

# BUDDHISM AND MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

By Alec Robertson (Ceylon)

Let us consider the teachings of Buddhist Psychology on the concept of the mind in relation to modern psychology. Could the theories of the mind postulated by modern psychologists be compared with the Buddhist concept of the mind?

It is pertinent to discuss this important question as there are some Buddhists who strain every nerve to find some sort of resemblance between modern psychology and the teachings of the Buddha. They even go further in reconciling modern psychological concepts of the mind with the Buddhist teachings in toto. However, it is a dangerous pastime as it would lead inevitably to a complete distortion and travesty of the Buddha's teachings. It should be clearly understood at the outset that modern psychologists deal with theories and hypotheses which may be accepted today, and thrown overboard tomorrow, whereas Buddhism deals with the eternal verities and facts of life which retain their perennial freshness despite the ravages of time. The Buddha through his super-normal vision perceived and understood the intricate and complicated workings of the mind whereas psychologists arrive at conclusions through the arduous process of observation, experimentation and reason.

Psychology divides the mind into four categories, namely the super-conscious mind, the conscious mind, the sub-conscious mind and the unconscious mind. According to the Buddha, the mind cannot be put into water-tight compartments as no two types of consciousness co-exist. The mind is nothing but a complex compound of fleeting mental states (**Cetasikas**). It persistently flows to its flood, ever dispensing to the world without the thought stuff it has gathered by the way. We live only for one thought moment and when that thought moment ceases, it transmits all the impressions and potentialities to the successor. Therefore, every fresh consciousness consists of the potentialities of the predecessor together with something more. It must be clearly understood that according to Buddhist psychology there is a continuous flow of consciousness like a stream without interruption. The subsequent thought moment is neither absolutely the same as its predecessor since that which goes to make it up is not identical nor entirely another being, but the same continuity of **Kamma** – energy. Here, there is no identical being but there is identity in process. The duration of one thought moment is even less than one billionth part of the time occupied by a flash of lightning.

## **Eighty Nine Types**

According to Buddhism there are eighty nine types of consciousness, eight of which are supramundane and the rest mundane. The composition of each type of consciousness is enumerated in detail and thoughts are minutely analysed and classified chiefly from an ethical point of view. It is precisely here that western psychology fails, for the psychologist is not concerned with moral values. In fact, he doubts whether they have any significance outside man's imagination. He is unable to give guidance in questions of right or wrong, but Buddhist psychology explains the relationship between mental activity and ethical laws showing that morality is an integral part of the pattern of cause and effect which is set up by our mode of thinking and the actions produced by it. Furthermore, the different levels of consciousness of beings existing in the different realms of existence in the unfathomable depths of space have been explained by the Buddha. He also minutely and microscopically enumerates how these different types of consciousness operate in beings with the combination of various mental factors (**Cetasika**) which are fifty two in number. These mental factors combine in various ways depending on the type of consciousness.

Modern psychologists with their limited researches into the mysteries of the mind have discovered some of these mental factors which however do not have the same connotations and functions as explained by the Buddha. For instance, they refer to the effective state of the mind which plays a dominant and significant role in our lives. This aspect of the mind bears some resemblance to **Vedana** (feeling) as enumerated in Buddhist psychology. But modern psychologists do not take into consideration the ethical and moral significance of this mental factor. The Buddha on the other hand through penetrative insight perceived that **Vedana** (feeling) is of nine types which are classified purely from the ethical stand-point. Modern psychologists, however, doubt the validity of the ethical import of this mental factor. The ethical significance of **Vedana** is clearly brought out in the **Satipathana Sutta** of the **Digha** and **Majjhima Nikayas** where **Vedana** forms the basis of one of the insight-meditations (Vipassana) which paves the way to final liberation and deliverance. Thus it is evident how Buddhist psychology reveals the real nature and function of **Vedana** and above all shows how one could surmount this tyranny and supremacy of **Vedana** or feeling which binds us to the bonds and shackles of existence, and, through understanding, see its real nature and thus escape from its bondage. Such a clear exposition is not found in any modern treatise on psychology.

It would interest psychologists to know how it could be possible to escape from the bondage of **Vedana** as it would throw new light into their researches. The Buddha enumerates the method and technique as follows: -

“And how, O Bhikkhus, does a Bhikkhu dwell, as regards sensation? Herein O Bhikkhus, a Bhikkhu experiencing a pleasant feeling understands ‘I am experiencing a pleasant feeling’. In experiencing a painful feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing a painful feeling’. In experiencing an indifferent feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing an indifferent feeling’. In experiencing a worldly pleasant feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing a worldly pleasant feeling’. In experiencing an unworldly pleasant feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing an unworldly pleasant feeling’. In experiencing a worldly painful feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing a worldly painful feeling’. In experiencing an unworldly painful feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing an unworldly painful feeling’. In experiencing a worldly indifferent feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing a worldly indifferent feeling’. In experiencing an unworldly indifferent feeling he understands ‘I am experiencing an unworldly indifferent feeling’.

Thus he dwells in contemplation of the feelings, either with regard to his own person or to other persons or to both. He beholds the feelings arise; beholds how they pass away; beholds the arising and passing away of the feelings. Feelings are there. This clear awareness is present in Him, to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness; and he lives independent, unattached to anything in the world. Thus does the disciple dwell in contemplation of the feeling.” (Digha Nikaya Discourse No. 22).

Here it should be noted that the disciple understands that the expression “I feel” has no validity except as a conventional expression (**Vohara Vacana**); understands that, in the absolute sense (**Paramattha**) there are only feelings, and that there is no ego, no person, no experiencer of the feelings.

There is another important aspect of the mind referred to in modern psychology which motivates and directs one’s thinking and is called the cognitive state of the mind. This aspect of the mind has been equated to **Sankharas** that is to say the fifty mental factors of the human personality. The fallacy of this could be gauged from the fact that the cognitive state of the mind deals with only one of the mental factors of the fifty mental factors which constitute Sankhara, that is Cetana – volition, which also do not have the identical meaning and function as the cognitive state of the mind referred to in modern psychology. Psychologists emphasise the volitional aspect of the mind which directs, guides and selects but they are not in the least concerned as to how one decides and what course of action one intends to pursue or in other words the moral or immoral content of the volition, which is of the greatest psychological importance in Buddhist psychology. Furthermore **Cetana** or volition as a mental factor is of the greatest importance in the psychological and ethical content of one’s deeds because it not only determines the nature of one’s thoughts, words and deeds, but also plays a significant role in conditioning one’s state of existence after death. It has

the dynamic ethical content of causing rebirth. According to Buddhist psychology, volition is a powerful mental factor that produces relinking consciousness (**Patisandhi-Vinnana**), certain kinds of matter such as the life element (**KayaDasaka**), the sex element (**BhavaDasaka**) and the sensitive element of the body. (Compendium of Philosophy by Zan Aung, Page 251).

The psychological and ethical function of **Cetana** (volition) is very well explained in the seven thought moments (**Javana**) of a thought process (**Citta-vithi**). The technical term used is **Javana**. It is at this stage that Kamma is produced – Kamma which brings about results in this life (**Dittha Dhamma Vedaniya Kamma**), in the subsequent life (**Upapajja Vedaniya Kamma**), and in the lives to come (**Aparapariya Vedaniya Kamma**). (Visuddhi Magga or Path of Purification Chapter XIX).

Psychologists deal with another function of the mind called the Cognitive aspect of the mind which covers all processes involved in knowing such as perceiving, judging, reasoning and so on. But the Supreme Buddha speaks of eighty nine types of consciousness which perform various functions and which have been classified mainly from the ethical standpoint and shows the types of thoughts possessed not only by human beings but the thoughts possessed by manifold beings existing in the different realms of existence in the infinite depths of space. Every nuance and type of thought comes within the ambit of these eighty nine types of consciousness connected with the sensuous sphere (**Kamaloka**) sublime states of consciousness associated with the form realms (**Rupaloka**), the imperturbable types of consciousness associated with the formless realms (**Arupaloka**) and the supramundane types of consciousness possessed by perfect saints (**Ariya Puggala**) are embodied in these eighty nine types of consciousness. (Compendium of Philosophy by Zan Aung – pages 81–93).

### **Ethical Content**

The ethical content and significance of thoughts is clearly shown in one of the most important suttas of the Buddha as follows, which is completely ignored by modern psychology: -

“How does the disciple dwell in contemplation of the mind? There the disciple knows the greedy mind as greedy, and the not greedy mind as not greedy; knows the angry mind as angry, and not angry mind as not angry; knows the deluded mind as deluded, and the undeluded mind as undeluded. He knows the cramped mind as cramped, and the scattered mind as scattered; knows the developed mind as developed, and the undeveloped mind as undeveloped; knows the surpassable mind as surpassable, knows the concentrated mind as concentrated, and the un-concentrated mind as un-concentrated; knows the freed mind as freed, and the un-freed mind as un-freed.”

**Citta** or mind is here, used as a collective term for the **citta**, or moments of consciousness. **Citta** being identical with **Vinnana** or consciousness should not be understood as “thought”. Thought and thinking correspond rather to the so called verbal operations of the mind, namely **Vittaka** (thought conception) and **Vicara** (discursive thinking) which belong to the Sankhara – khandha.

“Thus he dwells in contemplation of the mind, either with regard to his own person, or to other persons, or to both. He beholds how consciousness arises; beholds how it passes away; beholds the arising and passing away of consciousness. Mind is there, this clear awareness is present in him, to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness; and he lives independent, unattached to anything in the world. Thus does the disciple dwell in contemplation of the mind.” (Digha Nikaya, Discourse No. 22).

### **Mental Health**

The expunging and rejection of evil thoughts and the development and maintenance of salutary and wholesome thoughts which are vitally essential for mental health and the gaining of final liberation is stressed in the Buddhist texts as follows:

“He knows when there is lust (**Kamachanda**) in him: ‘In me is lust’; knows when there is anger (**Vyapada**) in him: ‘In me is anger’; knows when there is sloth and torpor (**Thina-midha**) in him: ‘In me is sloth and torpor’; knows when there is restlessness and mental worry (**Uddhacca-kukkucca**) in him: ‘In me there is restlessness and mental worry’; knows when there are doubts (**Vicikicca**) in him: ‘In me are doubts’. He knows when these hindrances are not in him: ‘In me these hindrances are not’. He knows how they come to arise; knows how once arisen, they are overcome; knows how, once overcome they do not rise again in the future.

“Further, the person who intends to cultivate and develop certain ethical qualities and purify his mind should contemplate as follows: - He knows when there is in him mindfulness (**Sati**), investigation of the law (**Dhammavicaya**), energy (**Viriya**), joy (**Piti**), tranquillity (**Passaddhi**), concentration (**Samadhi**) and equanimity (**Upekkha**). He knows when it is not in him, knows how it comes to arise and how it is fully developed.” (DighaNikaya, Discourse No. 22).

Thus it will be seen that Buddhism gives a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of the mind showing its real nature and functions, how evil thoughts could be got rid of and wholesome thoughts developed and cultivated. This is beyond the comprehension of psychologists as they lack the penetrative insight and wisdom of a Buddha.

The thought processes that arise through the five sense doors and the mind doors are clearly explained by the Buddha. Such an exposition cannot be found

in any modern psychological treatise. **Bhavanga** and **Javana** thought moments have no parallel in modern psychology and are only found in Buddhist psychology. The Buddhist conception of **Bhavanga** (sub-consciousness) is not exactly the same as the view taken on this point by modern psychologists. Buddhism is essentially the teaching of becoming without an ego entity (**Anatta Vada**), while other systems of psychology are at least “subconsciously” based on the soul theory so fundamental to all theistic religions. Modern psychology understands the subconscious or the unconscious as a lower level of consciousness, subsisting together with, though below, the conscious mind, thus postulating as it were a dual plane of thought which may take parallel or even opposite directions. The Buddhist conception of sub-consciousness (**Bhavanga**) is not that, for it does not subsist together with consciousness, but is cut off (**Bhavangupaccheda**), as soon as an advertent thought moment (**Avajjana**) arises by which the attention is turned to the sense doors. The arresting of the subconscious stream therefore must be understood as an interference with the thought current by an external object or internal reflection. Without which the stream of thought would have continued its logical, normal process of thinking. The difference between sub-consciousness (**Bhavanga**) and consciousness (**Vinnana**) is that the first has no relationship to external subjects in this world, but only to mental reflections thereof, while the latter is the full appreciation (**Javana**) of both.

Thus modern psychology has not even touched the fringes of what the Buddha has taught in the field of psychology because the mind and its constituents cannot be weighted and measured with the aid of test tubes and crucibles. It is only through penetrative insight and direct perception that the real nature and function of the mind is understood. Therefore it is here that the stupendous and profound intellect of the Buddha shines in all its splendour like a glorious Sun.

### **Psychoanalysis**

In the sphere of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, science is yet floundering with its theories and hypotheses. The limited nature of its success is indicated by the need to resort to physical treatment in cases that have passed from neurosis to psychosis, such as electro-convulsive therapy for acute depressive moods, insulin injections for the early stages of split personality, frontal lobotomy for prolonged anxiety states and the use of the class of drugs as tranquilisers which act upon the vegetative inter-neurotic circuits of the brain.

In marked contrast to the hit and miss methods and expedients of western psychiatry, Buddhist Mental Therapy aims at the total integration of the personality at higher level. Since craving in its various forms is the root cause of mental derangement, it is necessary to diminish and finally eradicate it. It is here that Buddhism introduces an infallible remedy which western

psychotherapy has been unable to fit comfortably into its field of theory – the field of ethical values. The understanding of the facts of impermanence, of suffering which is the result of craving, and non-ego brings about a reorientation of the mind which is characterised by greater detachment, psychological stability and moral awareness. This cannot be brought about by external means, but by an inner change and revolution of the mind.

The Supreme Buddha diagnosed the diseases that afflict all human beings. The three main diseases are greed, hatred and ignorance and He prescribed infallible remedies for them. These prescriptions or techniques of meditation, forty in number, are mentioned in the sacred texts. They cover every type of psychological need and every possible combination of temperament. They are prescribed by the teacher just as treatment is given by the psychiatrist. The mode of treatment is in accordance with the individual requirements of the patient. In one of his discourses the Buddha says – “Monks, there are two kind of disease, what are they? Bodily disease and mental disease. People are seen who say they have been physically healthy for a year, for two years, thirty years, forty years, fifty years, or one hundred year, or for more than one hundred years. But apart from those whose cankers are destroyed (that is the saints or Arahats), beings who say they have been mentally healthy for even a moment are rare in the world”. (Anguttara Nikaya ii, 143).

To cure the mental ailments of suffering humanity the All Compassionate Buddha – psychiatrist par excellence has given various prescriptions (**Kammattanas**). The VisuddhiMagga mentions six main types of temperaments which include many lesser ones. They are those disposed to lust, hate, infatuation, faith, intellectuality and discursiveness. As temperaments differ, so do the subjects of meditation (**Kammattanas**). One comes across these subjects of meditation scattered in the Pali texts specially in the discourses, the VisuddhiMagga or Path of Purification – Chapter iii, describes forty of them. They are as follows: - ten objects called **Kasina**, ten objects of impurity, ten recollections, four sublime states, four formless **Jhana**, one perception, one analysis. As to suitability it is said that the ten impurities and mindfulness of the body are ideally suited for one of a passionate temperament, the four sublime states and the four colour Kasinas are for the irritable, mindfulness on in and out breathing for the deluded and discursive, the first six recollections for the devout and for the intellectual the mindfulness of death, the recollection of peace, analysis of the four primary elements and the perception that food is repulsive. The remaining **Kasina** and the formless **Jhanas** are suitable for all types of temperaments.

Though a particular types of meditation would suit a particular temperament, the Buddha being an Incomparable Physician at times gives several subjects of meditation to certain individuals so that the various mental diseases (**Kilesa**)

that they are afflicted with, would be radically remedied. This technique and method of prescribing several subjects of meditation to an individual is clearly brought out in the **Rahulovada Sutta** of the **Majjhima Nikaya** – a discourse which was preached to His son Rahula, who according to the commentary was only eighteen and a Samanera. The Buddha says thus:

“Develop the meditation on loving-kindness (**Metta**), Rahula; for by this ill-will is banished.”

“Develop the meditation on compassion (**Karuna**), Rahula; for this ill-will is banished.”

“Develop the meditation on compassion (**Karuna**), Rahula; for by this cruelty is banished.”

“Develop the meditation of sympathetic joy (**Mudita**), Rahula; for by this envy or jealousy is banished.”

“Develop the meditation of equanimity (**Upekkha**), Rahula; for by this hatred is banished.”

“Develop the meditation on impurity (**Asubha**), Rahula; for by this lust is banished.”

“Develop the meditation on the concept of impermanence (**Anicca-sanna**), Rahula; for by this pride of self (**Asmi-mana**) is banished.”

“Develop the concentration of mindfulness on in-and-out breathing (**Anapanasati**), Rahula. In-and-out breathing with mindfulness Rahula, developed and frequently practised bears much fruit, is of great advantage.”

An important fact also emerges from this discourse and that is, that it is always better for a person (**Yogavacara**) to practise more than one type of meditation in order that, he could effectively eradicate certain deep-rooted and deep-seated diseases of the mind which continue to pester and harass him persistently. However, he should concentrate and specialise on a subject of meditation which suits a dominant trait of his personality as enumerated above in the Visuddhi Magga.

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