

# BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY: RELATING BUDDHISM TO MODERN PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES

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## ABSTRACT

Psychology was not considered as a scientific discipline before 1800. It is considered that Wilhelm Wundt and William James were the founding fathers of the psychology. They opened the first psychological labs for their elaborated experiments to understand how human brain works which leads to varieties of thoughts and acts.

But the credit of psychological theories also goes to Siddhartha Gautama who was when exposed to the types and realities of life, that is, old age, sickness and death, started studying the inner functions of his own mind 2500 years ago, long before Wilhelm Wundt and William James.

His painful six years journey of self observation and analysis to study the various levels of psychological functioning and understanding. He did not get an opportunity to test his theories and scientifically prove the human conduct and propagate his experiments, but he managed to record his words of wisdom which are still read, explored and being proven meticulously all over the world, which shows that he had great understanding of human brain and behavior.

This can be proven by an episode in William James life who was the owner of a great intellectual power himself. Once he offered his own seat to a Buddhist monk, who had come to hear his lecture.

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*“Take my chair. Yours is the psychology, everyone will be studying 21 years from now”*, he said to the monk.

Buddha’s unparalleled knowledge of human psychology and brain shall be illuminated in this paper. Buddhist theories and practices as prescribed by Lord Buddha shall be compared to the latest modern techniques of psychology to prove, that, the Buddha will always remain the topmost illustrious psychologist. The theories of most prominent psychologists, like William James, Ivan Pavlov, Freud and many others, shall be compared with the theories of Buddha.

The paper will also prove the Buddhist knowledge and similarities about today’s latest psychological techniques and therapies i.e. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), Default Mode Network (DMN) and various other therapies, applicable for all the age groups, that is, childhood, adulthood and old age, in all the phases and situations of life.

Psychology was not considered as a scientific discipline before 1800. It is considered that Wilhelm Wundt and William James were the founding fathers of the psychology (Sam, G., Dana, P., Jack, A., 2015). They opened the first psychological labs for their elaborated experiments to understand how human brain works which leads to varieties of thoughts and acts.

But the credit of psychological theories also goes to Siddhartha Gautama who was when exposed to the types and realities of life, that is, old age, sickness and death, started studying the inner functions of his own mind 2500 years ago (Richard, H. Robinson, Willard, L. Johnson, 2004), long before Wilhelm Wundt and William James. He became restless and decided to search for the path that will lead to cessation from all the sufferings. Although he made queries to many learned persons and religious leaders of his era, but no one could satisfy him enough. Through the practice of great austerities and meditation, after making his mind free of all the disturbances in the life, leaving the comforts of the life he walked on the rough road, to know more about the path of the miseries. After a lot of devotion and hardships, he was enlightened and lead the foundation of Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy, to give the message of peace and happiness through his practices.

His painful six years journey of self observation and analysis to study the various levels of psychological functioning and human behavior lead showed us the right path. He did not get an opportunity to test his theories and scientifically prove the human conduct and propagate his experiments, but he managed to record his words of wisdom which are still read, explored and are now being proven meticulously all over the world, which shows that he had great understanding of human brain and behavior, proving him to be a great psychologist.

It is well accepted by the great psychologists in the world. This can be proven by an episode in William James life, who was the owner of a great intellectual power himself. Once he offered his own seat to a Buddhist monk, who had come to listen to his lecture. *“Take my chair. Yours is the psychology, everyone will be studying 21 years from now”*, he said to the monk, the words which became the truth (Tapas Kumar Aich, 2013).

The Buddha will always remain the topmost illustrious psychologist, today and forever. Buddha’s unparalleled knowledge of human psychology and brain, Buddhist theories and practices as prescribed by lord Buddha can be compared to the latest modern techniques of psychology. To prove that, the theories of most popular psychologists, like William James, Ivan Pavlov, Freud and many others, can be compared with the theories of the Buddha. The three baskets of teachings of Gautama Buddha in *Tripitikas*, which is the main source of his teachings i.e. Abhidhamma Pitika, a basket that consist of all the philosophical, psychological and ethical thoughts of the Buddha, that if followed, may lead to liberation.

Buddhism is not only the humanistic psychology, cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis and existential psychology but as mentioned by orientalist Alan Watts, it is the combination of all, which is very much like psychotherapy of today, that has always been accepted in the past and will always be accepted in the future too. It was British Indologist Rhys Davids, who translated Abhidhamma Pitika from Pali and Sanskrit text, somewhere in 1900 and spread the information through his book, *“Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics in West”* and *“Buddhist Psychology : An Enquiry into Analysis and Theory of mind (Rhys Davids,` ` C.A., 1924).*

The Buddhist knowledge of psychology and similarities about today's latest psychological techniques and therapies i.e. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), default mode network (DMN) and various other therapies, applicable for all the age groups, that is, childhood, adulthood and old age, in all the phases and situations of life are as follows

**Gestalt therapy:** In Gestalt therapy, the techniques focus mainly on the immediate phenomenological and experiential reality of now and here in all realms like physical, emotional and mental. It states that therapy should work with the whole person, to develop the wisdom of right understanding. Zen Buddhism, specially, is popular for using this approach which is becoming conventional and is the feeder of Gestalt therapy

**Mindfulness and Stress Reduction:** Buddhism and psychology are quite similar in theory and practice. Mindfulness and stress reduction has a negative correlation in the patients of depression and anxiety disorders and has proven to be beneficial in treatment. Mindfulness, as we know is the basic concept of Buddhism.

**Rational Emotive Psychotherapy:** According to Dr. Albert Ellis, the theory of Rational Emotive Psychotherapy has originally been stated thousands of years ago by the Buddhist thinkers (Ellis, A., 1991).

**Cognitive Behaviour Therapy:** Cognitive behavioral therapy works on the feelings and thoughts. It removes irrational thoughts. According to CBT unrealistic expectations are the cause of our suffering so one has to be realistic and rational. Instead of Expectations, Buddhism talks about Desire. It talks about impermanence, cause and effect, conditions, sufferings and realistic beliefs, which is very similar to the CBT. Just like Buddhist philosophy, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy says that anger and evil-will is the main obstacle in the spiritual development of an individual. For example, in order to reduce anger, according to Buddhist thinkers, the thought of anger have to be reduced, have to be replaced by the loving thoughts (Ellis, A., 1997). The noble eightfold path focuses on the right thinking and right mindfulness. Similarly cognitive behavioral therapy also focuses on visualisation and positive self-talk to reduce assumptions, fears, phobias and

beliefs (Jayatunge, R.M., 2012).

**Default Mode Network-** is a large scale brain network of interacting brain regions known to have activity highly correlated with each other and distinct from other networks in the brain. It was initially assumed that the default mode network was most commonly active when a person is not focused on the outside world and the brain is at wakeful rest, such as during daydreaming and mind-wandering. However, it is now known that it can contribute to elements of experience that are related to external task performance (Sormaz, et al., 2018). It is also active when the individual is thinking about others, thinking about themselves, remembering the past, and planning for the future (Lieberman, Matthew, 2016). Meditation improves the attentional skills in the practitioners and brings tranquility and happiness in the lives. The Buddhist monks and the experienced meditators developed the ability to keep both the neural networks active during the meditation and this has been shown in the studies where the Buddhist monks brains have been scanned during the meditation (Matt Danzico, 2011).

**Psychotherapy:** It is the field that focuses on human potentials and not on human Pathology. Buddhist psychotherapy is somewhat ahead of it. It observes sufferings in the life as an opportunity for growth, change and developing the human potential.

**Psychoanalysis:** Psychoanalysis is a popular concept of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. it works on the buried complexes and memories and to uncover them for the therapeutic purpose and bringing them to the conscious level. This helps in removing the problems from the root. Buddhism believes in right meditation and right understanding. It also works on unconscious and dealing the problem through the direct methods and practices to uncover unconscious and this is very similar to psychoanalysis.

**Behaviorism:** the school was particularly associated with Ivan Pavlov and his dogs and B.F. Skinner, which works on the principles of behavior which can be manipulated to create the positive effects in the life of the person. The approach of exhortations to right action, right speech and right livelihood in Buddhism is very similar to behaviorism theory.

**Solution-focused Therapy:** as the name suggests, it encourages the person to reach one's personal narratives, revise the personal ideals and set the goals and prospects. Hence the right thought and right understanding is the only application which can be the therapeutic intervention successful.

**Rogerian therapy:** it is a person-centered therapy, according to Buddha the empathetic listening, reflection and validation of the thoughts and emotions helps the patients to bring about the positive changes. Unconditional consideration and genuineness of the therapist can help the sufferer grow and evolve. Hence person centered therapy has become the basic component of the modern psychotherapy.

**Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT):** Dialectic behavioral therapy was developed by Marsha Linehan, which teaches emotional regulation and tolerance to the persons with borderline personality disorders. The foundation of the therapy is mindfulness in two broad categories, that is, what and how. What can be defined as observation, description and participation. How can be described as being now nonjudgmental, one mindful and effective. This therapy is already a part of Zen Buddhism and hence, has its roots in Buddhism.

Similarly, there are umpteenth comparisons on the basis of which we can easily keep psychology and Buddhism on the same platform. The two fields can be said as the two sides of the same coin. But, there is a great need to establish Buddhist theory and practices as scientific approach. This requires lots of researches and knowledge sharing by the academicians especially, so as to bring about the changes in academic and research policies.

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