Abstract

Five characteristics of Buddhist psychology are explained — Buddhist psychology as a psychological, phenomenological, pragmatic, empirical, and therapeutic system. This explanation facilitates the understanding of the importance of indigenous Buddhist psychology within current psychotherapy science.

Kurzzusammenfassung

Fünf Kennzeichen buddhistischer Psychologie werden erläutert — buddhistische Psychologie als psychologisches, phänomenologisches, pragmatisches, empirisches und therapeutisches System. Diese Klärung verdeutlicht, warum die indigen buddhistische Psychologie eine entscheidende Rolle in der gegenwärtigen Psychotherapiewissenschaft einnimmt.
I think that his [the Buddha’s] ideas should form part of the education of every child, the world over, and that this would help to make the world a more civilized place, both gentler and more intelligent. (Gombrich, 2009, p. 1)

1. Introduction: Understanding the core of the Buddhist system

In the early 1960s Warder (1991) remarked: “Buddhism has been the subject of the most varied fantasies in the West. The few reliable guides are overlooked in the mass of claptrap, humbug, and pure fiction. ... [T]he only authorities are the ancient texts in Pali and Sanskrit” (p. xi). Though this situation has changed and the quantity of reliable introductions to Buddhism in Western languages has considerably increased, there is now a new transcultural and interdisciplinary challenge Western academia has to face — namely, the reception of Buddhist psychological ideas into current Western psychology, psychotherapy, and medical sciences (Virtbauer, 2012). Indigenous Indian psychology (IP) — particularly Buddhist approaches to consciousness, experience, and behaviour — plays a crucial role in contemporary cross-cultural psychology and psychotherapy (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011). To facilitate the understanding of Buddhist psychological ideas in the West requires the translation of Buddhist thought “from its philosophical ancestors in classical writings ... into understandable psychological idiom” (Rao, 2008, p. 16; see Bhawuk, 2010).

Translational and interpretative work on Buddhist psychological thought is of critical importance for the current psychotherapeutic discourses. Particularly the Buddhist concept and practice of mindfulness (Pāli sati) has been received in different psychotherapeutic modalities. Classical mindfulness (CM) and the mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), are based on Buddhist psychology (Rapgay & Bystrisky, 2009; Rapgay, Bystritsky, Dafter, & Spearman, 2011; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Buddhist ideas on mindfulness are also received in further “third wave” behaviour therapies, psychoanalysis, and other modalities (Hayes, Follette, & Linehan, 2004; Safran, 2003; Virtbauer, 2010; Heidenreich & Michalak, 2004).

Despite its contemporary importance, there is significant confusion about indigenous Buddhist psychology and the theory and practice of mindfulness within the psychological and medical sciences (Rapgay & Bystrisky, 2009; Mikulas, 2011). In this article five main characteristics of Buddhist psychology are concisely explained and interpreted in psychotherapeutic idiom (see Figure 1). This should enable psychotherapists to reflect on the Buddhist indigenous approach to mental health. As will become clear in the following, to understand the main ideas on consciousness, experience, and behaviour of the Buddhist system means to understand the core of this system itself; because this core is psychological. This, at least, counts for early (Pāli) Buddhism, which has been preserved in the Pāli canon, and all the later Buddhist schools that are based on mindfulness meditation, such as Japanese Zen (Virtbauer, 2008, 2009, 2011), which is also very popular in the West. Arguably, the Pāli canon represents the teachings of the historical Buddha, who lived in what is now northern India and southern Nepal around the 5th century BCE (Gombrich, 2009; Bechert, 2004).
2. Characteristics of Buddhist psychology

Following the suggestions of Rao above, I describe main characteristics of Buddhist psychology, based on Pāli source texts, in understandable psychotherapeutic idiom. There are many more characteristics that may be mentioned and interpreted, but I consider these of particular importance for the current psychotherapeutic discourses.

2.1. Phenomenological psychology

It may seem obvious that something that is commonly called “Buddhist psychology” is a psychology. However, the claim that the Buddhist system includes a psychology, or, as mentioned above, that the core of the Buddha’s teaching is psychological needs further exploration. As I have clarified elsewhere (Virtbauer, 2012, 2013), the Buddha systematically investigated the processes of human consciousness, experience, and behaviour at both the general and differential level; he, indeed, may be regarded as the first systematic general and differential psychologist in documented and recorded history. Theoretically, Buddhist psychology is based on what is now called phenomenology; methodologically, it is based on first-person qualitative psychological research – that is, the investigation of how experiential phenomena manifest in the individual (Bodhi, 2007).

The Buddha considered human life as intrinsically bound to suffering (dukkha). There is nothing in the conditioned experience of humans that is not subject to change. Hence, within human conditioning there cannot be anything stable or permanent. This instability, impermanence, or transience (anicca) is the characteristic of all natural phenomena (dhammas) and from the Buddhist perspective the human constitution – made up of processes of mental and material phenomena (nāmarūpa) – needs to be analysed as a part of all natural processes.

The key point of the Buddha’s teaching is, that suffering can only be overcome if experiential phenomena are realistically seen as they really are. If the processes in one’s experience are entirely understood suffering ends. This understanding, or the practical training in analysing the phenomenological processes of one’s experience (because only few will reach complete understanding), is necessary to establish a relation to one’s cognitive processes that does not create harm but well-being. As Gombrich (2009) points out, the Buddha replaced the question “What exists?” with the question “What do or can we experience?” This psychological question is the main characteristic of the Buddha’s thought and the guideline for the cognitive training he developed. From the Buddhist perspective, ultimately, we understand ourselves and the world not by creating a subject-object distinction (the modern scientific approach), but by realising how our cognitive processes create the experience of ourselves and the world.

The phenomenology of the Buddha’s teachings is based on three characteristics
(tilakkhaṇa): along with the two already mentioned – impermanence (anicca) and suffering (dukkha) – the third one is non-self (anattā). One may consider this approach a phenomenon-centred psychology and, as will become clear below, psychotherapy. From the Buddhist perspective, the investigation of human psychology needs to take place at the phenomenological level, based on a strict cause-and-effect nexus. A phenomenon is marked by its arising (uppāda), its presence (ṭhiti), and its ceasing (bhaṅga). From the Buddhist perspective, there is no experiential phenomenon whatsoever that does not follow this basic pattern.

Based on this impermanence (anicca) of all phenomena the two other characteristics become clear. Unsatisfactoriness or suffering (dukkha), the second characteristic, refers to the fact that within phenomenal existence there cannot be anything that lasts. Both, the most pleasant and unpleasant experiences arise, are present, and dissolve. Each phenomenon is caused by another phenomenon and is itself the cause for the next phenomenon to arise (the cause-and-effect nexus). The third characteristic, non-self (anattā), refers to this fact. Because of the mutual interdependence of phenomena, there can be found neither an ontological nor a psychological (enduring) self.

Phenomenal interdependence cannot be understood intellectually. Though intellectual understanding of this doctrine was considered important by the Buddha himself, interdependence needs to become an embodied first-person experience. This signifies the central role of consciousness (viññāṇa or citta) in the Buddha’s thought. Consciousness is the phenomenon that performs the act of cognition of a mental or material phenomenon. A human being is always conscious of something. Consciousness can be sixfold: relating to the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) or a mental event – the mind is the sixth sense in Buddhist psychology. The act of cognition of a mental or material phenomenon takes place as long as a person is able of conscious experience. From the Buddhist perspective, the psychological self or individual personality is the result of the chain of one state of consciousness after the other that have programmed or conditioned the person’s momentary state of consciousness – that is, the individual way of how a certain phenomenon is cognised in that moment. This momentary experience, or state of consciousness, itself conditions the next mental act, and so on.

One clarification may be needed here. From the Buddhist perspective, viññāṇa or citta does not refer to what is commonly acknowledged as “conscious experience”. The states of viññāṇa or citta are extremely short and what is commonly considered a “conscious experience” of a certain event is a chain of many states of viññāṇa or citta that are reflected and re-reflect to form the individual way of cognising a certain event (this also refers to the cause-and-effect nexus: one state of consciousness is itself a mental phenomenon that is reflected in the next state of consciousness). From the Buddhist perspective, it depends on the phenomenal constellation if a certain “unconscious” tendency becomes dominant in one’s experience and, hence, “conscious” in the sense that one is clearly aware of its presence. At the phenomenological level there is no unconscious-conscious distinction in this psychology. As long as there is individual consciousness (viññāṇa or citta) it performs its task of cognition of a mental or material phenomenon.

2.2. Pragmatism and empiricism

At this point the reader may ask: But then, is how one experiences entirely determined
because of how one’s way of cognising has been conditioned? Is there any possibility of changing one’s programming or conditioning? There are two connected answers to these questions: one based on Buddhist doctrine and another, more important one, based on first-person experience.

From the Buddhist doctrinal perspective, the Buddha was clear that people were agents that created – within certain conditions and to certain degrees – their own destinies. This underpins the importance of ethics in the Buddhist training in connection to mental health (a topic I cannot address in more depth here; see Virtbauer, 2012, 2013; Harvey, 2000). This means that the Buddha realised the options of directing one’s actions and deciding in certain ways, otherwise a systematic training in changing one’s cognitive and behavioural make-up would be without sense. From the Buddhist perspective, there are options to considerably reprogram or recondition the functioning of consciousness, which is also suggested in contemporary neuroscientific research on brain plasticity in connection to mindfulness (Farb et al., 2007; Farb et al., 2010).

There is one dimension in Buddhist psychology that is not based on causation and, hence, not a conditioned phenomenon. This dimension is usually referred to as “extinction” (nibbāna). To experience nibbāna is the goal of Buddhist practise. The Buddha never directly answered questions about the nature of nibbāna. He only suggested the characteristics of how this experience manifested in the individual. From the psychological perspective, the experience of the unconditioned enables one to entirely understand the nature of the conditioned. Practically, this means that one can step out of one’s conditioning and become a spectator of it; one stops being a victim of one’s programming, because one recognises how one’s conditioned processes work and how these processes create one’s individual way of relating to oneself and the world. This recognition enables one to foster fruitful and let go of harmful ways of relating to one’s conditioning.

The Buddha was a pragmatist and, from the psychological perspective, he emphasised that the goal in life was to reach entire inner peace and happiness, which needed to be based on the understanding of what created suffering. Such understanding cannot be superimposed by any doctrine from outside, but needs to be experienced directly by each individual him-/herself. Trust in one’s inner potential to reach such understanding is a key aspect of Buddhist thought. In this sense, Buddhist psychology is a method that should enable the practitioner to become independent and take full responsibility for one’s life. The main text in the Pāli canon that underpins this idea is the Kālāma Sutta (AN I 188–193), where the Buddha urges that no doctrine should be accepted without first-person experience of its value (Soma, 1959/2008). Of course, this pragmatic empiricism also counts for the Buddha’s doctrine itself. Even though the Buddha described his doctrine as entirely correct and complete (a usual characteristic of all so-called grand theories), he was also entirely clear that it was only valid if it was tested and proofed through first-person experience. Hence, there is nothing to be believed in Buddhist psychology, but everything needs to be tested and validated by the individual him-/herself.

2.3. Therapy

The main therapeutic method in Buddhist psychology is the training in mindfulness (sati), which is described in detail in the sati suttas and samyuttas of the Pāli canon (Mahāsatippatthāna Sutta (DN II 290–315; MN I 55–63); Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN III 78–88);
The two aspects of this training are concentration (samādhi or samatha) and insight (vipassanā).

From the Buddhist perspective, the key to an understanding of phenomenological interdependence is to develop the mental capacity of discerning the phenomenological cause-and-effect nexus. This usually requires a high degree of concentration (samādhi or samatha). Concentration in the context of sati means to learn to focus on one object in one’s experience. Very often, the breath is chosen as the object of concentration. If the mind is focused on one naturally occurring thing, such as the breath, it naturally relaxes. This relaxation is necessary to step out of the habitual involvement in emotions and thoughts and to learn to watch these occurrences without being drawn into them. Hence, concentration on one naturally occurring bodily phenomenon enables one to reduce or stop what is referred to as “conceptual proliferation” (papañca; Nāṇananda, 1976; Kuan, 2008). It is a training in metacognition.

Insight (vipassanā), the second aspect of sati, refers to the increasing recognition of the characteristics of experiential phenomena; one gets more and more aware of the states of consciousness, their functions, and interactions. Sati should enable the practitioner to come closer to the “[c]orrect knowledge and vision [yathābhūtañāṇadassana], which is the discernment of mentality-materiality [nāmarūpa; see above]” (Vism XXII 119), what Gombrich (2009, p. 66) calls “wide-eyed awakeness”. To see experiential things as they really are means to realise that everything is transient and there is nothing in one’s flow of experience to cling to or hold on to whatsoever.

Though this approach may sound logical and simple, the key point is that sati become a felt and embodied experience. This usually requires many years of intense practice, but the positive transformative effects of mindfulness meditation are mostly felt very quickly. To understand sati intellectually is helpful in discerning and relativising one’s own constructions and overcoming some of the maladaptive ones. However, from the Buddhist perspective, conditioning cannot be understood intellectually, based on analytical semantic processes, because they themselves are the result of one’s individual history that has shaped one’s conditioned way of experiencing. Hence, to step out of conditioning, ultimately, also means to step out of language and the belief in language as a (or the) tool that can adequately capture one’s present experience. In Buddhist psychology, the emphasis in analysing the body and mind based on felt experiences of emotions and thoughts is mirrored in the practical application of sati as the “direct way” (ekāyana; cf. Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN I 55–63); Anālayo, 2003) to well-being and realisation.

3. Summary and conclusions

To sum up, Buddhist psychology is a phenomenological psychology, based on pragmatic empiricism, with a therapeutic goal. There are many direct links to contemporary psychotherapy, such as cognitive and behavioural interventions, relational and intersubjective depth psychology, phenomenological and existential psychotherapy, and transpersonal psychotherapy.

The dialogue between Buddhism and psychotherapy requires high-quality serious scholarship concerning both involved systems. Otherwise there is great danger of more additions to “the mass of claptrap, humbug, and pure fiction” (see Warder’s quote above). This needs
to be prevented at all costs, because Buddhism has much to offer Western psychotherapy, and vice versa. This dialogue is still in its infancy, but given the development in the last decade (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011), it is foreseeable that this dialogue will play a crucial role in the development not only of new therapy strategies in different modalities but also of a more global and culturally sensitive psychology and understanding of mental health.

4. References

(Abbreviation: PTS – Pali Text Society ed. [references to volume and page(s)])

AN — Aṅguttara Nikāya. PTS.


DN — Dīgha Nikāya. PTS.


MN — Majjhima Nikāya. PTS.


SN — Samyutta Nikāya. PTS.


Vism — The path of purification (Visuddhimagga) by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. (1957/1999). (B. Nānamoli, Trans.). Onalaska, WA: BPS Pariyatti Editions. [references to chapter and paragraph(s)]


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