

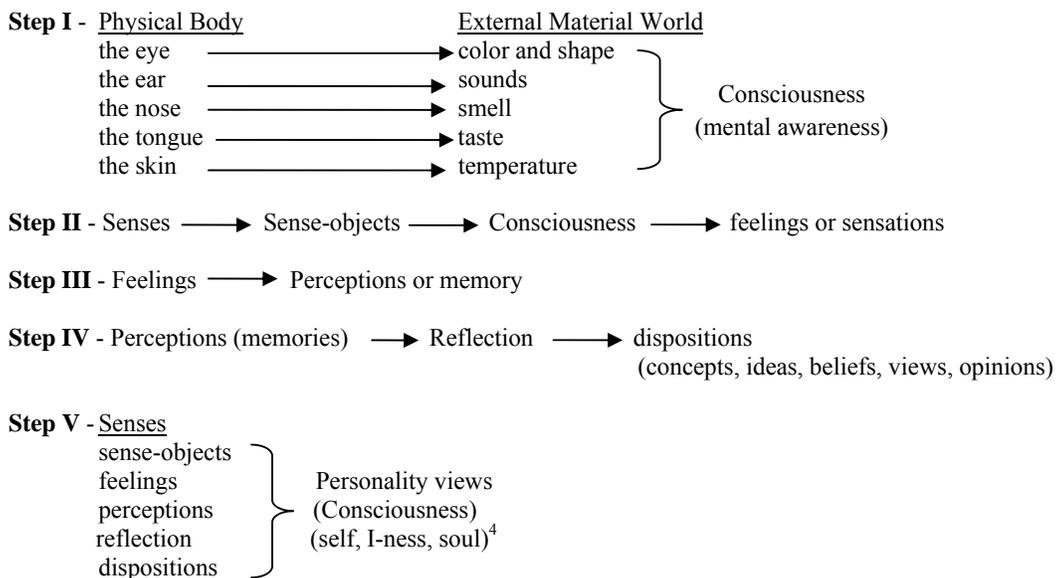
An Analytical and Creative Study of the Buddhist Theory and Practice of Psycho-therapy

Prof. Sumanapala Galmangoda
Director, Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies
University of Kelaniya

The teachings of the Buddha¹ originally delivered to the people in India in the 6th Century B. C. have been further analyzed and interpreted over a long period of time in many countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, China, Korea and Japan. The purpose of this noble endeavour was to provide people with a right understanding which is beneficial for their well-being in this life, life here-after and final freedom.

The Buddhist traditions though vary in terms of interpretations commonly accept that the mental aspect of human personality plays the most important role in human behavior. According to the Buddhist analysis of five grasping groups (pañca-upādānakkhandha)² mentality is explained under four groups and physical aspect represents only one group. The Abhidhammic analysis of the five groups ascribes 89 or 121 types of consciousness and 52 psychic functions to the mentality in relation to the feelings, perceptions, dispositions and consciousness. The physical or material aspect is analyzed into about 14 parts in early Buddhism and its Abhidhammic interpretation into 28 material elements. Mental and physical aspects though analyzed as two separate groups for the sake of easy understanding their mutual inter-dependent nature is emphasized.³

The interdependent process of psycho-physical function of human personality in relation to the external world is explained in the early Buddhist discourses as follows:



¹ Except otherwise indicated all references refer to the editions of the Pali Text Society, London

² S. 111., p. 101; D. 111., p. 233; M. 1., P. 190; A. V., p. 52

³ Sumanapala, G. D., *Abhidhammic Interpretations of Early Buddhist Teachings*, Singapore, 2005, pp. 12-14

⁴ Sumanapala, G. D., *Early Buddhist Philosophy and Social Concepts*, Singapore, 2001, pp. 8-11

It should be stated here that the term “Consciousness” occurs two times in the above process. It stands for the Pali term “viññāṇa”, The usage of the term “viññāṇa” in the discourses does not refer to one and the same thing. In the Step I the term refers to the initial mental awareness as a response to the contact with external objects of the senses. The term in the Step V refers to the self-view or personality view that people construct in their day-to-day life. Without the confirmation of this personality view they cannot survive in the world because the world including human beings is subject to constant change. Momentary change of psycho-physical world motivates people to establish themselves permanently in the world by means of building up a personality view out of their experiences. This is the reason for their existence continuously in the worlds in terms of birth and death. The complete stop of this process is called final freedom or liberation in Buddhism.

The same psycho-physical process of human personality is given in a wider context in Theravada Abhidhamma as follows:

- **Step I:** stream-consciousness, its vibration due to the contact between senses and sense-objects and the breaking of stream-consciousness
- **Step II:** mental awareness arising of particular thoughts regarding the objects in relation to one of sense faculties due to the contact of the objects
- **Step III:** Reflection on the sense-objects in terms of accepting, investigation and determining the nature of objects
- **Step IV:** Mental experience or enjoyment of the sense-objects in terms of rapid succession of seven thought-moments
- **Step V:** Registering of the sense-experience in terms of two thought-moments⁵

The above mentioned Abhidhammic analysis of psycho-physical process includes seventeen thought-moments. The complete process does not occur in regard to all experiences of sense-faculties. The moments of thought-process may vary in accordance with the extent of experiences. And the mind also as a sense-faculty contacts with mental objects or ideas directly.

This mental process is different from the above to some extent. But this mind-door process is very important as far as the Buddhist psycho-therapeutic methods are concerned. Ven. Nyanatiloka gives in brief the process as follows:

“The process of the inner, or mind consciousness, i.e. , without participation of the five physical senses, is as follows: in case mind-object entering the Mind-door (manodvārāvajjana), the 'Impulsive Stage' and the 'Registering Stage', before finally sinking into the subconscious stream”.⁶ A large number of mental problems in modern society is caused by thinking or reflecting over the concepts created through the sense data. The concepts created through the sense-perception process can be identified as mentality, mental concomitants or thoughts explained in Abhidhamma as fifty-two cetasikās. Out of the fifty-two cetasikās the karmically unwholesome cetasikās become the psychological basis for many mental problems. The 52 cetasikās are analyzed under the following categories:

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----|---|-------------------|
| i. Karmically wholesome or neutral: | 25 | } | = 52 ⁷ |
| ii. Karmically unwholesome: | 14 | | |
| iii. Karmically neutral: | 13 | | |

⁵ Sumanapala, G. D., An Introduction to Theravāda Abhidhamma, Singapore, 1998, 135-137

⁶ Ven. Nyanatiloka, Buddhist Dictionary, Singapore, 1946. See under Viññāṇakicca

⁷ op. cit., See under Cetasikā

The unwholesome thoughts are mainly related to greed, hatred and delusion. They become the basis for innumerable number of mental illnesses. The wholesome thoughts together with relevant behavior provide a good ground to get rid of all such problems.

According to early Buddhist teachings human beings possess two mental tendencies by birth. Simply they are likes and dislikes. These are mental reactions and they are extremely useful and essential for the survival of beings. Further they are not harmful defilements. But the problems arise out of them when they are developed without limits.

The unlimited growth of these two aspects can be given as follows:

Normal level	Middle level	Final level
likes	greed	covetousness (discontent)
dislikes ⁸	hate	malevolence (desire to injure)

The middle level tendencies are considered as mental disorders or unwholesome mental roots and the final ones are treated as unwholesome mental functions.⁹ As a result of unlimited development of greed and discontent one wishes to get everything that he or she likes. Due to the changing nature of the world no one is able to get everything that he or she wishes. Therefore as a result of the failure in this regard delusion arises in the mind. On the other hand due to the development of hate and malevolence though he or she wishes to keep away everything that he or she does not like, this attempt also becomes unsuccessful due to the impermanent nature of the world. So the result is same as in the first case. So delusion or mental disorder (confusion) becomes a common factor of all unenlightened beings. Hence the Buddhist saying that all ordinary beings are like mad people.¹⁰ Together with this madness there arises another defilement called conceit¹¹ in the mind as a result of some achievements in those reactions. The delusion and conceit are the basic factors of mental disorders. All the mental problems whether they belong to psychosis or neurosis can be explained in relation to the above mentioned mental reactions. In brief this is the theory of psychotherapy in Buddhism.

Before we turn to the practice of psychotherapy in Buddhism it is not out of context to point out some specific characteristics that serve as the basis of the therapeutic methods.

- i. All psycho-therapeutic methods in Buddhism are directed towards nibbāna extinction of all defilements as the goal. The actual experience of the goal is to give up everything in order to make an end to the suffering caused by repeated existence or rebirth. The patient who holds this view is able to bear up any problem with patience and satisfaction because he or she is trying not to gain anything but to give up everything.
- ii. In Buddhism even a single mental illness is not named. Instead the basic or root elements of mentality are explained mainly with reference to the above mentioned unwholesome and wholesome roots. All other mental problems arise depending on these basic elements.

⁸ Anunaya, paṭiḅha - D. 111., p. 254; M-1., p. 191; D. 1., p. 25; A. 1., pp. 3, 87, 200

⁹ Akusalamūla, Akusalakamma

¹⁰ ummattako viya hi puthujjano, MA. 1., ed. Hevawitharana, Colombo, p. 23

¹¹ māna, D. 111., p. 234

There are three main reasons for not naming the mental illnesses.

- 1) Physical illnesses are durable and they can be easily identified while the mental illnesses are momentary and cannot be identified with certainty.
- 2) It is the nature of human beings that they always depend on concepts indicated by specific terms of language in order to confirm their existence in the momentary world. Once they attach to a particular concept or word such as stress, depression or phobia referring to a mental illness the same word becomes a mental problem.¹² It cannot be easily removed from the mind. Further the mental illness though we identify with some characteristics they never exist permanently. Searching for characteristics to identify mental illness is a deliberate attempt to deceive oneself. But the problem is that without naming an illness one cannot prescribe medicine. The delusion is that they believe mind is related to brain. As to Buddhism mind is a specific faculty in human personality and it is not only related to brain but to all the five physical sense faculties.
- 3) Buddhist psychotherapeutic methods are mainly directed to change the mentality of persons and they do not pay much attention to change the environment or other external or physical factors so as to bring the mentality into a calm status.

Practice of psycho-therapy is also based on a simple formula which can be expand and extend to meet with any mental problem of beings. The practice has three gradual stages:

- i. development of moral behavior - behavioral therapy
- ii. development of concentration - psychological therapy
- iii. development of understanding - cognitive therapy

The first type of therapy refers to the restraintment of the five senses which are mainly responsible for the physical and verbal behavior of man.¹³ The second type refers to the restraintment of the above mentioned mental disorders namely greed, hatred and delusion-conceit.¹⁴

The third type of therapy concerns the development of understanding of people regarding the true nature of the world of experience.¹⁵ These three stages are mutually interconnected and they support for the restraintment and development of each aspect gradually. Therefore, in Buddhist practice these three stages should be connected with every method of psycho-therapy.¹⁶

It is not out of context to mention the relationship of physical body with the above stated three aspects of mental defilements namely greed, hatred and delusion. The Bhesajjamañjusā, the one and only Āyurvedic Pāli work available at present, states at the beginning that mental health should be maintained in accordance with the Tripiṭaka and Bhesajjamañjusā instructs to establish physical health. According to the Āyurveda all physical illnesses are related to imbalance of the three humors - phlegm, bile and air. The Visuddhimagga mentions that these three humors are connected with mentality as follows:

¹² Adhivacanasamphassa, D. 11., p. 62; M. 1., p. 113 D. 111., p. 86

¹³ sīla, D. 111., p. 235

¹⁴ samādhi, A. 111., p. 12

¹⁵ paññā, D. 1., p. 245

¹⁶ S. 111., p. 83

greed - phlegm
hatred - bile
delusion - air¹⁷

Although there are many other causes and conditions that influence the physical health such as environment and food the mental condition plays a prominent role in balancing the physical condition.

It is a fact that any theory cannot be put into practice as it is. So the well educated Buddhist psychologists can devise and develop various methods to be used in Buddhist psychiatry. All of them should be in conformity with the above mentioned basic elements of Buddhist theory and practice of psycho-therapy. And also it should be emphasized that all such methods bring temporary effects and the complete recovery of all mental problems can be achieved only through the realization of nibbāna, the summum bonum of Buddhist path to freedom. Until the final realization we should use such methods and I have developed some such methods depending on the Buddhist cultural accounts and they are given below as an example. It should be stated that these methods are taught in the postgraduate courses in our university and they have already been used in Sri Lanka in the counseling programmes for over three years.

- I. **Confession:** This method is derived from the practice of “āpattidesanā” followed by Buddhist monks and nuns. If they commit anything wrong they have to declare it in front of another member of the Saṅgha society before the dawn of the next day. Accumulating the experiences of wrong actions create mental problems. So it is better to purify one's mind by declaring every such incidents as a daily practice.
- II. **Imitation:** Ālavaka and Aṅgulimāla, well-known two characters in Buddhist canon were tamed by the Buddha first by agreeing with them. Ālavaka saw the Buddha sitting in his cave and ordered him to go out. Buddha followed three times his order finally he was converted to Buddhism. As to this method first of all we should agree with the behavior of the mental patient. Otherwise we cannot control the patient as we wish.
- III. **Generalization:** Some people think that the mental problems affect them only. They become calm when they understand that such problems are common to many people in the society. Kisāgotamā who was mad with the death of her son, realized the common nature of death for all beings when she was asked by the Buddha to bring some mustard seeds from a house where no one is dead.
- IV. **Kamma:** The Buddhist theory of Kamma is a good therapeutic method that can be adopted successfully. There are some mental problems that cannot be analyzed properly revealing all causes and conditions. In such cases we can explain them that Kammas related to former lives may influence the present life. After experiencing the effects of such Kammas we will be released from such effects in the future. This way of thinking in accordance with the theory of Kamma has created a contented society for over two thousand years in Buddhist countries.
- V. **Dialogue:** In many discourses of the canon such as Kasbhāradvāja and Aggañña friendly dialogues of the Buddha with people occur and they are logical and philosophical. These dialogues have influenced much for eliminating the mental

¹⁷ Visuddhimagga, ed. Ven. Saddhatissa, Colombo, 1914, p. 76

problems of various types of persons. So we can use this method especially for educated people to help them to get rid of their mental problems.

- VI. **Noble silence:** In some cases the best method of treatment is to maintain complete silence without responding to the complaints made by patients. This method has solved many social and individual problems in Buddhist society.
- VII. **Psycho-analysis:** With reference to Madhupiṇḍika, Mahānidāna sutta etc. we can introduce this method in which the counselor should analyze the psychological process of the patient in order to clarify the causes and conditions of the problem.
- VIII. **Right motivation:** According to the famous event of Nanda, he was taken to heaven by the Buddha in order to detach him from Janapadakalyāṇi by showing damsels. The theory of this method is that one cannot be totally detach from one concept at once. So the person should be motivated to achieve a higher goal and from there he or she should be directed to desired object.
- IX. **Logical analysis:** Some educated people like to argue with others. So the method of argument can be adapted to eliminate their problems. This also applies to educated people. Vāsetṭhasutta and Aggañña sutta are good examples in this regard.
- X. **Innocent punishment:** Brahmaḍaṇḍa is a punishment in which all other members do not talk with the patient. This can be used mainly regarding persons with personality disorders such as anger and arrogance. The main feature of these punishments is that they never hurt the patient physically.
- XI. **Praising:** Some people are suffering due to the lack of appreciation for their service or work. Such people should be directed to suitable environment where they are appreciated. Before passing away Buddha did not forget to appreciate Ven. Ananda's service and the benefits of the last meal given by Cundakammāraputta.
- XII. **Friendly meeting:** Some people suffer mentally due to the lack of association with other people. They should be provided with such friendly meetings with suitable persons.
- XIII. **Creating religious emotions:** Pilgrimage is one of the most suitable way of creating religious emotions in order to get rid of mental problems such as worry, guilty-conscious, sorrow, etc.
- XIV. **Creating emotion and intellect:** this concept is called “*vedalla*” and the patient should be provided with occasions where they can experience happiness and knowledge together. Reading novels, watching drama, singing, dancing, etc. can be used in this regard.

The above mentioned methods are given as examples and they are not adequately explained.