a separate existence. We are all interconnected, not just with our human world, but with the universe.

2. Suffering is due to attachment. We might say that at least much of the suffering we experience comes out of ourselves, out of our desire to make pleasure, happiness, and love last forever and to make pain, distress, and grief disappear from life altogether.



We are not therefore to avoid all pleasure, happiness, and love. Nor are we to believe that all suffering comes only from ourselves. It's just not necessary, being shot once with an arrow, to shoot ourselves again, as the Buddha put it.

Attachment is one translation of the word **trishna**, which can also be translated as thirst, desire, lust, craving, or clinging. When we fail to recognize that all things are imperfect, impermanent, and insubstantial, we cling to them in the delusion that they are indeed perfect, permanent, and substantial, and that by clinging to them, we, too, will be perfect, permanent, and substantial.

3. Suffering can be extinguished. At least that suffering we add to the inevitable suffering of life can be extinguished. Or, if we want to be even more modest in our claims, suffering can at least be diminished.

With decades of practice, some monks are able to transcend even simple, direct, physical pain. I don't think, however, that us ordinary folk in our ordinary lives have the option of devoting those decades to such an extreme of practice. For most of us, therapy is a matter of specifically diminishing **mental** anguish rather than eliminating all pain.

Nirvana is the traditional name for the state of being (or non-being, if you prefer) wherein all clinging, and so all suffering, has been eliminated. It is often translated as "blowing out," with the idea that we eliminate self like we blow out a candle. Another interpretation is that nirvana is the blowing out a fire that threatens to overwhelm us, or even taking away the oxygen that keeps the fires burning. By "blowing out" clinging, hate, and ignorance, we "blow out" unnecessary suffering. Perhaps an even more useful translation for nirvana is freedom!

4. And there is a way to extinguish suffering. This is what all therapists believe -- each in his or her own way. Buddha called it the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path is the equivalent of a therapy program, but one so general that it can apply to anyone. The first two segments of the path are referred to as **prajña**, meaning **wisdom**:

Right view -- understanding the Four Noble Truths, especially the nature of all things as imperfect, impermanent, and insubstantial and our self-inflicted suffering as founded in clinging, hate, and ignorance.

Right aspiration -- having the true desire, the dedication, to free oneself from attachment, hatefulness, and ignorance. The idea that improvement comes only when the sufferer takes the first step of aspiring to improvement is apparently 2500 years old.

Therapy is something neither the therapist nor the client takes lying down -- if you will pardon the pun. The therapist must take an assertive role in helping the client become aware of the reality of his or her suffering and its roots. Likewise, the client must take an assertive role in working towards improvement -- even though it means facing the fears they've been working so hard to avoid, and especially facing the fear that they will "lose" themselves in the process.

The next three segments of the path provide more detailed guidance in the form of **moral precepts**, called **sila**:

Right speech -- abstaining from lying, gossiping, and hurtful speech generally. Speech is often our ignorance made manifest, and is the most common way in which we harm others. Modern psychologists emphasize that one should above all stop lying to oneself. But Buddhism adds that by practicing being true to others, and one will find it increasingly difficult to be false to oneself.

Right action -- behaving oneself, abstaining from actions that hurt others such as killing, stealing, and irresponsible sex. Traditionally, Buddhists speak of the five moral precepts, which are...

- Avoid harming others;
- Avoid taking what is not yours;
- Avoid harmful speech;
- Avoid irresponsible sex;
- Avoid drugs and alcohol.

A serious Buddhist may add five more:

- One simple meal a day, before noon;
- Avoid frivolous entertainments;
- Avoid self-adornment;
- Use a simple bed and seat;
- Avoid the use of money.

Monks and nuns living in monastic communities add over 100 more rules!



Right livelihood -- making one's living in an honest, non-hurtful way. Here's one we don't talk about much in our society today. One can only wonder how much suffering comes out of the greedy, cut-throat, dishonest careers we often participate in. This by no means means we must all be monks: Imagine the good one can do as an honest, compassionate, hard-working business person, lawyer, or politician!

This is a good place to introduce another term associated with Buddhism: **karma**. Basically, karma refers to good and bad deeds and the consequences they bring. In some branches of Buddhism, karma has to do with what kind of reincarnation to expect. But other branches see it more simply as the negative (or positive) effects one's actions have on one's integrity. Beyond the effects of your selfish acts have on others, for example, each selfish act "darkens your soul," and makes happiness that much harder to find. On the other hand, each act of kindness, as the gypsies say, "comes back to you three times over." To put it simply, virtue is its own reward, and vice its own hell.

The last three segments of the path are the ones Buddhism is most famous for, and concern **samadhi** or meditation. For simple instructions, go to my page on meditation.

Right effort -- taking control of your mind and the contents thereof. Simple, direct practice is what it takes, the developing of good mental habits: When bad thoughts and impulses arise, they should be abandoned. This is done by watching the thought without attachment, recognizing it for what it is (no denial or repression!), and letting it dissipate. Good thoughts and impulses, on the other hand, should be nurtured and enacted. Make virtue a habit, as the stoics used to say.

Right mindfulness -- mindfulness refers to a kind of meditation involving an acceptance of thoughts and perceptions, a "bare attention" to these events without attachment. This mindfulness is also extended to daily life. It becomes a way of developing a fuller, richer awareness of life, and a deterrent to our tendency to sleepwalk our way through life.

Right concentration -- meditating in such a way as to empty our natures of attachments, avoidances, and ignorance, so that we may accept the imperfection, impermanence, and insubstantiality of life. This is usually thought of as the highest form of Buddhist meditation, and full practice of it is pretty much restricted to monks and nuns who have progressed considerably along the path.

Bodhisattvas

A Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who have chosen not to leave the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, but rather to remain in **samsara** (this existence) until they can bring all of life

into nirvana with them. Think of them as the Buddhist version of saints. In northern Buddhism, they believe we all should strive to become Bodhisattvas.

Five Insights of Buddhist Psychology:

(i) Centrality of consciousness/ subjectivity

The radically psychological nature of Buddhist psychology is evidenced by the need to explore the mind through meditation and other forms of contemplation. It is not necessary to explain it, where it comes from, which part of the brain and so on, which is a major focus of many western scientific disciplines. Our subjectivity consists of moments of awareness that appear seamless but with attention placed on it, within the present moment, can reveal how our cognitive processes culminate in the mental phenomena we experience. Investigating this moment, right here, right now, is where wisdom can arise.

(ii) Human experience manifests through 6 sense systems

Along with the 5 senses and their corresponding experiences, mind is considered to be a sense organ, and cognitive events are sense objects. The traditional account of consciousness describes its emergence from interaction of sense organ (e.g., eye) and sense object (e.g., visual object) creating sensory experience (e.g., visual consciousness). Everything we know depends on the activity of these 6 senses. While later developments in Buddhist philosophy posits additional senses, the traditional scriptures focus on these six.

(iii) All experience is constructed

The radically psychological nature of Buddhist psychology can be observed in the emphasis on what appears. What appears is a transformation or translation of the external environment into an internal language of consciousness (e.g., photons >> sight; chemicals >>taste, smell; vibration >>> hearing; pressure >> touch; brain activity >>> cognition). The transformation of raw sensory activation into sensory experience is so radical that no way to know what pre-constructed reality is. All we can know is our own subjectivity. Any discussion of what 'reality' is will always be limited by what our senses will permit and what our mind can conceive. The study of reality is the study of the human construction of experience. And whatever such reality may be is irrelevant to the real purpose of the Buddha's message, to transform delusion into wisdom. This project requires us to explore our inner world. Of course, each individual has their unique, subjective, constructed reality.

(iv) Experience is constantly changing- an incessant succession of events

Each perception, sensation, cognition, image, memory, feeling is a process that can never be experienced identically again. Every moment is unique. Our brains have evolved to reduce our awareness of such flux to increase our ability to survive. For reasons of adaptation sensory reality is filtered thus distorting our experiences. Three major forms of perceptual distortion are described by the Buddha: perceptions of permanence (perceptual-linguistic), satisfaction (cognitive) and self (metacognitive) are examples of this distortion-tendency.

(v) Mind/body (the self) revealed through 5 inter-dependent processes

Five processes or 'aggregates' define the self (i.e., mind/body). These five processes consist of physicality, consciousness, perception, affect, and habit. The Buddhist posits a view of self an interaction among these five processes to produce the coherent sense of identity and 'I'-ness that defines who we are. It is not accurate to claim that there is no self within Buddhist psychology. This would be absurd. What the Buddha clarifies is that the self we experience has no essence or substance but consists of these 5 constantly arising, abiding and subsiding. This article is completely modified by me in Previous article.

Conclusion:

The development of our true mind and its wisdom relies on the diligent practice of upholding the precepts, developing concentration and increasing awareness and insight. This process which transforms a deluded mind into our true mind is described in Buddhism as "converting consciousness into wisdom". Consciousness carries the psychological baggage of past experiences. The wisdom emitted from our true mind is the therapy or treatment for human beings in their attempt to resolve any internal conflicts within their minds, to transcend suffering in this lifetime and to escape from the cycle of birth and death in coming lives. The Mind-only School further classifies the psychological responses of human beings into fifty-one categories and refers to them as "the attributes of the mind." These include:

1. Five basic psychological functions: mental and physical contact, attention, feeling, identification and analysis.
2. Five deliberately created mental conditions: aspiration, comprehension, memory, concentration and wisdom.
3. Eleven wholesome psychological states: trust, diligence, humility, remorse, no greed, no hatred, no ignorance, tranquility, attentiveness, equanimity, and no harm.
4. Six root afflictions: greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, doubt and incorrect view.

5. Twenty unwholesome psychological states: anger, hostility, irritation, conceit, deceit, flattery, arrogance, malice, jealousy, stinginess, no remorse, no regret, no trust, laziness, insensitivity, apathy, agitation, forgetfulness, incorrect perception and heedlessness.
6. Four neutral states of mind: remorse, sleepiness, applied thought and sustained thought.

The above categorization of human psychological responses in Buddhism is rather comprehensive and sophisticated. Today's psychology researchers will gain a lot if they can study Buddhism in addition to psychology.

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