

Buddhist Psychology in the Theravāda Tradition: Mind, Non-self, and Mental Development

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Introduction

Buddhist psychology refers to the systematic analysis of mind and mental processes found in the teachings of the Buddha preserved in the Pāḷi Canon. Although the term *psychology* is not a traditional Buddhist expression, it is now widely used to describe the Buddhist investigation of consciousness, cognition, behavior, and mental development. Recent scholars have examined Buddhist psychology from philosophical, psychological, and therapeutic perspectives. Nevertheless, its conceptual foundation as a distinct Theravāda psychological framework has received comparatively little scholarly attention.

In particular, questions remain regarding whether Buddhism may properly be regarded as a psychology, what distinguishes it from modern Western psychology, and how its understanding of mind contributes to contemporary counselling. To address these questions, this study examines selected Pāḷi canonical texts together with modern scholarship in order to clarify the conceptual foundation of Buddhist psychology and its relevance to contemporary counselling.

An important question concerns whether the use of the modern expression *Buddhist psychology* is appropriate within the context of Buddhist literature. The *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* supports such usage, in which the Buddha advises that one should neither insist rigidly on local language nor reject commonly accepted expressions (*janapadaniruttiṃ nābhiniveseyya samaññaṃ nātiddhāveyya*) (M III 230). Through examples of regional terminology, the Buddha demonstrates a flexible and pragmatic approach to language, permitting conventional expressions that facilitate understanding without attachment to terminology. Accordingly, the modern designation Buddhist psychology may legitimately be used to describe the Buddhist investigation of mind and behavior.

The Buddha's teachings are grounded in direct experience rather than divine revelation. Consequently, Buddhist psychology is a distinctive framework for understanding mental processes based on dependent origination, non-self (*anattā*), and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*). Unlike many psychological systems that analyze behavior primarily from empirical or cognitive perspectives,

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Buddhist psychology aims at the transformation of the mind through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom.

The term *psychology* derives from the Greek words *psyche* and *logos*. Although modern psychology no longer accepts the notion of an eternal soul, Buddhism differs from modern psychology by rejecting the notion of a permanent self and explaining mental life as a conditioned process arising through causes and conditions. For this reason, Buddhist psychology has sometimes been described as a “psychology without psyche” (Kalupahana, 1987; de Silva, 2014). Rather than postulating an enduring self, Buddhism explains the individual as a dynamic interaction of mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*), understood through the doctrine of non-self (Karunadasa, 2018).

At the same time, Buddhism does not reject the conventional use of expressions such as *attā*, *satta*, and *puggala* in ordinary communication. These terms function only as conventional designations and do not imply an ultimate self. This distinction between conventional and ultimate truth further demonstrates the unique conceptual foundation of Buddhist psychology and distinguishes it from many philosophical and psychological traditions. The present study therefore clarifies the conceptual foundation of Buddhist psychology and demonstrates its distinctive contribution to contemporary counselling and psychological well-being.

Objectives

This study aims to:

examine the conceptual foundation of Buddhist psychology in relation to modern psychology;

analyse the Buddhist understanding of mind through the concepts of *citta*, *mano*, and *viññāṇa*;

investigate the role of meditation in mental development and behavioral transformation; and

evaluate the relevance of Buddhist psychology to contemporary counselling and psychological well-being.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology employing textual analysis and close reading. Primary data were collected from selected Pāli canonical texts, including the *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, and

the *Dhammapada*. Secondary data were obtained from modern scholarly publications on Buddhist psychology, philosophy, and counselling. The data were analyzed using textual, descriptive, and comparative methods to clarify the conceptual foundation of Buddhist psychology and to examine its relationship to contemporary psychological thought.

Results

The study demonstrates that Buddhist psychology constitutes a distinctive psychological framework grounded in the principles of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and non-self (*anattā*) (Kalupahana, 1987; de Silva, 2014). Rather than assuming an enduring personal identity, as found in many philosophical and psychological traditions, Buddhism explains the empirical individual as a conditioned process of mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*) arising through causes and conditions. This distinctive analysis of mind differentiates Buddhist psychology from many modern psychological approaches and provides a unique framework for understanding human experience, mental cultivation, and psychological well-being.

The Buddhist conception of mind is expressed through the Pāḷi terms *citta*, *mano*, and *viññāṇa*. References to these concepts are found in the *Assutavantasutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (S. II. 94) and the *Brahmajālasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (D. I. 21; Bodhi, 2000). Together, these terms describe different dimensions of consciousness. *Citta* refers to mental awareness, *mano* to cognition, and *viññāṇa* to consciousness dependent on sense experience (Karunadasa, 2018, pp. 56–57). Together, they illustrate the Buddhist analysis of mind.

In addition, Buddhist psychology places considerable emphasis on ethical conduct as an essential foundation for mental well-being. According to Buddhism, unwholesome mental states such as greed, hatred, and delusion disturb the mind and become causes of psychological suffering. Ethical discipline (*sīla*) therefore functions not merely as a moral system but also as a psychological method for regulating behavior and cultivating emotional stability. When ethical conduct is developed together with mindfulness and wisdom, the mind gradually becomes free from anxiety, remorse, fear, and agitation. Thus, Buddhist psychology closely relates morality to mental health. This perspective differs from many modern psychological approaches that often separate ethics from therapeutic practice. Buddhism teaches that mental purification is achieved through cultivating compassion, loving-kindness, patience, and mindfulness. These qualities promote self-awareness, emotional regulation, and constructive relationships. Consequently, Buddhist psychology offers a practical framework for psychological well-being.

The study further demonstrates that mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*) occupies a central place in Buddhist psychology. Through mental cultivation, the mind is observed, purified, and transformed. Meditation serves as a practical method for understanding mental processes and overcoming suffering. Buddhist meditation is broadly divided into two forms: *samatha* (tranquility meditation) and *vipassanā* (insight meditation). Through *samatha*, concentration and mental calm are developed. Through *vipassanā*, practitioners observe the impermanent and conditioned nature of phenomena. In Buddhism, this insight is described as seeing things as they really are (*yathābhūtañāṇa*).

As insight deepens, greed, hatred, and delusion gradually diminish. In this sense, Buddhist psychology is not merely theoretical but therapeutic, aiming at the transformation of human behavior and the reduction of suffering. Buddhist meditation therefore functions not only as a religious practice but also as a practical system of mental development and psychological well-being.

The Four Noble Truths may also be understood as a psychological framework. The truths of suffering (*dukkha*), its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation provide a systematic analysis of human distress and its causes. Buddhism identifies craving, attachment, and ignorance as the roots of suffering and proposes ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom as methods for overcoming psychological distress. Accordingly, the Four Noble Truths constitute both a philosophical and psychological framework for understanding the origin of suffering and guiding its cessation through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom.

Discussion and Conclusion

Buddhist psychology presents a practical understanding of mind and behavior. Its emphasis on impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), non-self (*anattā*), and dependent conditionality distinguishes it from many conventional psychological systems that presuppose a permanent individual identity. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical analysis, Buddhism provides practical methods for transforming mental states through ethical cultivation, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Buddhist psychology contributes significantly to contemporary counselling and psychotherapy through its analysis of suffering, emotional disturbance, and behavioral transformation. Meditation and mindfulness-based approaches are increasingly recognized for their therapeutic benefits.

Furthermore, Buddhist psychology emphasizes personal responsibility and introspection. Through mental awareness and insight, individuals gradually overcome suffering and attain inner well-being. Therefore, Buddhist psychology

remains highly relevant not only as a religious and philosophical system but also as a practical approach to counseling, psychological health, and human development.

Keywords - Buddhist Psychology, *Anattā* (Non-self), Mind and Consciousness, Meditation and Mental Development, Buddhist Counselling

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