

Research Question: Did the Buddha define a Natural Systems Theory?

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The most profound distinction that we know in nature is that between spontaneity and consciousness, between the blind actions of natural forces and systematic human efforts. Here we can expect the greatest heterogeneity of methods and their irreducibility to a unity. Here is the best place to start our research. - Alexander Bodganov, 1910-1913

To what extent did the Buddha define a natural systems theory of the body and mind as a unit, and what testable hypotheses and practical outcomes might this theory generate?

The term *natural systems theory* is taken here from Murray Bowen's theory of the family as an emotional unit. Bowen's family systems theory, or *Bowen theory* as it was later renamed to differentiate from misinterpretation by the family therapy movement as a mere series of therapeutic interventions, is a component theory of human behavior created to be compatible with systems thinking in general and biological evolution in particular. As I understand it, Bowen differentiated his *natural systems theory* as being derived more from *direct* observation of nature and less on ideas originating from the human mind such as mathematics in general systems theory or mechanical control systems in cybernetics. His ultimate goal was to create a theory that might some day lead to a science of human behavior derived purely from nature and accepted among the ranks of astronomy, paleontology, etc (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Reaching back at least to Aristotle, systems thinking is a philosophical response to increased compartmentalization of, and decreased communication between, the scientific disciplines and attempts to generate a set of common scientific principles which may one day unite the sciences (Laszlo, 1971; M'Pherson, 1974; Wilson, 1999). Systems thinkers argue that the philosophy of reducing nature into component parts is important but also limits the potential of science, and that a synthesis is eventually required to allow for solving problems using multiple levels of analysis (M'Pherson, 1974). In typical pragmatic fashion, Micheal Kerr (1988) writes:

While many clinicians have long recognized the importance of assessing variables from many levels of observation, it has been difficult to do this in the absence of an integrative theory. An integrative theory would provide a systematic way of collecting, organizing and integrating information from all levels of observation. In the absence of such a theory, there is a strong tendency in all clinicians to compartmentalize knowledge and to focus treatment on a particular compartment. Clinicians become knowledgeable about and develop therapeutic expertise in specific areas, but frequently attach too little importance to areas

outside their knowledge and expertise. (kpp. 6)

Similarly, E. O. Wilson (1999) writes to the dysfunction of Western education in his book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*,

Every college student should be able to answer the following question: What is the relation between science and the humanities, and how is it important to human welfare? ... Every public intellectual and political leader should be able to answer that question as well. (kpp. 26)

Systems thinking approaches this problem by describing systems in terms of how the components relate to one another as opposed to describing the isolated qualities of constituent elements. This promotes a conceptual conduit *between* theories which may cover different natural phenomena, because procedural qualities in relationships tend to be easier expressed in universal terms where qualities of components tend to be expressed more specifically to their particular system (Laszlo, 1971). For example, the term "ego" describes a component of the psyche but does not transfer well to the sciences. The term "phase-transition" describes the process of a complex system moving from one level of organization to another, and can be easily applied to social development of ants, mutation in evolutionary biology, shifts in growth in the economy, human learning theory, antelope population levels, homogeneity in guitar distortion, the triggering of snow avalanches by the collapse of hoar frost, the moment a collection of "non-living" matter becomes self-organizing, reproducing, and therefore "living," and so on.

Bowen was interested in a theory of human behavior that would one day fit into a comprehensive integrative theory that would have to be "in harmony with the sun and the earth, the tides and the seasons" (Kerr & Bowen, kpp. 401). He thought it most likely "that separate systems theories will be developed from the *direct* study of specific natural systems, and that it will then be possible to integrate these separate theories into a more comprehensive one" (kpp. 9). His seminal contribution to an integrative theory was a well-researched theory of the human family as an emotional unit. It is possible that Bowen theory may remain the only well-researched natural systems theory of a living system.

I hypothesize that if considered as scientific theory and *not* as religious doctrine, the earliest teachings of the historical Buddha also define a natural system: a relationship system of mind and body in the individual which is simultaneously a part of the family, societal, and planetary ecological systems as defined by Bowen. I propose this theory of the individual for consideration as "Vipassan? theory," named after *Vipassan? meditation* which is the practical application of the Buddha's teachings. If this is true, then Vipassan? theory could one day contribute to an integrative theory which might help unite the sciences through systems thinking.

This hypothesis is derived from an analysis of striking similarities between Bowen theory and Vipassan? theory, namely: the adoption of a mutual-causal model (Macy, 1991) opposing the linear-causal model upon which the "gold-standard" Randomized Control Trial depends (Puhakka, 2015); an emphasis on normalizing patterns in relationships instead of reducing and separating elemental qualities; and the suggestion that change occurs via a sort of ordered disorder similar to what chaos theory prescribes for complex systems (Fleischman, 1999); and most importantly the absolute prioritization of an ontological search into nature with the relief of symptoms as a by-product, not a goal.

Further, it may be no small coincidence that Vipassana theory defines the problem of human suffering in seemingly identical terms as Bowen: *as a failure to internally modulate one's own automatic reactivity at the deepest levels in response to the external environment* (Fleischman, 2009; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Finally, the practical application of these two theories appear to stem from one common principle: *the development of objectivity in the face of anxiety in order to understand the context of the problem in nature, with the ultimate goal of improving interpersonal relationships.*

These two natural systems theories could just as easily have been developed to explain widely dissimilar topics, such as the proximal organization of moss colonies and the ebb and flow of monarch butterfly populations. But somehow they both landed on the regulation of affect to improve human relationships.

If a scientific finding gains value when connected with other scientific findings (Wilson, 1999), then what would it mean to find consilience among the ideas of an ancient "super-scientist" (Hart & Goenka, 1987) and an influential yet misunderstood researcher like Murray Bowen? What would it mean if what these researchers had in common suggests a new scientific paradigm that stands at odds with the paradigmatic assumptions of mainstream clinical psychology? What if a synthesis of these two theories was also able to generate concrete, testable hypotheses with practical implications for clinical work while simultaneously promoting deeper coordination with the natural sciences?

Simplistic pragmatism and compatibility with science have lead to an astounding surge in the popularity of the teachings of the Buddha in the West and now create an opportunity for them to grow deep roots in new and emerging epistemologies. This study proposes that Vipassan? theory may contain vastly uncharted benefits for modern science which current "mindfulness" techniques will fail to reveal so long as they are removed from their original practical context. A comparison of these teachings to Bowen's systems thinking may reveal a robust pathway to deeper epistemological benefits for science while setting the stage for another step toward an accepted science of human behavior.

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