

Seeing the Whole Picture: The Apannaka Sutta and Gestalt Psychology on Holistic Decision-Making

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Introduction

Buddhism and Western psychology both study how the human mind works, how people view the world, and how they make decisions. The Apannaka Sutta is one of the most well-known suttas from the Buddhist scriptures, specifically the Majjhima Nikāya (Bodhi, 1995). In this sutta, the Buddha shows people the logical way to make decisions that will result in safe and correct outcomes for themselves. This teaching is provided for those who struggle with conflicting ideas and perceptions of the world around them.

Gestalt Psychology is a Western theory of the mind. It originated in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century (Koffka, 1935). This psychological theory suggests that the mind does not view the world as a collection of separate elements of information. Rather, the mind understands the world as a single, complete pattern of information (Wertheimer, 1945). The following paper investigates the connection between the practical logic of the Apannaka Sutta and the principles of Gestalt Psychology.

Objectives

To critically examine the logic and structure of decision-making as discussed in the Apannaka Sutta.

To analyze the principles of Gestalt psychology, specifically focusing on the concept of holistic perception, the idea of figure and ground, and insight learning.

To compare the structure of the Buddhist sutta with Gestalt psychology to find similarities in the approaches to cognition and decision-making.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design based on textual analysis and comparative literature review (Bryman, 2016). Because this research

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explores the conceptual connections between ancient Buddhist teachings and Western psychology, a qualitative approach is the most effective way to interpret meanings, identify shared themes, and compare ideas across different cultural frameworks (Flick, 2018).

The primary sources of this study include the Majjhima Nikāya (Majjhima Nikāya II, 2005) and its commentary, the Papañcasūdanī (Papañcasūdanī III, 1943). Principles of Gestalt Psychology by Kurt Koffka (1935) and foundational concepts from Max Wertheimer (1945) and Wolfgang Köhler (1947) are used as primary psychological texts. Modern academic articles and books discussing educational psychology, cognitive science, and Buddhist philosophy serve as secondary literature. The data collected from these texts are analyzed using qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to identify, group, and compare key concepts (Krippendorff, 2019).

Discussion

The Structure and Logic of the Apannaka Sutta

When the Buddha visited a village called Saleyyaka, the villagers were confused by the ideas of different teachers that they had encountered (Majjhima Nikāya II, 2005). To clarify these differences, the Buddha discussed three main points of disagreement among these villagers:

That there is no afterlife or the result of one's actions (Karma) — or that there is an afterlife and Karma.

That actions have no value — or that they have a great value.

That all events happen by chance — or that all events have a cause.

The Buddha did not make a choice for one side of the argument. Instead, he taught the concept of the Apannaka, which means the safe or infallible choice (Bodhi, 1995). To demonstrate this to the villagers, the Buddha said that if a person lives a good and moral life, they will win in both scenarios. Should the afterlife exist, the moral person will be rewarded. Should the afterlife not exist, the person who lives a moral life will still live a peaceful life and earn the respect of the wise. However, should a person live badly without belief in an afterlife, yet an afterlife does exist, that person will lose all they have worked to build throughout their lifetime. With this teaching, the villagers began to see the bigger picture in terms of their choices.

Core Principles of Gestalt Theory

The school of thought was founded by Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Köhler (Koffka, 1935; Wertheimer, 1945). The main idea of Gestalt theory is that the whole of an object is greater than the sum of its parts (Koffka, 1935). In other words, the human brain does not view the world as a collection of separate objects and elements, but rather perceives the world in terms of a single, meaningful pattern (Athukorala and Athukorala, 2005). Gestalt theory includes three key ideas:

- 1. Figure-Ground:** The ability of the human mind to separate the main object of interest from its background.
- 2. Holism:** The idea that the human mind views objects as a whole, rather than a collection of separate elements.
- 3. Insight Learning:** The idea that humans sometimes solve a problem suddenly, after gaining insight into the way in which the individual elements of a given object are related to each other (Athukorala and Athukorala, 2005).

Parallels Between the Sutta and Gestalt Theory

The Holistic Approach Versus Narrow Views: Gestalt psychologists warned about looking at only one small part of a problem to conclude that the problem has a certain resolution (Koffka, 1935). Ancient philosophers made this mistake of looking at only one part of the afterlife debate by focusing solely on physical death (Bodhi, 1995). The Buddha corrected this by teaching a holistic approach, encouraging villagers to look at all effects of their choices—on their minds, on society, and in the future.

Reorganizing ‘Figure’ and ‘Ground’: The way an individual focuses upon an element can change figure and ground (Köhler, 1947). Within the sutta, the villagers focused on the abstract question of whether the afterlife exists (figure), leaving daily impact as background (ground). The Buddha shifted their focus to moral and practical behaviors, allowing them to see what truly mattered.

Insight Learning, or Sudden Realization: Wolfgang Köhler demonstrated that learning occurs by insight when a person sees how pieces fit together (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991). In the Apannaka Sutta, the Buddha unifies disconnected parts into a complete chain of reasoning. The villagers’ sudden understanding eliminates their confusion and enables them to accept the Buddha’s teachings with confidence (Majjhima Nikāya II, 2005).

Results

The systematic thematic mapping between the Apannaka Sutta decision-making framework and Gestalt psychological principles yields three major thematic correspondences, as summarized in Table 1 below:

Apannaka Sutta Approach	Gestalt Psychology Principle	Psychological Explanation
Looking at the whole life impact instead of one isolated argument.	Holism (The Whole View)	The mind avoids mistakes by looking at the whole system instead of single facts.
Shifting focus from abstract theories to real daily behavior.	Figure-Ground Relationship	Changing what is in the foreground of the mind changes how a person understands reality.
The sudden clarity and relief the villagers felt at the end.	Insight Learning	When the mind sees the hidden connection between parts, confusion disappears at once.

Conclusion

The connection between the Apannaka Sutta and Gestalt psychology demonstrates that the Buddha had a deep understanding of human thinking long before modern psychology developed. The Buddha utilized a method similar to cognitive restructuring (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991), helping villagers find a practical way of life. The Apannaka Sutta demonstrates how a holistic view, focus on practical outcomes, and understanding structural connections enable humans to make correct decisions in a confusing world.

Keywords - Apannaka Sutta, Gestalt Psychology, Holistic Decision-Making, Figure-Ground, Insight Learning

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