

Challenges to the Study of Vipassan? Meditation

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The following is a draft section from the introduction chapter of my dissertation proposal, which addresses the problem of erosion of benefits of vipassan? from the conflation of widely different Buddhist traditions in popular and scientific literature and confusion of technical terms in vipassan? from their original traditional context. It is mean to be read after the posts:

- [1. Complexity in Science](#)
- [2. Compartmentalization in Science and Society](#)
- [3. Challenges to Psychology as a Science](#)

We turn now to a review of the relationship between vipassan? meditation, the essential and postpositive science. The preceding sections represent a rather broad philosophical discussion to demonstrate that the major challenges facing psychology as a science of human behavior are not only technical but pertain to the paradigmatic assumptions of reductionistic science in general. Some of these paradigmatic challenges may, in turn, limit the potential for vipassan? meditation to contribute to the study of human behavior and could be overcome through a shift from a reductionistic paradigm to a natural systems paradigm. This hypothesis assumes that vipassan? has something to do with knowledge or a framework for obtaining of knowledge and that this knowledge or framework for obtaining knowledge may be organizable within the paradigm of systems philosophy. If true, the most direct outcome of this effort would be differentiating what is science from what is religion in vipassan?, if any such distinction were found. An indirect outcome of this goal is examining the potential for the historical Buddha to have produced a theory of human behavior and the hypothesis, the understanding of which necessitates knowledge of universal laws and patterns of organization that govern the rest of our environment much like the goals of systems philosophy in general.

Confusion of Traditions and Technical Terms

In "The New Buddhism," Coleman (2001) reviews the dramatic transformation occurring within ethnic Buddhist traditions as they transmigrate into the Western scientific worldview. Progressive Western perspectives on science and spirituality challenge stagnating conservative traditions, while the rapid and often superficial assimilation of ancient structures threatens the richness of millennia of evolution. It has now been 2500 years since the life of the Buddha, and the staggering number and variation of the traditions that have evolved from the singular achievement of this historical figure poses a challenge for historical scholarship. The Buddha himself made statements in line with Max Weber's (as cited in Coleman, 2001) assertion: "Once any charismatic religious teacher dies, the message must be 'routined' if it is to continue," and that there is a degree of erosion inherent in this routinization. Historical figures who inspire a new way of thinking

possess a unique mix of qualities which enable them to see through the homogeneity of the time but also create the likelihood that their followers may not possess the ability to maintain the message or principles at the same level. Further, the varying opinions, perspectives, and accumulative contributions of the founder's followers and their cultural contexts influence the teaching over time.

What sets the Buddha's discovery apart from religious traditions is the comprehensive step-by-step instructions for replicating his discovery, followed by an appeal for each meditator to strive to prove him wrong (Hart, 1987). This crucial aspect of the teaching suggests that the vipassanā rests squarely within the postpositive scientific paradigm. At the same time, all traditions hold that a Buddha's ability to teach his discovery is so rare that the knowledge generated by it will slowly erode as a function of his students' lesser capacity to comprehend and transmit it. A Buddha is defined as a normal living being who has developed a profoundly rare mixture of talent and commitment to the care of all beings. Buddhas are so rare that only one exists in the world at a time and the time between them is uncountable (Bodhi, 2013). This rare mixture of qualities enables this living being to rediscover the *dhamma* (Sanskrit: dharma), or universal "law of nature" (Hart, 1987), through profoundly rigorous experiment without the aid of a teacher. It is precisely this unaided rediscovery of the dhamma that makes an otherwise ordinary living being a *samāsambuddha*, or perfect Buddha (Bodhi, 2013). In contrast to religious traditions, this designation is not meant to elevate the Buddha to a divine status outside the realm of science and everyday life. There have been and will be many Buddhas who emerge as a function of a set of fluctuating natural conditions just as the global water supply is in a constant flux between states of evaporation into clouds and condensation into rain.

All Buddhas teach the same message: the nature of suffering and the way out of suffering. However, because of a Buddha's rare perfection, that message is the most "pure" when given by the original teacher and slowly loses its purity as the Buddha's followers do their best to preserve the teaching. In the earliest known traditions, this erosion is said to occur in part through the creation of sects which provide status to members of each sect, the introduction of rights, rituals, and blind belief, etc. Any of these contribute to the concept of Buddhism or the dhamma as an "organized religion" (Goenka, 2012, p. 57).

Now, within the preceding statement, we already face a bifurcation in traditional conceptions of what these teachings are and one of the most important challenges for relating these teachings into the Western scientific tradition. Shortly following the Buddha's death, a large gathering of his most devoted students, known as *the sangha*, gathered to record the entirety of his sermons before they were lost from memory. This gathering is known as the *First Buddhist Council*. About seventy years later, the sangha gathered again to discuss the rules of monastic conduct and the first major philosophical schism formed in the sangha. Conservatives (the remnants of which are today called the *Theravada*, or Teaching of the Elders) represented a simple step-by-step teaching with concrete concepts and emphasis on individual rigor and attainment for the good of all beings. Reformists (the remnants of which are today called the *Mahāyāna*, or Great Vehicle) who promoted

a more cosmological perspective on the teachings with an emphasis on a special relationship between student and teacher (Bodhi, 2013). Both factions agreed that the Buddha only taught the same method (known as *satipa??h?na*, which comprises the theoretical basis for vipassan? meditation) that he used to attain his enlightenment, but that he obtained a more “perfect” enlightenment due to his following a much longer and profoundly rigorous path than any one of his followers. This longer path is known as the path of the *bodhisatta* (Sanskrit: bodhisattva), and the schism remains rooted in the Mah?y?na’s express denunciation of the classical, individual path of vipassan? as a “lesser” path. Today there are many dispensations of the Buddha’s teachings in the Mah?y?na tradition, the more notable being the Japanese tradition of *Zen*, and the Tibetan tradition of *Vajray?na*, or the Diamond Vehicle.

Numerous extant traditions are carrying the Buddhist label while promoting concepts and pedagogies that may be antithetical to another tradition also claiming to be Buddhist. The consequences of both popular and academic literature ignoring subtle traditional differences are a weak conception of what the literature assumes that the Buddha taught, what the practical implications for these differences are, and how to handle contradictory definitions for technical terms in related research. Thus, the challenge for any substantive philosophical study in this domain is to define which tradition is examined and for what purpose. This is a most challenging task due to the difficulty in differentiating between the major traditions based on knowledge gained from popular and scientific literature. For example, the author of this study required three years to conduct an intensive comparative study which required the experience of practice and contact with advanced teachers in multiple traditions to develop this basic skill. This wonderfully fruitful but rather lonely effort was all the more difficult by the fact that it stood at odds with the stated goals of teachers and students in each tradition, which was to teach their tradition in the way that they had were taught. Nevertheless, a deep understanding of technical terms is crucial for any serious theoretical endeavor in this domain however inaccessible this information may be.

One barrier to this effort was the common practice for popular authors of nearly all traditional modalities to label ethnocentric practices as Buddhist, while those practices might be incompatible with another tradition also claiming to be Buddhist. One tradition [ref] may use the term “Buddhist religion” when another (Hart, 1987) may stand quite specifically against using the terms “Buddhist” and “religion” when referring to their own practical frameworks which they attribute to the same historical figure. Modern historians tend to attribute the terms Buddhism and Buddhist to a projection onto the group of philosophical traditions by Western scholars who are used to discussing spirituality and metaphysics in terms of organized religion (Coleman, 2001). Some authors will go to great lengths to point out a Buddhist religion does not exist in any form in any tradition. Germer (2013) writes,

It cannot be overemphasized that Buddhist psychology is not a religion in the familiar, theistic sense, although Buddhists in some Eastern cultures worship the Buddha’s teachings and image. The historical Buddha (563-483 B.C.E.) is understood to have been a human being, not a god, and his life’s work was dedicated to alleviating psychological

suffering. (p. 14)

However, while technical incompatibilities exist, all traditions do share a common thread: a pragmatic, practical framework with a clear, logical formulations; the priority of personal experience over doctrine or another's opinion, including that of the Buddha himself; the sole aim of the relief of suffering in all beings. There are stories from the Buddha's life which locate his teachings within the objective realm and apart from the realm of religious belief system. The following story of two earthen pots is one such example. A young man who was suffering from the death of his father came to the Buddha asking him to perform a ritual so that his father could gain access to heaven. The Buddha could see that the young man was too agitated to accept a logical explanation of his teaching and so he asked him to gather two earthen pots, one filled with butter and the other with pebbles. After the young man had done so, the Buddha asked him to place the pots in the river and break them with a long stick. The Buddha then asked him to call his priests and have them pray for the stones to rise to the surface of the water as the butter did. When the boy protested at the illogical task, the Buddha explained to the boy that while he understood the reliability of the law of nature, he did not apply the same knowledge to one and all. The Buddha said that there was nothing he could do for his father; If his father performed actions like pebbles, he will go down like pebbles, if he performed good actions he would go up like butter (Goenka, 2008).

This logical, pragmatic formulation of the teachings along with the rather postpositivist appeal for each meditator to validate them for oneself is a message apart from the typical system of religious faith. Confusing this empirical message with the function of belief in religion (Deegalle, 2017; Hackley & Hackley, 2015; Moore, 2017; Trammel, 2015) poses an obvious opinion/fact conundrum for experimentation. If a framework does not include a system for objective verification, then the framework exists within a subjective domain and cannot be compared with similar frameworks on general terms. This conundrum is similar to that facing clinical theories derived from Freud's psychology (Zepf, 2010), which Popper (2002) would place on the same level as myth or religious belief.

A specific example can illustrate one way to demarcate realms. All major religions include an ethical system which revolves around a common set of concepts like abstaining from killing, stealing, lying, inappropriate sexual conduct, etc. However, the foundation for moral conduct (*sila*) taught by the Buddha is not taught as a divine mandate but as an integral and pragmatic component to developing the profound level of *samadhi* (concentration; unbroken attention on a needle-sized area of focus as it systematically moves through the entire body, part by part) required to support the development of *pañña* (wisdom; the rigorous examination of the entire physical and mental structure). *Pañña* is the essential component for understanding the nature of suffering as it applies to that physical and mental structure (Goenka, 1998). Though developing even the most preliminary level of progress in the field of *samadhi* requires multiple days of sustained practice in a controlled environment, all effort goes to waste without first obtaining from the various amoral activities that steal one's attention and cause more agitation in the mind. In a

nutshell, one simply can't concentrate when the conscience is screaming for attention.

The proposition is that any meditator who works correctly will eventually discover the relationship between sila and samadhi in a way that can be operationalized as a falsifiable hypothesis. For example, a person who has sexual misconduct or intentionally kills living beings might not progress far enough into the field of samadhi (and so also the field of pañña as defined by the circular relationship between pañña and samadhi) to be able to sit through a 20-day or 30-day vipassanā in literal stillness and silence. These standardized courses taught by S. N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin follow a highly-structured daily format through which every moment is attributed to practice, and are reserved for advanced meditators who have made various prerequisite commitments. One of these prerequisites is sustaining the maintenance of a particular level of sila for the year prior to taking the course. The experimental hypothesis for this relationship between sila and samadhi might be that a person with this sort of conduct would be too agitated to manage the intrusive thoughts and bodily sensations known to plague all meditators at this level. If a significant sample of meditators were able to complete such a course having only followed instructions to develop samadhi and pañña, then the hypothesis would be false.

Sila, samadhi, and pañña form the inseparable tripartite core of the practical teaching of the Buddha (Polanski, 2015). Popular religions often enforce ethical frameworks with similar rules but outside of the context of a precisely defined cause-and-effect relationship with other parts of their belief system. The exclusion of a precise causal relationship between ethical conduct and other facets of the belief system opens the possibility for individuals to exclude ethical conduct from the overall framework, or to create their own explanations and/or assumptions about the role of that ethical conduct. If the Buddha's teachings are conceived as a religion in this way, it is easier to ship the practices for developing samadhi and pañña without sila in the box as is the case with modern mindfulness-informed therapies such as MBSR, ACT, DBT, etc. The same argument can be made for shipping sila and samadhi without pañña as was the case prior to the Buddha's crucial discovery (Goenka, 2012), or with sila and pañña without samadhi, as is often the case in popularized forms of vipassanā taught in shorter length meditation courses today.

In academic research, differentiating between various dispensations of the Buddha's teachings is just as crucial as differentiating between the Buddha's teachings and organized religious teachings. The Tibetan traditions, known as *Vajrayāna*, or the Diamond Vehicle, mix Mahāyāna Buddhism with the later Indian spiritual framework known as *tantra* (Patrul Rinpoche, 1998). Tibetans practice mental visualization and the vibratory power of spoken mantra where Theravadin eschew practices which deviate from bare observation of involuntary experience (e.g., bodily sensation generated without the intention of the observer). This practical conflict poses a challenge related to the paradigmatic conceptions of observer bias for a researcher attempting to relate the practice to a particular objective metric. Further, the Pāli Canon, the scriptural product of the First Buddhist Council and essential record of the Buddha's own words (Nānamoli, 1992), contains statements declaring never to mix any practice with vipassanā. This statement would stand in conflict with the use of tantra in Tibetan Buddhism, and mantra in Tibetan and other

Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, and even the use of psychotherapy or acupuncture for meditators at certain levels.

All Mahāyāna traditions teach an exclusive collection of sutras (sermons in the oral tradition later recorded in Sanskrit) given by the Buddha but not necessarily attributed to his lifetime (Williams P. , 2009). These sutras are said to have been “revealed” at a later time as an effect of his attainment similar to an echo on a stone wall. Rigorous theoretical examination reveals this suggestion to be entirely plausible within the theoretical boundaries of all traditions but stands at odds with the widely-accepted declaration by the Buddha that the entirety of the teaching is simple and that there are no secret teachings.

Zen traditions contain practices based on passive observation of involuntary phenomena which resemble the conservative Theravadin empirical philosophy, but which also incorporate other practices aimed at the use of logic and the intellect apart from bare observation which conflict with Theravadin bare observation.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet is a uniquely gifted figure who often promotes a wonderfully evolved relationship between science and religion (Dalai Lama, 2005). However, it is not uncommon for him to use the umbrella term “Buddhist” to refer to exclusive Tibetan practices that are not only antithetical to Theravadin practices but taught by the Theravada to be counterproductive to the relief of suffering. The Tibetans, Zen, and countless other Mahāyāna traditions typically perform rites and rituals: bowing in reverence to the Buddha to counting mantra repetitions using mantra beads; withholding secret teachings for advanced meditators; or the use of icons of the Buddha or other ethnic deities which are explicitly forbidden as corruptive to the supposed “purity” of the empirical framework taught by the conservative traditions.

All traditions agree that the bodhisatta (Mahāyāna) path is the higher path aimed at delaying the attainment of enlightenment. However, the Theravada reserve that path for the profoundly rare and exceptional meditator to find on their own while the stated goal of the Mahāyāna is to teach the higher path directly to all students (Bodhi, 2013). Theravadins teach that a meditator must work for their own salvation to assist in the salvation of others (“you can’t help others until you first help yourself”) and that those with a propensity for the bodhisatta path will gravitate naturally toward it. In contrast, Mahāyāna traditions claim that this classical view is by definition short-sighted and selfish and that the higher path should be taught directly and from the cosmological perspective of enlightenment using terminology that is more difficult to grasp.

Similar to differing research methods among scientific paradigms, philosophical incompatibilities among these traditions generate vast practical and paradigmatic differences (Bodhi, 2013). These differences revolve around teaching style and the choice and interpretation of one of the four objects of contemplation (body, sensations in the body, mind, thoughts in the mind) in the core teaching of satipatthana (Anālayo, 2003). Just as in science, these philosophical positions provide different aspects from which to view what appears to be a common domain of

knowledge. In Buddhist modalities, these differences provide an array of choices more or less appropriate to a student's preferred learning style. Thus, the purpose of this brief critique is not to make a case for one tradition over another but to point out the potential consequences of conflating their technical and philosophical aspects in the pursuit of differentiating science from religion in the teachings. All the major traditions have produced exceptional individuals: Webu Sayadaw in the Theravada tradition (U Ba Khin, 2012), Thich Nhat Hanh in the Zen Mahayana tradition, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the Tibetan Mahayana tradition, to name a few. Each of these figures has contributed immeasurably to the quality of life around the world and the understanding the teachings of this single historical figure. However, conflating the unique strengths and weaknesses of different traditional modalities in the literature confuses and misrepresents traditional technical terms which in turn limits the potential for the Western scientific community to reap the benefits of the unique strengths of any one tradition. This study aims to address this problem by producing a theoretical formulation that sufficiently reviews any dependence on a specific traditional context (the classical, pre-sectarian view) as well as incompatibilities within another traditional context (the reformist, Mahayana view and possibly also the sectarian Theravadin view).

Vipassana in Clinical Literature

The weak distinction between traditions is as present in the scientific literature as it is in popular literature. One experiment may use a randomized trial to measure the effect of a "Buddhist walking meditation" on a quantitative biological metric (Gainey, Himathongkam, Tanaka, & Suksom, 2016) while gross body movements conflicts with the necessity of remaining still in seated position to reach the higher stages of insight during the most common and essential practice of satipatthana as taught by some traditions (Goenka, 1998). Another experiment measuring the effect of John Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training on relationship variables (Gillespe, Davey, & Flemke, 2015) may describe MBSR as a "Buddhist" meditation when in fact the MBSR framework goes against warnings in most Buddhist traditions against engaging their practices for the relief of a symptom or syndrome as opposed to a deeper understanding of the nature of all symptoms (Hart, 1987) [ref: Suzuki article from Kaisa's class]. These traditions teach that practicing vipassana will probably affect a change in the symptom for the short term but will ignore the broader systemic causal context of this and other symptoms. At a more superficial level is the conflation of the exponentially larger set of traditional practices in RCT experiments (Melloni, et al., 2013) (find one more?) which control for "meditation" as an independent variable while actually controlling for only one technique among the countless techniques or modern clinical interventions originating either within or without a Buddhist tradition. Different meditation techniques can have widely different purposes, side effects, and actual outcomes, and distinguishing a traditional (or modern) technical context can avoid drawing incorrect conclusions about experimental results.

Some researchers are aware of these problems and work to make them known. A common thread between this cohort seems to be the maintenance of a devoted personal practice contributing to the clarification of unique features within their tradition or the dangers of conflating

technical terms between traditions. Also, the odd article (Chiesa, 2012; David, 2014; Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003; Gardner, Moore, & Marks, 2014; Lee, 2017) will address the need for better-operationalized constructs in research and might also propose a new experimental model, typically with regards to mindfulness interventions. John Kabot-Zinn (1998) has probably made the largest contribution to this effort by producing Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Framework (MBSR) which includes standardized practices and an eight-week coaching certification program. Early conventional (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985) and longitudinal (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995) statistical support behind this simple and cost effective treatment modality have made the term *mindfulness* both a clinical and household term. Kabat-Zinn has considerable training in traditional Buddhist practices having trained with well-known Zen-Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Seungahn (Wilson J. , 2014). His work to develop the MBSR program represents a unique formulation of ancient mindfulness practices while maintaining a level of compatibility with the ancient traditional context of mindfulness, which is no simple task. The MBSR has made the most superficial benefits of the Buddha's teaching of the cessation of suffering accessible to the average person and put the concept of mindfulness on the map.

Nevertheless, researchers (Lee, 2017; Nilsson, 2013; Polanski, 2015; Zeng, Oei, & Lui, 2014) including Kabat-Zinn himself (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) remain cautious about problems associated with removing such techniques from their traditional context and altering them to fit the scientific paradigm. Kabat-Zinn asks, "Is there potential for something priceless to be lost through secular applications of aspects of a larger culture which has a long and venerable, dare we say, sacred tradition of its own?" (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 4). We answer with an affirmative "yes." Zeng (2015) argues the potential to conflation of technical terms such as *awareness*, *attention*, and *equanimity* which have subtle but precise meanings in relation to the goals of the traditional practice of vipassan? as taught by S. N. Goenka: "Equanimity without awareness only solves superficial problems while ignoring deeper ones, and high awareness without equanimity causes even more suffering because it makes people more sensitive to pain" (pp. 1699-1700).

While both ACT and DBT support the novel third-wave philosophy of developing the capacity to observe and "let go" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 148) of troubling thoughts and symptoms as symptoms instead of reality, neither makes the crucial link between these adverse experiences and bodily sensations. MBSR and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MCBT) incorporate observation of the body particularly when treating chronic pain, but do not go so far as to include the development of the faculty to feel "subtle bodily sensations" (Zeng, Oei, & Lui, 2014, p. 1694) vital to developing an understanding of the broader systemic relationships between a symptom and processes in the rest of the body. In traditional vipassan?, "stronger emotions such as anger are associated with changes in breathing, and subtler emotive activities such as satisfaction may be associated with subtle bodily sensations such as slight vibrations throughout the body" (Zeng, Oei, & Lui, 2014, p. 1694). Both desirable and undesirable experiences are taught to manifest similarly in the body, for example, increased heart rate or breathing rate for both anger and elation. Moment-to-moment reactions of attraction or aversion to the sensations that initiated or are generated by

these events amplify the emotional rollercoaster that is suffering and would develop neutral observation of all experiences regardless of valence and not just undesirable experiences (Bodhi, 2013; Goenka, Satipatthana Sutta Discourses, 1998; Young, 1994).

Traditionally, the non-reactive observation of both positive and negative experiences is what allows a person to transcend the old pattern of “rolling” (Goenka, 2012, p. 80) in the emotional rollercoaster of suffering. This nonjudgmental stance toward all phenomena regardless of perceived valence implies a key aspect of traditional forms of vipassana, which is the priority of the search for the “truth,” whatever that may be, over fixing a single problem (Hart, 1987). This is the reasoning for the practice of vipassana to be the path to the “unconditioned realm” (Polanski, 2015, p. 26), in that happiness is seen as a state that is unconditional, it is not dependent on the sensorial environment in any way. Unfortunately, as in science, the yet-to-be-discovered truth is not always what we want it to be. This is why teachers in many traditions first will assess an individual’s capacity to take on more difficult levels of practice. Progress in vipassana does not always appear to be linear and a student may not be ready to work through the deeper complexes that await them.

Unfortunately, the current philosophy of curing isolated problems with isolated fixes in positive medicine (Fulton, 2014) is not always compatible with the suggestion that progress in vipassana may not always appear to be linear. “By categorizing mental suffering as analogous to other forms of physical illness, medicine abandoned explanations that were metaphysical, theological, or moral in nature. . . Medicalization may give a false impression that any suffering is evidence that ‘something is wrong with me,’ and is therefore potentially treatable” (Fulton, 2014, pp. 209-210). Sometimes a meditator may appear to be regressing when they begin to exhibit symptoms that may be unrelated to the original presenting symptom.

For example, a back ache, cold, or “dark night” (Fleischman P. R., 2015, p. 18) of depression may emerge when the individual originally became interested in meditation simply to feel satisfied in their job. In the traditional context, The Second Noble Truth of suffering (Goenka, 2012) describes the nature of all symptoms as the result of a complex web of conditions present in the body and mind. Unforeseen issues may arise naturally as the mind and body work through more fixed complexes in deeper levels of practice (Young, 1994). The deeper a practice becomes, the more complex and unforeseen the connections between the presenting problem and the conditions which contribute to it may be, and the more important that these seemingly impertinent issues are addressed in the seemingly random order that they emerge. It is for this reason that why Shinzen Young (1994) warns,

We are chock full of sources of unhappiness which are completely foreign to our being. It is not in the nature of consciousness to suffer. However, we have acquired certain limiting forces: cravings and aversions, painful memories, inappropriate yet habitual behavior patterns, and so forth. . . When we sit down and do this practice that’s all going to come up. So you don’t always feel good while doing Vipassana meditation. In fact you might feel

lousy. I know, having heard that, some of you may want to leave right now. You say, "I thought meditation is supposed to make a person feel great." Yes, in the long run, but an important aspect of meditation is to sit down and start working through the sources of not feeling great, whatever they may be. You literally eat your way through them, one after another, after another, after another. How? By just being mindful and having equanimity, that's all. Whatever comes up, you'll observe it and you'll do nothing. You'll be very aware and that's all. (p. 2)

Prominent teacher of vipassanā meditation Acharya S. N. Goenka (2012) uses the technical explanation of this process in terms of saṅkhāras, or reactionary artifacts of past conditioning which arise as mental or physical symptoms during this process of purification. In a summarized publication of the discourses for his standardized 10-day silent vipassanā courses, Goenka writes,

Any moment in which one does not generate a new saṅkhāra, one of the old ones will arise on the surface of the mind, and along with it a sensation will start within the body. If one remains equanimous, it passes away and another old reaction arises in its place. One continues to remain equanimous to physical sensations and the old saṅkhāra continue to arise and pass away, one after another. If out of ignorance one reacts to sensations, then one multiplies the saṅkhāra, multiplies one's misery. But if one develops wisdom and does not react to sensations, then one after another the saṅkhāra are eradicated, misery is eradicated. (p. 43)

Paul Fleischman (2015), possibly the only student authorized to give discourses to experienced students on his behalf, writes within the context of Goenka's particular style of observing bodily sensations, "Meditation practiced in this way is a wide containing systems practice. It is dynamic and changing, not one thing, but a collection of many things held together in a more elastic and resilient psychological capacity" (p. 5). Fleischman continues,

And we all need to keep in mind that all of us, all of the time, to some greater or lesser degree, are subject to our common human frailties of anxiety, depression, panic, and other forms of mental suffering. That's why we seek out meditation in the first place. Meditation does not cause all of the anxiety, confusion, or "dark night" that occurs in the lives of people who have meditated, because those people have had many other influences upon them before and after they meditated, such as their genes, family, religion, school, etc. (pp. 17-18)

This concept of nonlinear progression in vipassanā meditation points to an important gap in the literature regarding the limitations and adverse experiences in mindfulness therapies (Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen, & Britton, 2017). This gap could be an effect of reductionistic thinking within

the medical model (Fulton, 2014; Lee, et al., 2017; Polanski, 2015), which limits the scope of a problem to the successful application of its singular solution. “By placing all our misery at the feet of psychotherapy or psychopharmacology, thereby implying it is a disorder, a precious opportunity to encounter the truth of life’s difficulty may be lost” (Fulton, 2014, p. 210). Engler (Wilbur, Engler, & Brown, 1986) quotes an Asian meditation teacher who puts it simply: “Many Western students do not meditate. They do therapy. They do not go deep with mindfulness” (p. 29).

In short, a reductionistic understanding of vipassanā meditation enforces a symptom-oriented view which is both inaccurate and insufficient for describing the practice. A vipassanā researcher might change a conventional research question from “How can I stop back pain in this cohort?” to something like, “What are the conditions that cause this back pain to come and go?” or “How is it that I do not feel this back pain when I am riding my bike or arguing with my spouse?” This shift from a single question about removing the symptom to multiple questions about the nature of the symptom implies a shift from first-order change to second-order change necessitating a “qualitative difference” in the underlying interdependent causal system (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). While posing a formal research question or even an intention is not a part of traditional vipassanā practice, the shift from first-order-change to second order change in the example necessitates the type shift in thinking implied by the Second Noble Truth pertaining the systemic quality of suffering.

There are, of course, difficulties in pulling one’s attention off of a pressing problem to take a deeper look at the nature of the problem itself. When the back screams in pain or one’s child has behavior problems in school, the idea of looking anywhere other than the immediate problem for a solution can seem quite disconnected from reality. And as discussed in the section on linear thinking, those who exhibit this tendency probably possess an evolutionary advantage over those who do not. However, this shift necessitates an entirely new way of looking at the role of vipassanā meditation with regards to human health. In *Vipassana Meditation: A Practical and Spiritual Path*, Fleischman (2015) describes a higher-order perspective on vipassanā meditation as a practical “way of life,”

Vipassana should also be practiced in an atmosphere that is free of exaggerated claims for medical cure or radical personality transplant. One of the foundation blocks of meditation as a way of life is that it does not become misdirected towards limited goals. Vipassana is not a substitute for treatment of any kind. It is not a cure, nor a preventative for mental or physical disorders. No one can be cured of all disease, and any activity that is focused on cure loses the broad perspective that animates Vipassana, which is a lifelong, spiritual path, and not merely to eliminate disease. (p. 18)

There is a need for greater rigor in understanding the historical and cultural context from which these technical terms have emerged if the deeper aspects of these practical traditions are to contribute to the literature (Puhakka, 2015). Gambrel & Keeling (2010) write of Joanna Macy’s

work in the systems paradigm for doing so,

Theory that provides the foundation of mindfulness-based systemic therapies needs to be developed. While many clinicians are beginning to implement mindfulness in their work with couples and families, few discuss their theoretical premises for doing so. Macy's (1991) philosophical discussion of general systems theory and Buddhism is a useful starting point for theory development. (p. 420)

To date, there have been no efforts to develop a theory suitable for the study of mindfulness practices as they pertain to clinical work, let alone a theory suitable for the study of traditional vipassan? meditation.

Though there are significant limitations to current literature, valuable contributions have nevertheless emerged from the recent explosion of interest in these traditions, particularly in the last ten years. After all, the Buddha is widely accepted to have said that he only taught the relief of suffering, and the evidence is clear that the systematic implementation of symptom-oriented third-wave interventions such as MBSR, MBCT, ACT, and DBT has been effective in the relief of certain kinds of suffering. Further, the confusion of traditions and their technical terms is understandable given the vast complexity of both the traditional practices and the problem of understanding human health and behavior. It is possible to find research (Pruitt & McCollum, 2010) which sufficiently reviews the traditional scope related to the intervention studied, and others (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003; Garton-Gundling, 2017; Lee, 2017; Nilsson, 2013; Polanski, 2015; Wilson J. , 2014; Puhakka, 2015) who go so far as to cover the challenges or consequences of removing vipassan? technical terms from their full traditional context. But the majority of experimental research does not sufficiently specify the traditional context that informs the work, and the majority of researchers who do this sufficiently do not adequately locate the work in relation to technical terms within one tradition which may be antithetical to other commonly confused technical terms in another tradition.

Most important to this study, there appears to be no research which acknowledges the connection between technical terms in vipassan? meditation and either living and non-living natural sciences within the postpositive paradigm. This is a notable finding considering that it is fairly well accepted within most or all traditions that developing an understanding of the fundamental laws that govern human experience as well as the rest natural world is essential to progress on the path of the cessation of suffering. Instead, the vast majority of both popular and scientific literature examines the relationship of traditional techniques and concepts with psychological concepts and within the context of clinical psychology. A comprehensive search in the EBSCO and APA PsychInfo databases on August 15th, 2017, revealed no results outside the area of specific clinical outcomes. Further, a significant majority of this literature rests in analogical comparisons with psychological concepts which fail Popper's test of falsification. This understandable marriage with clinical theory is almost surely due to all practices in all Buddhist traditions having something to do with observation of oneself, a practice paralleled by Freud's operationalization of the subjective

paradigm that emerged from his work. Literature has been written to assist those seeking relief from suffering, which is in line with the stated goals of every tradition claiming allegiance to the Buddha.

Unfortunately, this evocative but exclusively constructivist focus on the subjective realm of clinical theory suggests a startlingly weak academic understanding of the traditional context of vipassanā and ignores the deepest aspect of the practice which is to reduce suffering by understanding the nature of suffering itself. Shinzen Young (1994) describes this paradigmatic hurdle,

The insights that come as a result of Vipassana are deeper and more general than those that are ordinarily encountered in psychotherapy. They deal with very broad issues that are multiply rather than singularly applicable. In science, a deep theory augers many specific applications. Out of a single fundamental breakthrough in science you may have dozens—or even thousands—of specific applications. So in the same way, the insights that come from Vipassana practice let us understand the very nature of personality itself, not just things about our own personality. (p. 1)

The very title of the *Four Noble Truths* given by the Buddha to describe the most essential part of the teaching in every tradition, suggest that the practice of vipassanā is rooted in the search for objective truth: that suffering is inherent in life; how suffering comes to be; how suffering comes to cease; and the instructions for the cessation of suffering. These four truths are taught to exist within the same fabric of reality of all natural phenomena such as gravity, the changing of the tides, the building and eroding of mountains, the passing of the weather, and are there to be verified by any living being possessing the capacity to give the experiment an honest trial (Goenka, 2012).

Though this ontological meta-inquiry into the nature of suffering originates within the framework of the body and mind, it is inseparable from an investigation into the most fundamental natural laws (Fleischman P. R., 2016). This perspective exists within each tradition but is rarely, if ever, taught or included in the literature. Therefore, if the dhamma is “the information state that guides but is not the same as the material universe” (Fleischman P. R., 2016, p. iv), then it is vital for both popular and scientific literature on vipassanā meditation to move beyond the basic, reductionistic paradigm of linear cause-and-effect and into a deeper ontological and paradigmatic critique about the nature of suffering within the full scope of the teachings. That is, there is a need for researchers to attempt to replicate the Buddha’s findings within the full context of his experiment.

While very little research reviews the impact of paradigmatic assumptions on the study of vipassanā, those who do tend to also compare the Buddha’s teachings with concepts from systems philosophy. This is due to the compatibility of the nonlinear causal paradigm in systems philosophy with the Second Noble Truth’s description of suffering as a failure to realize the

inherent interdependence of all phenomena. In *Buddhism and General Systems Theory*, Macy (1991) provides the most comprehensive analysis of the assumptions of causality in *pa?iccasamupp?da* (The Law of Dependent Origination, known as The Second Noble Truth) with Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 2015) and Wiener's Cybernetics (Wiener). Macy offers the most in-depth look at key passages from the *p?li* scriptural tradition (of Theravada Buddhism) and the compatibility with postpositive science available. However, while an important step in the marriage of systems philosophy and Buddhist theory, her review only pertains to General Systems Theory which assumes a pure mathematical basis for natural laws. A more accurate comparison with the radically empirical stance of the Buddha might be the alternative development of separate natural systems theories through the direct observation of systems as they occur in nature with fewer *a priori* concepts imposed by the human mind. Both Bertalanffy, who coined the concept of the *open-system*, and Murray Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), who developed the only natural systems theory of human behavior, refer to either of these starting points as valid alternatives for developing an integrative systems theory. In the end, Bertalanffy chose an *a priori* mathematical route for GST and Bowen chose a natural systems route for Bowen theory (BT) which will also be the focus of this study.

Gerald Midgley, prominent systems researcher and author of the 2003 4-volume *Systems Philosophy*, constructed and implemented a systems-cybernetics model for problem solving in Buddhist organizations (Shen & Midgley, 2007; Shen & Midgley, *Toward a Buddhist Systems Methodology 3: An Application in a Taiwanese Non-Governmental Organization*, 2007; Midgley & Shen, 2007). This model appears to have achieved some success incorporating traditional systems/Buddhist concepts such as radical interdependence of variables, reciprocation, and depolarization into a Taiwanese Buddhist organization's organizational structure. Like Macy, Midgley provides a rare in-depth review between logical systems concepts and Buddhist concepts and demonstrates the compatibility of "Buddhist Philosophy" (Midgley & Shen, 2007, p. 196) at the intellectual level with systems philosophy. Midgley does not address primacy of the practical component of *vipassan? meditation*, collapses the plurality of the traditions under the umbrella term Buddha and Buddhist while referencing several Buddhist authors several traditions, and begins with *a priori* concepts from organizational systems theories as opposed to experimental research questions related to human organizations as natural systems. In *Reasoning Into Reality*, Fenner (1995) thoroughly reviews and attempts to integrate concepts from the Middle Path Philosophy in Mah?y?na Buddhism with "systems-cybernetics theory" (1995, p. xviii) into a computer simulation model for use in philosophy, psychology, and information processing. Fenner's compelling intellectual work was inspired by the "mind-only" teaching style of Mah?y?na Buddhism (ref) which generates concepts and teachings styles at odds with the philosophy of bear empiricism in the earliest known Theravadin traditions. As outlined by Macy's beautiful formulation of *pa?iccasamupp?da*, these earlier schools are more compatible with a natural systems approach which begins from the position of a scientist learning about the laws of govern systems as they are in nature.

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