

A Bowen/Vipassan? Perspective on Societal Emotional Process

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There is so much pain experienced after this election. Those who "lost" the election are experiencing fear, confusion, and depression, and at times ignorance of the dire situation that drove the "victors" to vote the way that they did. Those who "won" the election are so elated by their victory that they are at times ignoring the factors driving the intense fear in the opposition. In times of such unrest, it can help to work to understand the processes that created the situation in order to help us cope and influence these processes for the better. One way of understanding our political climate is through Bowen theory and lessons learned through the practice of vipassan?.

Looking at the world through a natural systems theory provides a uniform model that can be applied to all phenomena. This model of similarities is possible because it emphasizes focus on the universal relationships between elements in the model over the qualities of the elements.

A *natural systems perspective* on emotional process may apply to an individual, family, and society because it looks beyond the specific material of each unit to the similarities between the processes that maintain them. The material in an individual case may involve functioning of the body, mental balance, and existential wholeness. The material in a family case may involve marriage, divorce, sibling disputes, etc. The material for a society may include the role of government, foreign policy, and disputes on collective values. A *general systems* perspective will look at the similarities between *how* members of a family interact and cliques in a society interact, regardless of the content of the interaction. A *natural systems* perspective will also expand the scope of to universal patterns found in the rest of nature, for example among primates, microorganisms, and maybe even non-living natural systems.

In *Vipassan?*, particularly in *vedan?nupassan?* (developing understanding of impermanence through the observation of bodily sensations) as taught by S.N. Goenka, our task is to systematically develop simultaneous awareness of the sensations throughout our body at the subtlest level possible. That is, to be able to feel every part of our body at once. We do this "systematically" in order ensure that we are conducting a controlled experiment. That is, we don't dwell on a single sensation or cluster of sensations and we don't shift our awareness randomly throughout the body in order to resist the temptation to bias one sensation over another. This relatively mechanical *frame* of practice induces a control-variable in the scientific experiment of Vipassan?. This control variable keeps our attention from succumbing the gravitational pull generated by this or that bodily sensation, allowing us to develop a more objective scientific model of the nature of our mind and body.

This is important because when dullness allows the mind to succumb to this gravitational pull, it *collapses* the complexity of a cluster of subtle sensations into a single aggregate experience, i.e. "gross sensation." This gross sensation also tends to appear relatively permanent. "The pain in *my* leg is solid." For example, the relatively "loud" pain in the back may overwhelm the mind so that the "quieter" sensations in the stomach, thighs, arms, etc are missed. When the mind can only experience the loud sensation, it is not possible to see how all the sensations in the body are connected and influencing each other simultaneously. The effect is an fixation on the pain in the back and quite literally an "ignore-ance" of the broader context of factors leading to this pain.

Here we find an overlap in the way dysfunction is viewed across natural systems. The benefit of a systems theory is in moving away from a narrow linear-causal paradigm which implies that each *effect* has a single, isolated *cause*, and toward a mutual-causal paradigm which implies that all effects are simultaneously influencing each other as causes themselves.

For example, I may be completely convinced that the pain in my back is an isolated event that needs to be remedied by shifting posture, stretching, or taking medication. This conviction is so deep that it occurs automatically, i.e. unconsciously. It is instinctual. But from a *systems perspective*, the pain in my back is the symptomatic result of a complex network of interdependent conditions throughout the complex system of the body/mind. My instinctual conditioning is to react in order to "fix" the collapsed experience of the pain, but this ignores and pushes aside the myriad peripheral factors throughout the body contributing to the pain. So long as we remain ignorant of vast complexity of these peripheral factors, our ignorant reactions will continue to maintain the mal-adaptive structural organization of the complex system of body/mind.

There is no one, true escape from a symptom. All sensations are *dukkha* (suffering). All sensations are interdependent.

This is most simply experienced by the fact that it is impossible to find the "perfect" sitting position in a 10-day vipassan? course. A reaction to stop a gross sensation in one area of the body causes that sensation to subside, but simply causes a new sensation to arise in another location. A reaction to stop the new gross sensation will also cause it to subside, but then another gross sensation arises in yet another location. There is no escape.

The magic of the Vipassan? "prison" (Goenka, 1995) is that it forces a meditator to eventually accept all of these *sensation potentials* simultaneously by not reacting and simply sitting still. This is part of the purpose of the sittings of *adhi??h?na*, or "sittings of strong determination" at a 10-day course. The moment that that mind stops reacting and can hold all the gross sensations simultaneously, the complex system of mind and body slowly starts to reorganize its internal structure in order to adapt to the sensations instead of trying to change them. This is part of the magic of *annicca* (impermanence), realizing that the sensations are impermanent, and if the mind can avoid reacting, it will simply adapt. As the reaction subsides, so also do the sensations (Hart & Goenka, 1987). Stop feeding the endless loop of sensation/reaction, and both begin to fade.

My current understanding is that the potential to coerce a complex system to reorganize is common across all natural systems. Bowen suggests that a member of a family has the ability to cause their family system to restructure by developing the ability to observe the functioning of the system and avoiding unconscious emotional reactivity to the system's "drama." As occurs in Goenka's form of vipassanā, which involves sensations on the body instead of members of the family, Bowen suggested that if the one family member can remain in emotional contact with the family emotional system without getting involved in gossip and scapegoating (i.e. *triangulation*), the entire system will re-organize in a series of predictable steps (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In his discourse summaries, Goenka similarly mentions that those who live with a vipassanā meditator are drawn to that Vipassanā meditator, and the entire atmosphere of the house becomes "so pure, so full of joy" (Goenka, 1995).

In general systems theory this "going against the grain" is called *positive-feedback*, which describes any force that induces *change* in the system's organization. Bowen also suggested that the potential for positive-feedback induced through non-reactivity is present in societal emotional systems as well. *Negative-feedback* works to *prevent* change, and manifests in the body as gross sensations which have the purpose of triggering reaction and maintaining the habitual organization of the mind/body system, or triangles in the family emotional system to maintain comfortable but mal-adaptive family rules. Negative-feedback maintains the status-quo.

To a vipassanā meditator, this model provides a uniquely personal perspective on the social issues of our day. If we can see the complex systems of family, society, nation, and planet as subject to the same laws of nature as the complex system of mind/body as experienced in vipassanā, we should be able to apply the same principles of vipassanā across all of these systems. For example, the family reacts unconsciously to sankhāras (sensations/conditioning) of drama, which relieves symptoms in the short term fixes problems in place in the long term. This can be seen as blaming, backbiting, multiple members ganging up on a single member to relieve anxiety in themselves. The United States of America reacts unconsciously to sankhāras of political division, which perpetuates the turmoil throughout the system. This can be seen in the same patterns of blaming, name-calling, backbiting, and political factions groups ganging up on other factions to relieve their own anxiety. The sankhāras serve as a negative-feedback force intended to trigger unconscious reactions that maintain the status-quo.

Just as the sensations of a meditator's body arise, sustain, and pass away, the "body" of each of these complex systems goes through phases of progression and regression as determined by patterns of unconscious reaction to its environment. According to the model I am proposing, these systems will never see real, lasting change until some neutralizing (i.e. equanimous) force is induced to coerce the system toward reorganization. A *truly* neutralizing force will cause even more symptoms in the short term, but these "false threats" are always impermanent and will eventually subside so long as the positive-feedback is truly neutralizing. Real, lasting, transcendent change will eventually set in as the system reorganizes itself to accommodate the neutralizing force. The result is a complex system of body/mind, family, society, or planet that still experiences pain but

one that recovers more quickly because its new internal organization is more adaptive to change.

In the new-age spiritual vernacular of our day, it is still the same system as before - nothing has been added or removed - but something *within* it has changed altogether. Like a business model optimized for success, the system has simply reorganized to better adapt. It has evolved.

At the level of Vipassan? meditation, this neutralizing force is the combination of awareness and equanimity as attention passes over bodily sensations. In his 10-day discourses Goenka says that each person has their own way to understand this process, and my comparison to complex systems may be one such way. Goenka also describes a metallurgist's way to understand the process, where a meditator's scanning attention of bodily sensations acts like a ring of "ultra-pure" metal which draws out the impurities of another metal in the metallic purification process (Goenka, 1995).

At the level of the family, Bowen suggests that a relatively strong member may induce positive feedback by taking a principled stand against unconscious, mal-adaptive rules of the family. These kinds of rules involve coercing members to morbidly sacrifice themselves to ensure the survival of the group, for example where a dependent individual might take part in destructive drinking rituals to avoid threat of expulsion. Giving into these rules by sacrificing self is easier in the short term but causes problems for both the individual and the group in the long term.

At the social level, a neutralizing force can come in the form of a massive social movement, or even a single person. Seen through Bowen's model, the Civil Rights movement probably progressed so well as it's members took a principled stand a la MLK, and regressed so long as it's members became malicious and thoughtlessly violent. Ghandi is an example of a single person acting as a profoundly powerful neutralizing force. He transcended the issues of the day by taking a principled personal stand to change himself without forcing others to join in. Ghandi simply "worked on self," as Bowen would put it, without fueling the fire of the political climate by getting involved in the drama of one or another side.

This integration of Bowen theory and Vipassan? can help us understand today's intense political climate without becoming overwhelmed by or estranged from it. Three days out from this election, the fallout is already generating myriad "gross-sensations" throughout our society and around the world. Seen through the model described above, these clusters of *gross societal sensations* should be treated by a vipassan? meditator as gross sensations in the body, no matter how strong and how "evil" they may appear. Nazi-inspired graffiti, sexual predation, school bullying, media bias, name calling, side taking, arguing, complaining - all are annicca, anatt?, dukkha: *sabbe sankh?ra annicca*. Each one of the above painful societal sensations equate to the unconscious emotional rules of the family that work to coerce a member to morbidly sacrifice themselves to maintain the maladaptive process in the family. At the societal level, violence and political upheaval define the status-quo, symptoms of the structural organization (i.e. unconscious rules) of the societal emotional system, which similarly serve to coerce its

constituent parts into self-sacrifice to preserve the mail-adaptive organizational structure.

The kicker is that just as every sensation in the body is connected as one phenomena, not a single one of us is exempt from the potential to have a major, definitive impact on our societal system. At an intellectual level, systems theory helps us see how all phenomena are connected. At an experiential level, the practice of vipassan? develops the subtlety of mind required to see the exactly how all of these phenomena - sensations, people, organisms - are intimately and absolutely connected to the systems that they comprise.

This intimate connection suggests that we should remain in contact with our society while exercising *perfect s?la* (morality), as s?la precisely defines a truly neutralizing force that is *vital* to reducing suffering. So long as we perfect right livelihood, right action, and most importantly right speech, we will safely "go against the grain" of the status quo and coerce the societal system to restructure around us. Perfect s?la basically equates to avoiding Bowen's *triangulation* and working consciously *with* the system instead of unconsciously *for* it. No more backbiting, no more violence, no more expecting others to provide for you; instead just diligently "working on self" in order to be able to provide as much as possible to a more evolved systemic organization.

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

Not a single moment is exempt from the laws that govern natural systems. Every moment we watch horrible events on the news, join with friends to soothe our wounds, and perform our responsibilities to sustain our families and societies, we absolutely must practice perfect s?la in order to stop contributing to the very same problems that we are trying to cope with.

This is how change is made on a large scale. This approach is the definition of *systemic change*. Complaining and taking sides will get us nowhere. We can only set an example, and the stronger and more equanimous our example the broader it's impact will be.

References

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