

The Science of Buddhist Psychology (awakening and liberation)

An Introduction to Abhidharma

When the Buddha interacted with people over twenty-five hundred years ago, he was always answering questions. Walking across the North Indian plains and meeting all kinds of people, he gave thousands of instructions that responded to their questions. After his passing, his students summarized these teachings and gave them a structure, which was helpful because the Buddha had presented different methods at different times according to his followers' needs and understanding.

This classification of his teachings is called *abhidharma* in Sanskrit (*abhidhamma* in Pali), a term which can translate as the higher doctrine. It is thought of as the teaching that clarifies the multitude of the Buddha's talks because it provides a coherent outline of his path to liberation. When you study the abhidharma there are lots of categories – five of this, eight of that, fifty-one of these, and so on. It can be tempting to think, Oh stop! Enough already! But again, it's presented this way because it gathers and organizes the different elements of the Buddha's instructions within a systematic structure.

What does the abhidharma teach?

There are aspects that may remind us of psychology, but as we read it, we should note that it's not just a psychology of knowing the mind, it is first and foremost the psychology of how to experience awakening and attain liberation. The intention of Buddhist psychology is to investigate what enables liberation from suffering and what hinders it. All of the categories presented in the abhidharma track the path to liberation. They enable us to work on eliminating the obstacles we experience due to habitual views and opinions, and, in so doing, to open wide the path to freedom.

The basis of abhidharma is the teaching called the four noble truths, or the four truths of the noble ones. These begin with the first: insights into the presence of suffering and stress that are experienced by everyone everywhere. The second noble truth addresses the reason why. What are the causes? Is there a way out? Yes, there is a way out, and this is the third noble truth. How do we get there? Fourth noble truth. So we've got a list of four that is actually

the structure of a very natural path of discovery: how to eliminate confusion and become free.

The root of all abhidharma teachings is present in these four truths or understandings. If we're inspired to learn more, then we'll be encouraged to reflect on impermanence, suffering, and non-self: a structure of three. And now we have a helpful orientation that summarizes a great many different explorations.

We might think of Buddhist psychology as a subjective science because it does not involve an approach where someone observes someone else's reactions and emotions. It's a subjective approach where each participant shares their personal experiences and insights. Many highly accomplished meditators have done exactly this over the centuries, and the combined sharing of their personal insights has become "Buddhist psychology." They describe what kind of obstacles were encountered along the path, how they were dissolved, what was discovered, how the next challenges arose and were mastered, and so on. So Buddhist psychology is a map of mental and spiritual development on the path to awakening; a precious map that makes it easy for others to orient themselves and find their way.

One main aspect of Buddhist psychology focuses on how motivation impacts the outcomes of situations. Motivational psychology is linked to the law of karma, cause and effect. The other main aspect of Buddhist psychology is the psychology of perception. This focuses on how errors and biases in perception arise and explores how to dissolve them systematically until perception has become completely free of all veils and filters.

While Buddhist psychology and Western psychology are quite compatible, the focus is different because Buddhist psychology is always directed towards liberation and awakening. They do overlap sometimes, especially when it comes to investigating the process of perception. Here, the conclusions of modern psychology are identical with what Buddhist meditators have discovered about how perception works, how it is filtered by emotions, how it is immediately processed according to prior experiences or innate biases, and so on.

These two approaches also agree that a person's motivation or outlook completely colors their experience of the world. Furthermore, in the last thirty years modern psychology has abandoned all notions of a stable, individual self. Both now describe the individual self as a constant dynamic process of adaptation.

And there are differences. Western psychology is only beginning to investigate the importance of positive qualities such as compassion, love, generosity, and the like. Buddhist psychology has focused on their development for centuries as they are considered the transcendent qualities (*paramita* in Sanskrit) that lead to liberation.

There are also the four immeasurable qualities of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. In his core teachings, the Buddha repeatedly stated that they are central to human development and encouraged his followers to explore them. For example, what are the different degrees and dimensions of compassion? How does it arise? And what about awareness? It is the source of all understanding, but how does awareness express its full potential?

These questions were the focus of the meditators who could be considered the founders of Buddhist psychology. They would investigate suffering and its causes as long as they needed to, and then they would turn their attention exclusively to developing the positive qualities that illuminate the path to awakening. And with this, they created a very solution-oriented, resource-based psychology rooted in qualities which are considered to be inherent in mind. This is another important point of Buddhist psychology: we are born with everything we need to wake up. These qualities don't need to be fabricated, but we do need to open up to them so that they can fully blossom. And we do this by learning about the mind and training on the cushion, just like the great meditators have done throughout the centuries.

Edited transcript of a short talk by Lama Tilmann Lhundrup

See: [Introduction to Abhidharma \(Buddhist Psychology\) | Mindworks](#)