

Proposition of this Dissertation

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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](#)
4. [Challenges in the Study of Vipassan? Meditation](#)

We have now reviewed the reductionistic assumptions of mainstream science and associated philosophical limitations for addressing problems of complexity. We have reviewed the limitations that those assumptions place on psychology as a science, and the conflict between positivist or constructivist clinical theory and the stated goals of the APA for psychology as a science. We have also reviewed how academic understandings of vipassan? meditation limit the potential of the teachings for postpositive science.

This study proposes to address these problems with a theoretical comparison of vipassan? meditation and Bowen's natural systems theory of the human family as an emotional unit. Bowen theory uses the paradigm of systems philosophy which augments reductionism with synthesis and the assumption of interdependence in phenomena. It remains one of the most substantive predictive theories of human behavior in use today. It is one of only a handful of postpositive clinical theories (attachment theory is another example) in use and is the only clinical theory which makes a direct theoretical connection between human behavior and other natural systems.

When describing how to observe bodily sensations in vipassan? meditation, the Buddha repeated the phrase *yath?bh?ta* in many of his discourses, which translates to "as it is" (Goenka, 1998, p. 43). This key phrase points to the importance of working to view bodily phenomena with minimal prejudice to understand their nature outside of the volitional context. Similarly, the concept of a natural systems theory assumes that the unit of analysis has emerged from nature and should be studied with as few a priori concepts as possible. The Buddha's emphasis on objectivity and observing processes and relationships instead of fixed, isolated elements appears to be a good fit for Bowen theory. Further, associating a theory of vipassan? with an existing natural systems theory of human behavior might help shift the focus from constructing purely conceptual systems models from an intellectual interpretation of the Buddha's teaching to constructing empirical models for the discovery of nature, as the Buddha intended. For a theory of vipassan?, this might encourage less speculation and more meditation.

This theoretical comparison will ask the question “To what extent did the Buddha define a natural systems theory?” It hypothesizes that the Buddha might have discovered much more than just a theory of the body and mind, but a theory of what the body and mind has in common with the rest of the universe. Fleischman (2015) writes,

One of the most important insights of ancient India, where the Buddha first taught Vipassana meditation, was that the microcosm contains the macrocosm. Our sciences today have documented this truism in much more finely grained detail, but the truths that animate our focus on sensations in Vipassana meditation are ancient and modern. (p. 10)

Multidisciplinary research methods allow for the analysis of generic relationships across many domains: complex systems and subsystems of the brain (Meunier, Lambiotte, & Bullmore, 2010); the relationship of neurological networks to the body and concept of mind as an emotional unit (Siegel, 2012); flocking behavior in social species (Ben-Shahar, Dolev, Dolgen, & Segal, 2014; Farine, Strandburg-Peshkin, Couzin, Berger-Wolf, & Crofoot, 2017); decision making in primates (Dyer, Johansson, Helbin, Couzin, & Jens, 2009); and computer models which can function in the context of large classes of systems (Zhang, Cheng, Chen, & Li, 2015). If the Buddha’s insight that “the microcosm contains the macrocosm” is compatible with systems philosophy, then it is possible that a degree of conceptual portability may exist between a natural systems perspective on vipassana? meditation and Bowen’s theory of the human family.

The concept of the body/mind unit as a complex system appears to be at least mostly compatible with the essential concepts of anicca (impermanence) and anatt? (no-self). *Sabbe sankh?r? anicca* (AN 3.134, i 286; Vinaya, Mah?vagga I, 6.37-46; i, 13-4), or “all phenomena are anicca” means that there is nothing in the universe that is not in a constant state of flux. *Sabbe sankh?r? anatt?* (AN 3.134, i 286; Vinaya, Mah?vagga I, 6.37-46; i, 13-4) means that there is nothing in the universe which has an essential, unchanging core, including the galaxy, earth, mountains, rivers, or animalian body and mind. The Buddha taught that suffering originates in part due to the misconception that “I” exist as a solid, unchangeable self, and I have things that are “mine.” The reality is, of course, that “I” am constantly changing and will eventually lose everything ever assumed to be “mine,” whether in the next few moments or at the time of death. In vipassana, this illogical attachment to “I” and “mine” is seen as a source of great suffering, no different than crying because your favorite cloud in the sky has gone away. Systems philosophy conveniently sidesteps the concept of a solid, unchanging core in any system by focusing on processes and relationships. A symptom-oriented clinical focus would not share this compatibility as it would assume essential, isolatable variables which can be manipulated through other essential, isolatable variables. In contrast, a natural systems theory of the body and mind would assume that a change in one part of the system necessitates a change in another part of the system. If the symptom was a function of an imbalance of many variables in the broader system, fixing the symptom may cause a change in the short term but only make it easier to ignore the larger problem.

A systematic comparison of Bowen theory with the Buddha's theory in vipassan? meditation may offer a new way of looking at change in the human body and mind for postpositive psychology. This new perspective would not reduce a human or any other living being into isolated biological variables. Such an isolationist approach to human behavior divorces the vast complexity and interdependence of a human being's physical and interpersonal context. An isolationist approach can also limit our curiosity for the unknown, and for humanistic meaning in life (Laszlo, 1971).

This comparison will not look for conceptual equivalence but begin to frame a way in which Bowen theory might relate to vipassan? meditation. For example, there is little evidence that the Buddha taught a theory of the human family as an emotional unit. Rather, if the Buddha discovered something similar to a natural systems theory which relates to human suffering, then it may contribute something from within or to the side of Bowen theory. For example, this study might just as easily yield a theory of the body and mind as a unit that interacts with the family as a unit, a theory of the body and mind as a unit that has no practical connection to the family unit, a theory that ultimately has more to do with the universe than the body and mind or the family, yet another individual therapy which loses the broader perspective of Bowen theory, or a spiritual path that makes bold but naïve claims about what is and is not science. In any case, both approaches appear to share many essential concepts: reducing human suffering through the understanding of problems instead of simply trying to make the problems go away; the primacy of relationship; a single construct for systemic health; the tempering of emotions and development of objectivity; increased awareness of one's self and surroundings; the absolute interdependence of all of life; the importance of becoming an ardent researcher; and that progress for the whole begins and ends with progress for oneself.

This study will associate closely with Vipassan? meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka in the Tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin (Hart, 1987). The reason for this choice is two-fold. First, a deep theoretical study such as this requires in-depth knowledge of at least one vipassan? tradition, and the author has made an exclusive commitment to dedicated practice within this particular tradition over the last seven years. Second, Goenka put forth significant effort to formulate the teachings for his Western students in a way that appears to be uniquely compatible with the scientific world view (Fleischman P. R., 2016). Goenka only teaches new students within the context of highly-structured, 10-day silent meditation courses. The purpose of this is to provide an environment where a student has little opportunity for unethical conduct (sila). During the courses, Goenka makes every effort to reiterate the importance of the practice as a non-sectarian technique and way of life which is compatible with science and has "nothing to do with organized religion" (Goenka, 2012). To this end, the courses are structured to provide students with enough time to develop the vital personal experience needed before introducing subtle concepts that might otherwise be misunderstood as a "high philosophy" (Goenka as cited in Melnikova, 2014, p. 15). Goenka (2012) writes in the Forward to his *Discourse Summaries*,

None of this can be attained just by thinking about it or wishing for it. One must take steps to reach the goal. For this reason, in a Vipassana course the emphasis is always on actual

practice. No philosophical debates are permitted, no theoretical arguments, no questions that are unrelated to one's own experience. As far as possible, meditators are encouraged to find the answers to their questions within themselves.

While a theoretical review of any extant Buddhist tradition with systems philosophy would likely produce compelling results, there are aspects of Mr. Goenka's formulation which may produce a unique compatibility with systems philosophy in general and Bowen theory in particular.

For this reason, this study will be using Mr. Goenka's opinion of what is and is not part of the Buddha's teaching from this point forward. This will no doubt generate statements and new concepts which are in philosophical conflict with other traditions, especially the reformist Mahayana traditions. However, a hermeneutic analysis of the validity of the traditions is a task for only the most experienced meditators and falls outside the scope of this study. As such, the term "vipassana" will refer to the non-sectarian style of satipatthana as taught by Mr. Goenka. This tradition teaches that satipatthana, which is also called vipassana meditation, comprises the entirety of the teachings. Therefore, if the practice of vipassana meditation is said to be scientific in nature, or that vipassana operates on something like a natural systems theory, then it is assumed that the entirety of the Buddha discovery and teachings are scientific in nature and operates on something like a natural systems theory. Subsequent research which specifies a different traditional context may therefore define the scope of the Buddha's teachings differently, and statements within this study should then be interpreted accordingly. The terms Buddhist and Buddhism will be assumed to indicate either the ethnic Asiatic religions claiming allegiance the same historical figure as vipassana, or the Western conception of the non-sectarian practices as a religion. Instead, we will use the terms dhamma, and vipassana for the "law of nature," and the practical teachings to develop an understanding of the law of nature, respectively.

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