

Dissertation Topic: Bowen and Vipassan?

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My idea for a dissertation topic is a conglomeration of ideas that make up my world view and personal psychology. It is an integration of what seems to be the most important forces governing our lives.

The idea is simple: to find a literary correlation showing that Murray Bowen was getting at the same thing as the historical Buddha. Bowen's construct of differentiation of self in Family Systems Theory could equal the Buddha's construct of equanimity in Vipassan?. If true, this could provide a key bridge between the science of the West and millennia of wisdom of the East. The implications are vast, and worthy of a book let alone a dissertation.

The approach to life is simple: that the level of unconscious reactivity is the core determinant in human functioning. To improve, a person must become more aware of the ignored processes that control their lives. Bowen taught non-reactive but engaged observation of one's interpersonal relationships because they have the largest impact on one's life. The Buddha taught non-reactive but engaged observation of sensations on the body as they are the only concrete way to observe the reality of yourself and your connection to the world. The Buddha also taught that the entire "path" is about relationship; "*for the good of others, for the good of others.*" Bowen's observation of external relationships is something like modern "mindfulness" which operates at a very gross level, where Vipassan?, the teaching of the historical Buddha, operates on similar principles but goes to a much subtler level by observing the microcosmic processes that ultimately shape one's entire experience.

These subtle can be observed within the individual (using the same way of thinking as used by the current medical, psychological, and molecular biological models) yet absolutely interact with the interpersonal processes as Bowen describes them. For example, when a person enters into a space with anxious people, that person may also get anxious. They may or may not be aware of the anxiety, but in either case they *feel* the anxiety through sensations on the body. The level of *differentiation of self*, as Bowen termed it, determines how much *choice* the individual has over their own functioning amidst the anxiety. A poorer differentiated person has less choice and is more reactive to the field of energy in the room, and is more likely to join in on and even contribute to the anxiety.

In Vipassan?, when one works with sensations on the body instead of objects outside the body (e.g. relationships, object of addiction, etc) one implicitly works directly with the root of Bowen's *emotional system*. By learning to become a non-reactive observer of sensation, one redefines the relationships with their most instinctual emotional drives. They learn to simply listen to their instincts instead of being controlled by them. They form healthier relationships by moving

away from the extremes of over-involvement or total cutoff. They waste less energy in useless emotionally reactive processes and have more energy for productivity and the *well-being of the group as a whole*. This is exactly what Bowen taught his patients and students to do and this is exactly the ability that one develops in Vipassan?.

The challenge is that I have never actually seen any one put these two schools together in this way. One explanation for this is that Bowen Theory is not mainstream; It's still rare to find people that have made the "leap" to systems thinking. After all, it is very difficult to expand one's awareness from oneself to include the entire system.

Another explanation is that making these subtle connections may not be possible in most "Buddhist" traditions available today which front-load theory before serious, deep practice. For example, in my experience merely talking, writing, and thinking about concepts like *no-self* (anatt?), *impermanence* (anicca), or interdependence seems to point to an orientation that does not lend itself to compatibility with Bowen Theory. In fact, it may be more helpful to introduce these concepts at all until a meditator is beginning to have enough concrete experience to discover them themselves in some way. Even writing about this here is problematic. I partly base this opinion on the fact that I have not witnessed an exclusively intellectual discussion of key Buddhist concepts that connected so deeply, broadly, and **clearly** to other scientific schools, let alone Bowen Theory. By "clearly" I mean as clear as gravity is still a thing. These kinds of "Buddhist" conversations feel too philosophical and speculative to expose the deeper realities that easily connect to other perspectives. They remind me of a group of people sitting outside a windowless restaurant having never heard of the exotic foreign food inside while trying to decide what it tastes like through philosophical debate. It's just not possible to know the complex mix of taste, smell, texture, service, ambiance, etc in that way.

But when I take my experience from S.N. Goenka's 10-day courses in Vipassan? meditation (which are heavily front-loaded with practice before theory, i.e. no real mention of "impermanence" until 35+ hours of sitting!), everything Bowen proposed suddenly makes sense; that it is precisely the unconscious reactivity to bodily sensations that makes all the difference, not just some concept like "no abiding self" or "nothing lasts," which until experienced at some basic level is as good as myth. In fact, exactly what that reactivity and the process of moving through the lifetime of bodily sensations *feels* like is so personal that I can't even describe it in words!

With Vipassan? it is so much easier to understand how my unpleasant experiences are "impermanent." For example, what before seemed like a simple, inanimate left arm that could only "feel" if something touched it, is now very clearly a pulsing mass of particles that is quite alive and adhering to the same fundamental laws of existence as every phenomena in the universe. This is a plain reality that can be *felt* with practice. No leg pain is permanent, every itch fades if left alone. Just as these sensations arise and pass, so do the minutes, hours, days of the week, the seasons, the years, rivers, clouds, ice, tides, societies, nations, and I imagine worlds, the universe, and even my "life."

Ah, *nothing lasts*. Now I see. Then why get so worked up about a little physical or mental pain? Ah, because the mental reactivity to the pain is unconscious (I'm not aware of it), accumulated by my past pattern of reactivity. And reactivity causes more pain, and so on. But how to change the pattern? The words of both the Buddha and Bowen are simple:

"Just observe, just observe."

Bowen said you are always in the *emotional system* whether the actual members of the system are physically present or not. Similarly, I know that as I sit still to meditate twice a day for one hour, all of the residue from the immediate or distant past automatically comes up. Coincidentally, it almost always involves relationships. Even the self-centered stuff boils down to some relationship dynamic on a very subtle level. Mother, father, brother, friends, colleagues. Wow. But looking further, some sensation or another occurs *just before* each thought. And I know that if I manage to observe those (potentially unpleasant) sensations long enough without reacting (infinitely easier said than done), the sensations eventually pass away on their own accord. They are "impermanent." More importantly, each time I am able to keep from reacting to these sensory experiences, I develop a resilience to them and the pattern slowly changes - forever.

So all experience is sensation, and my relationship to all sensations can change. That's a really big deal.

Once I got good enough at working with sensations in this way, I became able to observe subtle sensation with my eyes open and even while interacting with groups of people. Now the concept of "being an observer" in my relationships, as Bowen put it, has a whole new meaning. I now experience all social relationships through the reality of my body instead of purely through my thoughts, which are mostly just fuel for anxiety. My body is the sole monitoring instrument for the world, and sensations are it's data. Through this mode of practice, I gain more freedom to choose when to think (about theory) and when to just tune into my physical senses. In this way, Vipassanā takes Bowen Theory much further by providing a deeper and profoundly more subtle understanding of how much my functioning is influenced by the environment and in turn how much the environment is influenced by my functioning. In a word, it's much, much, *more* than I thought before with years of just Bowen Theory, and I think Bowen would be proud!

Now, I know that it is nowhere close to practical to suggest to some poor struggling sod that the key to life is in learning to sit still for hours on end. If this was possible everyone would already be doing it. But this does not change the truth about the origin of their problems. I'm not suggesting that this project will directly point to specific ways to fix those problems, but I do think that it is important to understand - and be brave enough to accept - how we really work before we can get there. I don't think it is going to help us at all to stay stuck in our current linear-causal, individual-isolate way of thinking just so we can make ourselves feel better for a short while. If that's what we want then I remember that the exploding craft brew and spirit industry offers myriad fabulous ways to achieve that.

I think this is huge. Systems thinking is the future of science. Vipassan? is the way to systems thinking. Systems thinking is the way to Vipassan?. They are the same. Science and Vipassan? are the same. The "inter-being" of paticcasamupp?da is the "reciprocal, non-linear causality" in systems thinking. *Differentiation of self is equanimity and equanimity is differentiation of self.* Cut the feedback loop anywhere in the chain, and you have nibb?na, though it might hurt for a while first.

So somewhere in there is a dissertation.