Buddhist Psychology: An Inquiry into the Analysis and Theory of Mind in Pali Literature

Caroline A.F. Rhys Davids
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The Buddhist tradition—comprised of the Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna—arguably lends itself to being interpreted in psychological terms more than other religions of the world because of its particular focus on the mind. This is exemplified by the Buddha Shakyamuni's own words: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought."[1] An early teacher of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987), stated in 1975: "Buddhism will come to the West as a psychology."[2] Although this psychological perspective—devoid of any theistic terminology—has significantly added to the rise in popularity of Buddhism in the West, it does not come without its own problems. For example, many misconceptions exist about Buddhism, such as the notion that it can be purely reduced to a psychological system that is free of metaphysics or the Absolute. Yet it needs to be stressed that, although Buddhism does have a corresponding psychology as do the other religions, it is *not only* a psychology as this term is commonly understood today; rather, its primary objective is emancipation from the conditions of "birth and death" *(saṃsāra)*.

Even though Sufism's "science of the soul" (*'ilm al-nafs*), like Buddhist psychology, has in many ways entered the popular culture in order to enlarge the scope of modern Western psychology and its secular outlook, both have undergone attempts to extricate them from their exoteric dimensions. Regarding Sufism, this is a distortion of its central message, which cannot be cut off from the Islamic tradition. All Sufi orders are linked through an initiatic succession back to the Prophet Muhammad. Within Buddhism, some of the highest-level teachings and practices are often offered to Western seekers with little or no assessment of their spiritual and temperamental qualifications. Analogously, the attempt to co-opt Sufism, Buddhism or any of the divinely revealed religions with a view to reducing them solely to a psychological system or self-help technique is erroneous. While each religion has its own sacred psychology, it remains valid only to the extent that it is rooted within a given spiritual tradition. It is all too often forgotten in the present day that the human psyche cannot be understood or treated on its own level; it requires reference to what is beyond it, which contemporary psychology fails to acknowledge or understand.

This pioneering work by British translator and editor of Buddhist Pāli texts, Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids (1857–1942), was written long before the proliferation of books on the psychology of the Buddhist tradition. This book presents the basis of Buddhist psychology in the early *Nikāyas* and traces its general development through the later Pāli texts. It consists of nine chapters: Chapter I: Habits of Thought; Chapter II: The Psychology of the Nikāyas—1. Mind in Term and Concept; Chapter III: The Psychology of the Nikāyas—2. Consciousness and the External World; Chapter IV: The Psychology of the Nikāyas—3. Feeling; Chapter V: The Psychology of the Nikāyas—4. Ideation; Chapter VI: The Psychology of the Nikāyas—5. Ideation—continued; Chapter VII: Psychological Developments in the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka; Chapter VIII: Psychology in the Milinda; and Chapter IX: Some Mediæval Developments.

Already at the time of the writing this book, Rhys Davids spoke to the growing interest in the field of psychology. She made some important observations about the limitations of modern Western psychology compared to Buddhism. Rhys Davids writes: “We find no reference to the patient work of many centuries accomplished by the introspective genius of the East” (pp. v–vi). She emphasizes the profound wisdom and understanding of the human psyche that has been present in the Buddhist tradition since its formation. Because of this, she urges present-day mental health practitioners to deepen their understanding of the human psyche through the wisdom of Buddhism. She emphasizes that “The work of these profound analysts of the nature of mind should, therefore, by no means be neglected by modern psychologists” (p. vi).

Without naming it as such, Rhys Davids alludes to the secularization that took place in the modern West, and how this eradicated the spiritual dimension within psychology. She points out, “We shall hardly expect to find … that detached and specialized study of mental life as such, which under its modern name of psychology is a matter of yesterday among ourselves” (p. 4). The impact of constructing a materialistic psychology devoid of metaphysics has had a devastating impact on the way that the human psyche is understood today. Rhys Davids makes a distinction between modern Western psychology and Buddhist psychology. The former is uncertain about its subject-matter—which continues to hinder the field—whereas the latter concerns itself with how things manifest themselves in the mind and what this implies for navigating the realm of appearances.

Buddhism teaches that the mind does not come into existence out of its own volition; the mind requires an initial cause. What is this? The Buddha explains:

And consciousness is designated only in accordance with the condition causing it: visual consciousness from the seeing eye and the seen object; auditory consciousness from the hearing ear and

the sound; ... thought from mind and mental object. Just as a fire is different according to the kind of fuel…. Do ye see, bhikkhus, that this is [something that has] become? Do ye see that the becoming is according to the stimulus [lit. food]? Do ye see that if the stimulus ceases, then that which has become ceases? (pp. 15–16)

This again discloses the fundamental limitations of modern Western psychology, which is rooted in the pseudo-metaphysics of Cartesian bifurcation of subject-object or mind-body dualism. That traditional Buddhist cosmology views the entire manifest world to consist of *nāma-rūpa* ("name and form") does not in any way perpetuate a dualism with regard to the nature of Ultimate Reality. This is highlighted by the Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching regarding the identity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* which shows the illusory nature of dualism when viewed at a higher level of reality.

Rhys Davids appears to have misunderstood, not unlike many Westerners, the Hindu doctrine of the Self (*Ātman*) and the Buddhist doctrine of "no self" (Pāli: *anattā*; Sanskrit: *anātman*). On the one hand, she correctly states: "The *an-attā* position in the Nikāyas cannot be properly judged by those who are acquainted only with the European conception of 'souls'" (p. 30). Elsewhere, however, she falls into the common trap of misunderstanding the concept of *anattā*: "Now the *attā*, as popularly and as theologically conceived, was an entity distinct from phenomena, a self-existent something that 'perdured' while they arose and ceased, a unity temporarily associated with plurality, a micro-deity within distorting man's true perspective, in Buddhist doctrine of all illusions the most dangerous" (p. 33).

When viewed through the often paradoxical language of metaphysics, these two seemingly conflicting doctrines are, in reality, not opposed to one another. Rather, they both contemplate Ultimate Reality or the Absolute from different points of view. As the Buddha taught:

The body … [and so on for mental factors] … is not the Self. If it were the Self, the body would not be subject to disease, and we should be able to say: “Let my body (or mind) be such and such a one, let my body not be such and such a one!” But since the body is not the Self, therefore it is subject to disease, and we are not able to say: “Let, etc.” Now of that which is perishable, liable to suffering, subject to change, is it possible so to regard it as to say: This is of Me; this am I, this is the Self (soul) of me? (p. 31)

Taken at face value, there appears to be a contradiction here but, if understood metaphysically, they are compatible, for these are but two ways of regarding the same reality. In Buddhism, each human being is said to consist of *five aggregates* or “heaps” known as *khandhas* (Sanskrit: *skandhas*): (1) Form (*rūpa*), (2) Sensation or Feeling (*vedanā*), (3) Perception (*sañña*), (4) Mental formations (*saṅkhāras*), and (5) Consciousness (*viññāṇa*). However, the existence of the five aggregates does not rule out the existence of the Self (*Ātman*) that is not bound to birth, old age, sickness and death.

The *Abhidharmakośa*, by the influential monk and scholar Vasubandhu (fourth or fifth century), states: “It is a mistake ... to consider as a self that which is not the self; but [nowhere does the Buddha say that] it is a mistake to consider as a self that which is the self.”[3] The Buddha does not take issue with the Hindu understanding of the Self (*Ātman*) as “*neti*, *neti*” (not this, not this), which, by means of a double negation, conveys an apophatic understanding that eliminates all determinate conceptions, leaving in its place only the consciousness of that which is, the Self alone; all that is not this is the non-Self (*anattā*). This position is summarized in the Buddha’s words, “What is not self, that is not my self” (*yad anattā … na meso attā*) (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*, iii. 45, iv. 2).[4]

At the heart of the Buddhist tradition is the teaching of *dependent origination* (Pāli: *paṭiccasamuppāda*; Sanskrit: *pratītyasamutpāda*), which describes the chain of causation that determines the causes of

suffering and the conditions that lead to birth, old age and death along with the Four Noble Truths: (1) the existence of suffering; (2) the cause of suffering; (3) the end of suffering; and (4) the path leading out of suffering. The term *dukkha* (suffering) can also be applied in a broader sense to anything that is unsatisfactory, including both bodily and mental illnesses. Buddhist psychology therefore aims to identify *dukkha* and eradicate it from human existence. This includes the *three poisons* or the *three unwholesome roots* of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). According to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha has said, "Both then and now just this do I reveal:—*dukkha* and the extinction of *dukkha*" (p. 82).

The secularization of the Buddha's teachings in the West should be a cause for alarm, as it highlights the growing confusion about, not only the Buddhist tradition, but religion itself. There are many Western Buddhists who take issue with the notion of God or a transcendent reality and would prefer if it was somehow removed from the tradition altogether. Accordingly, they seek to recast the essential principles of the Buddha's teachings, thus distorting and diluting its timeless wisdom. Traditional metaphysics, along with any notion of an ultimate reality, is often dismissed as something that does not sit well with the secular mindset of the present day.

The Buddha Shakayamuni himself affirmed: "The Tathāgata has no theories" (*Majjhima Nikāya* I, 486), yet without any reference to the Absolute, such statements are incomprehensible and lead to much confusion. Every religion requires the existence of a reality that is unconditioned and has its own teachings and practices to help us return to this transcendent reality; otherwise, it could not be a complete religion. In the case of Buddhism, this transcendent reality is known as the *Dharmakāya*.

It is in connection with its metaphysical foundations that the integral psychology of Buddhism becomes intelligible, as the empirical ego cannot transcend itself and requires a reality beyond

it. *Manas* in Pāli is one of three overlapping terms used in early Buddhism to refer to the mind, the others being *citta* (Pāli and Sanskrit) and *viññāṇa* (Pāli; Sanskrit: *vijñāna*). *Paññā* (Pāli) or *Prajñā* (Sanskrit)—recognized as transcendent wisdom—is the highest faculty of knowledge which is unmediated and allows for a direct apprehension of the true nature of phenomena. Here *manas* corresponds to the faculty of reason (Latin: *ratio*) and *Paññā* or *Prajñā* with the faculty of the Intellect (Latin: *Intellectus/Spiritus*), which has its equivalents in other religions. It is this transpersonal dimension that makes Buddhist psychology a true vehicle for liberation (Pāli: *vimutti*; Sanskrit: *vimukti*): "Those who think the unreal is, and think the Real is not, they shall never reach the Truth, lost in the path of wrong thought. But those who know the Real is, and know the unreal is not, they shall indeed reach the Truth, safe on the path of right thought."[5]

It is also a concern that Buddhist mindfulness or *sati* (Pāli; Sanskrit: *smṛti*) has been extracted from the Buddhist tradition and incorporated in an *ad hoc* manner into both modern psychology and a plethora of self-help techniques. Although these techniques are proliferating—often outside of the Buddhist tradition—they are unable to confer their full benefit, as these practices have been severed from their traditional context. It is worth adding that the equivalent to mindfulness as found in Buddhism can be seen in all religions; this allows interested seekers to return to their own faith traditions and immerse themselves in their contemplative teachings.

This pioneering work by Rhys Davids gives a good overview of early Buddhist psychology as taught in the Theravāda tradition. While it is very informative, it does appear to have limitations that need to be addressed. One of the great art historians of the world, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), expressed cautionary remarks about this book by citing Rhys Davids's own disclosure; namely, that she had written it "in our ignorance of the stock of current nomenclature of which the Nikāyas made use" (p. 18).[6] Nonetheless, this work contains very useful information about

Buddhist psychology. It is difficult to read it and not walk away thinking how deficient modern psychology has become due to an absence of metaphysics, sacred science and spiritual principles. All perennial psychology, including Buddhist psychology, is a means of awakening and cannot be removed from the fullness of the tradition itself. Over 2,500 years ago, Buddha Shakyamuni asked: "This *world* is *always burning* ... Why *do ye not seek* a *light*, *ye* who *are* shrouded in darkness?"[7] These are the same compelling questions that we need to ask ourselves today.

Endnotes

[1] Buddha Shakyamuni, "Chapter I," in *The Dhammapada*, trans. Irving Babbitt (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1965), p. 3.

[2] Chögyam Trungpa, quoted in Daniel Goleman, "Foreword," to *The Sanity We Are Born With*: *A Buddhist Approach to Psychology*, ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2005), p. vii. "Many modern psychologists have found that the discoveries and explanations of the abhidharma coincide with their own recent discoveries and new ideas; as though the abhidharma, which was taught 2,500 years ago, had been redeveloped in the modern idiom." (Chögyam Trungpa, "Introduction," to *Glimpses of Abhidharma: From a Seminar on Buddhist Psychology* [Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2001], p. 2).

[3] Buddha Shakyamuni, quoted in Edward Conze, "The Status of the 'Self,'" in *Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy* (London, UK: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 129.

[4] See Isaline B. Horner, "Attā and Anattā," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 1973), pp. 31–35.

[5] Buddha Shakyamuni, "Chapter I," in *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, trans. Juan Mascaró (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 36.

[6] See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or rather Pneumatology," in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 2: Selected Papers, Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 333–378.

[7] Buddha Shakyamuni, "Chapter XI," in *The Dhammapada*, trans. Irving Babbitt (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1965), p. 24.