

BUDDHISM – THE MOST PSYCHOLOGICAL OF RELIGIONS

By Ven Piyadassi Mahathera

The author says that Buddhism is “a study of the highest psychology”, that “psychology works hand in hand more with Buddhism than with any other religion” and consequently that Buddhism is “the most psychological of religions.” Do you agree?

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- Ed.

What the Buddha taught during a period of forty-five years is so vast, its aspects so varied and fascinating, that scholars call Buddhism a religion, a philosophy, an ethical code, a religio-philosophical system, and ethical idealism. But one has yet to find a religion in which psychology looms as large as in Buddhism. The commonly called academical psychology – like other academical sciences – defines mind in static terms, whereas Buddhist psychology defines mental life in dynamic terms. However, after many struggles and persistent efforts modern psychology has left the dilapidated abode of orthodox schools, and is rediscovering the old doctrine of a dynamic mind. There are some variations, to be sure, but the basic principle is one. Today, many a psychologist accepts the dynamic nature of the human mind, and modern textbooks of psychology have abandoned the concept of a soul, and regard psychology as the science of human behavior. Let us hope that it will not deviate from its well-found track.

To the Buddhist even the question of religion and its origin is not a metaphysical one, but a psychological and intellectual one. To him religion is no mere creed or code of revelation or fear of the unknown, or fear of a supernatural being who rewards and punishes the good deeds and ill deeds of his creatures. It is not a theological concern but rather a psychological and intellectual concern resulting from the experience of *dukkha*, that is, suffering, conflicts, unsatisfactoriness of the empirical existence, of the nature of life.

When we consider the doctrinal contents of Buddhism, we are necessarily compelled to regard the Buddha’s teaching as distinguished and different from other systems of religion in which the central feature is the concept of a creator God. It is correct to say that there is much religion in Buddhism, but it cannot be included among the many religions in existence today, at least in the sense in which anthropologists

understand the word religion. Generally, the concept of religion is associated with a system centred around God and supernatural forces. Buddhism, however, does not advocate any prescribed system of ritual and worship, nor the supplication of deities or gods. There is no recognition, on the part of man, of some higher unseen power as having control over his destiny. In Buddhism, man attributes all his attainments and achievements to human effort and human understanding. Buddhism is anthropocentric and not theocentric. Thus, to a Buddhist, religion is a way of life – a way of moral, spiritual and intellectual training leading to complete freedom of the mind, the highest attainment of insight, which puts an end to all sufferings and repeated existence.

Looked at from the point of view of philosophy, the Buddha was not concerned with the problems that have worried philosophers both of the East and West from the beginning of history. He was not concerned with metaphysical problems which only confuse man and upset his mental equilibrium. Their solution He knew, would not free mankind from suffering, from the unsatisfactory nature of life. That was why Buddha hesitated to answer such questions, and at times refrained from explaining those which were often wrongly formulated. He was not willing to answer such question as: Is the world eternal or not? Is it finite or infinite? Has the world an end or not? What is the origin of the world? At times the Buddha was silent to such seemingly important but futile questions, because silence was the best answer to such speculations and meaningless questions. The only way to resolve these doubts and difficulties is by exploring the innermost recesses of the human mind which can only be affected by deep self-introspection based on purity of conduct and consequent meditation.

All the principal tenets of Buddhism, like the doctrine of *kamma* (Skt. *karma*), volitional activities or moral causation, rebirth, meditation and the resultant mental attainments, are best studied and investigated as workings of the human mind, and therefore, Buddhism can most fittingly be described as a study of the highest psychology.

The *Abhidhamma Pitaka* of the Buddha Canon gives a very comprehensive account of the mind and the mental factors in a manner so as to help the Buddhist way of life. However, a close study of the dialogues, or the discourses of the Buddha, tends to produce the conviction that psychology plays a significant role in the *Sutta Pitaka*, too. What the Buddha had to say with regard to the nature of the human mind, the method of cleansing it, and the art of becoming its master and not its slave is clearly enunciated in the discourses of the *Sutta Pitaka*. In this respect, the *Satipatthana Sutta*¹, the discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the *Vitakka Santhana Sutta*²,

1. Translated in **The Wheel** series, No. 19 (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy); also see “**The Satipatthana Sutta** and its Application to Modern Life’, V.F. Gunaratna, **The Wheel** No. 60.

2. **The Wheel** series, No.21.

the Removal of Distracting Thoughts, and such other cardinal discourses, are striking examples.

Buddhism is the most psychological of religions. It is significant that the intricate workings of the human mind are more fully dealt with in Buddhism than in any other religion, and therefore, psychology works hand in hand more with Buddhism than with any other religion.

“Is Buddhism related to modern psychology?” one may ask. Yes, but with some difference. Buddhism is concerned more with the curative than the analytic. Buddhism helps us to get beyond the intellect to the actual experience of life itself. Through meditation the Buddha had discovered the deeper universal maladies of the human heart and mind. The remarkable insight into the workings of the mind makes the Buddha a psychologist and scientist of the highest eminence. Admittedly, His way of arriving at these truths of mental life is not that of an experimentalist, yet what the Buddha discovered remains true, and in fact, has been corroborated by the experimentalist. But the purpose in engaging in these inquiries is quite different from that of the scientist. The statements of the Buddha about the nature of the mind and matter are directed towards specific ends. They are simply the deliverance of man, supreme security from bondage. The Buddha places very much emphasis on mind and mental phenomena because of the crucial role that our inner life occupies in the genesis of human action. In theistic religions the basis is God. In Buddhism, which is non-theistic, the mind is the basis.

In order to understand fully the ideal of the freedom of the mind, it is necessary to appreciate the importance of the mind. If there is no proper understanding of the importance of the human mind, we cannot appreciate to its fullest extent the reason why it is so necessary to develop and safeguard the freedom of the mind.

Of all forces, the force of the mind is the most potent. It predominates every other force. It is a power by itself and within itself. Any attempt to thwart the growth of this force is a step in the wrong direction. No one has understood the power of the mind so clearly as the Buddha.

Buddhism, while not denying the world of matter and the great effect that the physical world has on mental life, emphasises the very great importance of the human mind. Once a monk asked the Buddha: “Pray, Venerable Sir, by what is the world led? By what is the world drawn along? Under the sway of what one dhamma have all gone?” The Buddha’s answer is categorical: “Well, monk the world is led by the mind (thought); by mind the world is drawn along; all have gone under the sway of the mind, the one dhamma.”¹ The Buddhist point of view is that the mind or

1. *Anguttara Nikaya*, II, p.177.

consciousness is the core of our existence. All our psychological experiences, such as pain and pleasure, sorrow and happiness, good and evil, life and death, are not attributed to any external agency. They are the results of our own thoughts and their resultant actions.

The Buddhist way of life is an intense process of cleansing one's speech, action, and thought. It is self-development and self-purification resulting in self-realization. The emphasis is on practical results and not on mere philosophical speculation, logical abstraction or even mere cogitation. The Buddhist ethos and psychology is built on the eternal truth of *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of all sentient beings, all empirical existence, the Buddha said:

“One thing only do I teach:

Suffering, and its end to reach.”¹

To understand this unequivocal saying is to understand Buddhism; for the entire teaching of the Buddha is nothing else than the application of this one principle. What can be called the discovery of a Buddha, is just the Four Noble Truths: namely, *dukkha*, the arising or cause of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*. And the rest are logical developments and more detailed explanations of the four truths. “This is the typical teaching of the Buddhas of all ages.”²

1. *Majjhima Nikaya*, I, 22.

2. *Vinaya Mahavagga*, i.16, ii.156; *Digha N.*, i.110; *Majjhima N.*, i.380; *Anguttara N.*, iv. 186.