

Basics of Psychology in Pali Buddhism

Ralf Kestler

Summary

In this Essay, I want to give a short account of Buddhist psychology as found in some pieces in the Pali literature, the scriptures the Theravada tradition. This school of Buddhism is the only one of the Hīnayāna schools still existing, and is spread in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia. For a full account of Buddhist psychology more topics should have to be included. But I think, it is enough to give a basic understanding of Buddhist psychology and a further elaboration wouldn't improve that first understanding. It would only introduce more technical terms of an ancient and foreign language. After giving a short account of Buddhist philosophy, I will quote and interpret two passages from the Majjhima-nikāya. The first is the Madhupiṇḍika-sutta dealing with perception and the second is the Mūlaparyāya-sutta dealing with psychic differences of worldlings and Arhats. After this I will have a look on the Abhidhamma philosophy as it is described in the Abhidhammatṭhasaṅgaha. This is a comprehensive textbook on Abhidhamma written in the 12th century. It must be clear that there is a difference of time of 17 centuries between the Suttas I discuss here and the Abhidhammatṭhasaṅgaha.¹

Keywords

Theravāda-Buddhist psychology, Buddhist philosophy

1 The Teachings of the Buddha

The philosophical program of the Buddha are the four noble truths²:

1. The truth of suffering
2. The truth of the origin of suffering
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering

The first one states that joy and suffering are always changing in existence, and therefore existence is painful. The origin of the suffering is the clinging to the perceptions, which is rooted in ignorance and which will lead to deeds, which will lead to further suffering. The third truth states that there is a possibility to escape suffering called Nibbāna. The way to Nibbāna is described in the last truth, the noble eightfold path. The Buddha saw himself as a doctor giving analysis of the disease (1st truth), its origin (2nd truth) and a method of healing it (3rd and 4th truths). Psychology is not an off-shot of Buddhist philosophy, it is central to it.

In the philosophies of Upanishads, an eternal entity was searched and found in “breath”, “water”, “fire” and, finally, the “Ātman”.³ The Buddha contested this with the “doctrine of Non-Self”. In human beings there is no eternal entity, which is transmigrating through lives called “ātman”, “puruṣa” or “jīva”. In doing so, he had to develop a new approach to the human being. For this, the Buddha explained human beings with the “Five

Aggregates” or Pañcakkhandā, which constitute the human being. These are also called *Nāma-rūpa*. Nāma are the four mental Aggregates and Rūpa is matter.⁴

The Five Aggregates are:

- Rūpakkhandha – The Aggregate of Matter
- Vedanākkhandha – Aggregate of Sensations or Feelings
- Saññākkhandha – Aggregate of Perceptions
- Samkhārakkhandha – Aggregate of Mental Formations
- Viññānakkhandha – Aggregate of Consciousness

2 The Madhupiṇḍika-Sutta

Once, the prince Daṇḍapāṇi approached the Buddha and asked for being taught. Shortly, the Buddha said:

“Truthly speaking, that in this world with its gods, Māras and Brahmas, with its Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas, the people, with its noblemen, nobody is striving, and like this again, that the Saññās do not obsess a Brāhmaṇa who lives unconnected to pleasures, talks not things not to be talked, has cut off doubts, is free from thirst (taṇhā) to existence or non-existence – truly, friends, I have said this.”

Daṇḍapāṇi rejected this with harsh gesticulations and left without saying anything. In the evening, the Buddha told this to some monks and he was asked to explain his words. He explained:

“From what basement, monks, an amount of recognitions and proliferations befall man. (Yatonidānaṃ, bhikkhu, purisaṃ papañcasaññāsaṅkhā samudācaranti.) And if herein it is not rejoiced, discussed or bent upon. This is the discharge of the obsessions to lust, this is the discharge of the obsessions to hatred, this is the discharge of the obsessions to views, this is the discharge of the obsessions to doubt, this is the discharge of the obsessions to conceit, this is the discharge of the obsessions to the lust to existence, this is the discharge of existence, this is the discharge of taking up clubs and weapons, the discharge of quarrel, disputations and evil-speaking. Herein are the evil, unwholesome are destroyed without anything left.”

With that explanation the Buddha raised from his seat and left. Unsatisfied with it, the monk approached Kaccāna, a major pupil of the Buddha, and requested a further explanation. Kaccāna is deepening the Buddha’s explanation with a description of sense-perception for all the six senses. In Buddhism, next to sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch is a sixth sense called Mano which percepts dhammā, mental objects. I will only discuss sight, for the other senses it is rendered same wise.

For the perception through the eyes it runs as follows:

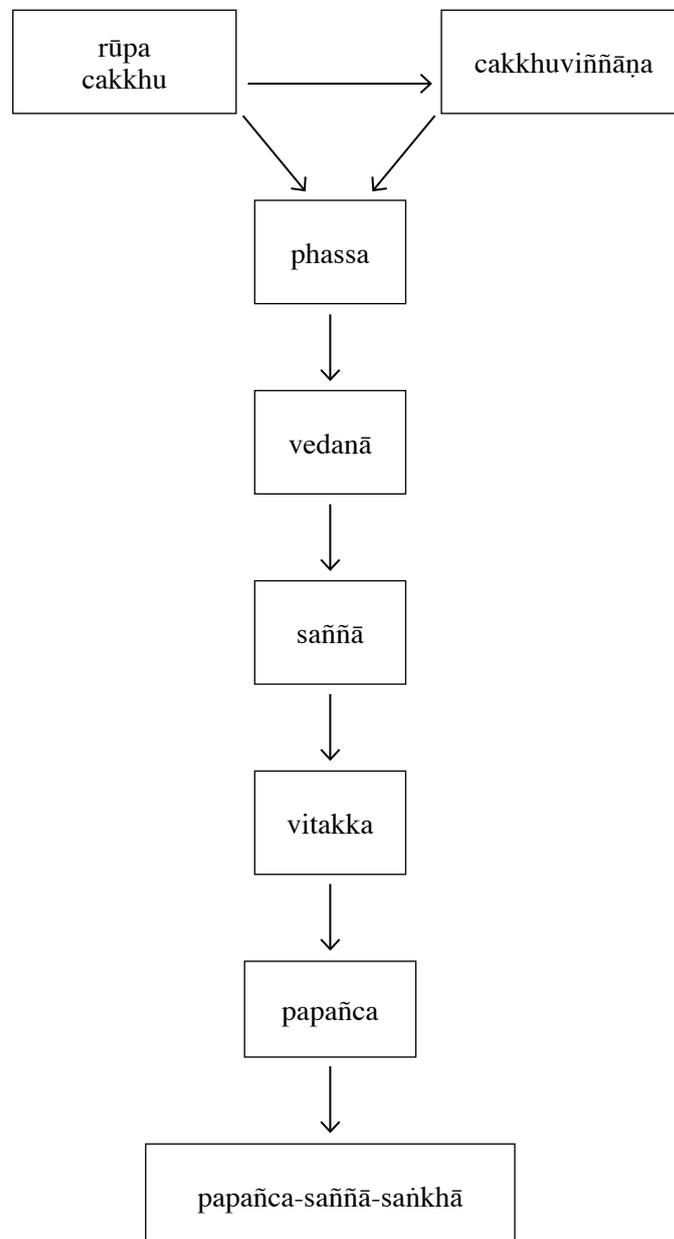
“Cakkhuñcāvuso, paticca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññānaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāsaṅkhā samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppaññesu cakkhuvīññeyyesu rūpesu.”

“Friend, depending on the eye and forms eye-consciousness arises, contact is the meeting of these three, based on contact is feeling. What one feels, this one recognizes, what one recognizes, about this one argues, what one argues, about this one proliferates. What one proliferates, with that as basement an amount of recognitions and proliferations befall man according to forms, which are arisen in past, present and future in the eye-consciousness.”

It is important to note that Rūpa, rendered as forms, here is not materiality of man as part of the Five Aggregates, it denotes visual objects.

After that description, Kaccāna states that every item can be inferred from the preceding and if one item is missing, it can be inferred that the next is also missing.

Now, I will give an interpretation of that Sutta. The following diagram shows that process, graphically:



Stylistically, two things are remarkable. First, the yato in “Yatonidānaṃ, bhikkhu, purisaṃ papañcasaññāsāṅkhā samudācaranti.” in Buddha’s explanation to the monks correlates to tato in “tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāsāṅkhā samudācaranti” in Kaccāna’s explanation. Second, between Vedanā and Saññā Kaccāna switched from a nominal to a verbal style giving the impression of movement of a vicious circle to the reader.

Saññā is also the term Buddha used in his speech to Daṇḍapāṇi, to the monks he used papañca-saññā-sāṅkhā.⁵ Saññā and Papañca-saññā-sāṅkhā are the cornerstones of the Sutta.

At first, we have Rūpa and the eyes. Out of the context Rūpa seems to be the visible form of the object. In the description with the other senses, Rūpa is replaced by sound, smell etc. Depending on Rūpa and eyes arises eye-consciousness before the contact, which, depending on these three, is arising. Cakkhuvīññāṇa can be interpreted grammatically as consciousness in the eyes, from the eyes, consciousness to the eyes or consciousness through the eyes. Taking also into account that it arises before contact, we must interpret Cakkhuvīññāṇa as attention or awareness of the visual sense-faculty.

Vedanā is the emotional aspect in perception and in the Pañcakkhanda. It is either analysed three-fold or five-fold. In the three-fold analysis it is divided into pain, joy and neutral feeling. In the five-fold division both pain and joy are further divided in bodily and mental pain and joy. In the analysis of perception presented here, it is before Saññā, translated here as recognition.⁶ Saññā being based on Vedanā or feelings is not only the cognition of the object, it includes also the subjective and intentional aspects in perception⁷, which can be also seen in the Buddha’s statement to Daṇḍapāṇi that a Brahmaṇa is not obsessed by Saññās, this is further elaborated in the Mūlaparyāya-sutta.

With Saññā the perception is completed. With Saññā, the last of the Five Aggregates mentioned here, we have a turning point in this description. With the transition of Vedanā to Saññā not only the style of language is switching from a nominal to a verbal style, the mental behaviour of an unenlightened person to the sense-datum described, too, which is as stated to Daṇḍapāṇi as Saññā and to the monks as Papañca-saññā-sāṅkhā by the Buddha the foundation of thirst, the bondage to Saṃsāra. He argues about that object, then he proliferates. The basic meaning of papañceti renders here as proliferates is “spreads out”. In the context here, I interpret it as “putting it into context”, as bringing it into relation what is already known and then he starts to think about a lots of things as it is indicated by “an amount perceptions and proliferations”.

The way we deal with the sensations is, as this Sutta shows, the reason for our bondage to this world. The difference between this behaviour and that one of an enlightened one is related in the Mūlaparyāya-Sutta, which I will discuss now.

4 The Mūlaparyāya-Sutta

In the Mūlaparyāya-Sutta the Buddha explains the difference of mental processes following the sense-perceptions in worldlings and in followers of the Buddhist Path to liberation. The follower of the Path are further analysed according to their stage on that Path, but I will not deepen so much.

He mentions very different objects on which the sensation is based, which can be grouped into:

- the four elements (i.e. Rūpa, matter)
- gods
- states of meditation
- personal experiences

In the last section, we find views, the heard, the considered, viññātam – the past participle referring to viññāna, unity, plurality, all and Nibbāna.

I take the earth as example. About the worldling the Buddha said:

“puthujjano (...) pathaviṃ pathavito sañjānāti; pathaviṃ pathavito saññatvā pathaviṃ maññati, pathaviyā maññati, pathavito maññati, pathaviṃ meti maññati, pathaviṃ abhinandati. Taṃ kissa hetu? ‘Apariññātaṃ tassā’ti vadāmi.”

“The worldling recognises the earth as earth, he conceptualises earth, he conceptualises in the earth, he conceptualises from the earth, ‘the earth is mine’ he conceptualises, he rejoices the earth. What is the reason for that? I say: ‘It is not completely understood’.”

About a follower of the Path he said:

“sopi pathaviṃ pathavito abhijānāti; pathaviṃ pathavito abhiññāya pathaviṃ mā maññi, pathaviyā mā maññi, pathavito mā maññi, pathaviṃ meti mā maññi, pathaviṃ mābhinandi. Taṃ kissa hetu? ‘Pariññeyyaṃ tassā’ti vadāmi.”

“He acknowledges the earth as earth, having acknowledged the earth as earth, he should not conceptualise the earth, he should not conceptualise in the earth, he should not conceptualise from the earth, ‘the earth is mine’ he should not conceptualise, he should not rejoice the earth. What is the reason for that? I say: ‘It is may completely understood’.”

The passage about the worldling reads similar as the passage in the Madhupiṇḍika-sutta discussed above. He recognises the object. Here also ‘sañjānāti’, the verbal form of Saññā is used. Afterwards he also is conceptualising about it, which is here expressed with ‘maññati’. Finally, the Buddha states that this is because it is not completely known.

In contrast to that, a follower of the Buddha ‘acknowledges’, as I translated ‘abhijānāti’. It can simply mean that it is perceived directly or it is a reference to the ‘Abhiññā’. In Buddhism, six higher mental faculties named ‘Abhiññā’ are described. Five of these are developed by a meditative technique called ‘Samādhi’ and one through ‘Vipassanā’. The first five are faculties like the clairvoyance or telepathy. The sixth is the calming of mental intoxicants, which is seen as the primary quality of an enlightened one. But, being contrasted to sañjānāti, which, as we have seen as being intermingled with subjectivity, I would interpret abhijānāti here simply as perceiving directly. And, having the object acknowledged, the follower is not thinking about it. As a reason, the Buddha said, it is because he knows it completely.

With the Mūlaparyāya-sutta we can see that liberation in the Buddhist sense is psychic difference between the unenlightened and the enlightened.

5 Saṃkhāra

Saṃkhāra has not been mentioned in the texts before, so I will give some remarks here. The basic meaning of Saṃkhāra is ‘putting together’, as an Aggregate, however, it covers more the intentional and volitional aspects of mentality. It arises also with the perception of an object. Saṃkhāra is identified with Cetanā, volition.⁸

6 Abhidhamma

The Abhidhamma is the scholastic elaboration of Buddhist philosophy. There are seven books in the Pali-Canon, which are very extant and complex.⁹ There are several treatises on that philosophy, the best known is the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, written by Anuruddha Thero in the 12th century. My description will be based on it, although it is a relatively late text and has differences to the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka, the canonical Abhidhamma texts. But all introductory books I have seen on Abhidhamma are translations or adaptations of it. I will use the edition by Bikkhu Bodhi.¹⁰ My aim here is to give short introduction to that philosophy and to give a principle idea about it.

In the Abhidhamma, the ontology is fourfold:

1. Citta
2. Cetasika
3. Rūpa
4. Nibbāna¹¹

Citta and Cetasikas together are mentality, herein Citta is the primary, and Cetasikas accombinates it. They are rendered as “consciousness” and “mental factors” in English.

On Citta and its relationship to Cetasika, Bhikhu Bodhi gives some remarks, mostly taken from commentaries without references. He writes:

“The commentators define *citta* in three ways: as agent, as instrument, and as activity. As the agent, *citta* is that which cognizes the object (*ārammaṇaṃ cintetī ti cittaṃ*). As the instrument, *citta* is that by means of which the accompanying mental factors cognize the object (*etena cintentī ti cittaṃ*). As an activity, *citta* is itself nothing other than the process of cognizing the object (*cintanamattaṃ cittaṃ*).”¹²

And further that its

“characteristic is the knowing of an object (*viñāna*). Its function is to be a ‘forerunner’ (*pubbaṅgama*) of the mental factors in that it presides over them and is always accompanied by them. Its manifestation – the way it appears in the meditator’s experience – is as a continuity of processes (*sandhāna*). Its proximate cause is mind-and-matter (*nāmarūpa*), because consciousness cannot arise alone, in the complete absence of mental factors and material phenomena.”¹³

Anuruddha defines Cetasika as:

“Ekuppāda-nirodhā ca ekālabana-vatthukā
Cetoyuttā dvipaññāsa dhammā cetasikā matā.”¹⁴

“The 52 phenomena which are connected with Citta are known as Cetasika, having the same arising and decline and having the same object and foundation.”

The number of Citta is either 89 or 121 according to two different ways of counting; the number of Cetasika is 52. Both are categorized in different ways. As an example, I will only mention the most important one: They can be differentiated according to the karmic value, which can be positive, negative or neutral. Furthermore, in the Abhidhamma literature mental processes are described.

I will stop here the description of the Abhidhamma to contra pose the places of Nāmarūpa and the Five Aggregates in the Suttas and the Abhidhamma. It is obvious that in all the ways of descriptions, Rūpa or matter is the same everywhere. Nāma in Nāmarūpa is referring to Mentality which is Viññāṇa, Saññā, Vedanā and Saṅkhāra in the Five Aggregates. In the Abhidhammatṭhasaṅgaha, within the enumeration of Citta, some are named as Cakkhuviññāṇa or Sotaviññāṇa¹⁵, i.e. eye-consciousness and ear-consciousness, and the like, which are further analysed. Therefore, Citta corresponds to Viññāṇa. Saññā and Vedanā listed within the Cetasika and the rest of the Cetasika comprise together Saṅkhāra.¹⁶

For visualisation, I present it in a table:

<i>Nāmarūpa</i>	<i>Five Aggregates</i>	<i>Abhidhamma</i>
Rūpa	Rūpa	Rūpa
Nāma	Viññāṇa	Citta
	Saññā	Cetasika
	Vedanā	
	Saṅkhāra	

(Endnotes)

- 1 For the history of Theravāda-Buddhist psychology see E.R. Sarachandra: *Buddhist Psychology of Perception*, Dehiwala(Sri Lanka) 1994, 2nd edition.
- 2 Rahula, Walpola: *What the Buddha Taught*, London 1963 is a good introduction to Buddhism, following this model. The Buddha is describing his philosophical program in the *Dhammacakkhappavattana-sutta*,
- 3 See Schneider, Ulrich: *Der Buddhismus. Eine Einführung*. Darmstadt 1997, 4th edition, p.57–65 for a description of pre-Buddhist philosophy and its relation to Buddhism.
- 4 ibd. p.99. This term has pre-Buddhist origins.
- 5 Nananda, Bhikkhu: *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, Kandy 1971 is an interesting treatise on Papañca-saññā-saṅkhā. An English version can be downloaded here: http://www.seeingthroughthenet.net/files/eng/books/other/concept_and_reality.pdf, a German translation here: <http://www.dhamma-dana.de/buecher/Bhikkhu%20Nanananda%20-%20Konzept%20und%20Realitaet.pdf>
- 6 Saññā, skt. Samjñā, is a cognate of “cognition” in the Indo-European languages.
- 7 Nyanatiloka, Thero: *Kleines Buddhistisches Wörterbuch*, Konstanz 1954. The article can be found here: <http://www.palikanon.de/wtb/abhinna.html>

- 8 Analayo: Saṅkhāra in: Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Vol. VII p.732f..
- 9 In Nyanatiloka Mahāthera: Guide Through The Abhidhamma Piṭaka, Kandy 2008, 5th edition, the author gives selections from the seven books focusing on style and logic to give the reader an access to that literature.
- 10 Bhikkhu Bodhi (editor): A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma. The Abhidhammtha Saṅgaha of Ācariya Anuruddha, Kandy, 2006, 3rd edition. This is a revised version of a book by Mahāthera Nārada. Nārada's original version can be found here:
http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/abhidhamma.pdf
- 11 ibd., p.25
- 12 ibd., p.27
- 13 ibd., p.29
- 14 ibd., p.76
- 15 ibd., for example p.40
- 16 Analayo, p.733

About the author

Ralf Kestler studies Indology, Philosophy and Computer Science at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz. He also visited courses in Sinhala, Buddhist Philosophy and Pali at the University of Ruhuna.
Kontakt: Ralf.Kestler@gmx.net