

*Wheel Publication No. 179*

**The Psychological Aspect  
of Buddhism**

*Piyadassi Thera*



# The Psychological Aspect of Buddhism

The Fifth Sir Baron Jayatilaka  
Memorial Lecture

Delivered on the 13th of February, 1972  
at the Colombo Y, M. B. A.

by

Piyadassi Thera

**Buddhist Publication Society**  
**Kandy • Sri Lanka**

The Wheel Publication No. 179

First Edition, 1972

Second Impression, 1984

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

# The Psychological Aspect Of Buddhism



I am happy to be here in response to the invitation of the Colombo Young Men's Buddhist Association to deliver the fifth Sir Baron Jayatilaka Memorial Lecture. Let me, at the outset, speak a few words about Sir Baron Jayatilaka who was the President of the Y. M. B. A. for forty-six years, that is, almost from its inception until his death in 1944.

A self-willed individual who toiled his way upwards from small beginnings, unaided by patronage and unsupported by the influence of friends, Sir Baron Jayatilaka is in every respect a self-made man. The story of his life richly illustrates the power of the human mind. It is appropriate, therefore, on an occasion like this when we recall the flights of his many-sided career, to devote an hour or so to what the Buddha, the Supremely Enlightened Master, has said about the power of the human mind. In other words let us dwell on "the psychological aspect of Buddhism." A dispassionate student of Buddhism who carefully reads through the books of early Buddhism is confronted with a dynamic personality, a religious teacher, who had attained supreme enlightenment and security from bondage through moral, intellectual and spiritual perfection, a teacher with an indefatigable zeal and steel determination for propagating

the truth he had realised. That dynamic personality is none other than Siddhattha Gotama (Sanskrit, Siddhartha Gautama) popularly known as the Buddha. This teacher, who did not claim to be other than a human being, was not one more philosopher among many others, but a teacher of a way of life, who set in motion the matchless “Wheel of Truth” (*dhammacakka*) which was to revolutionise the thought and life of the human race. His self-sacrificing zeal, large love, kindness and tolerance combined with his remarkable personality, aroused the Indians from their slumber of ignorance and inspired them.

The Buddha spoke to all men and for all time. His teaching, the Dhamma, is for all men, whatever language they speak, whatever clothes they wear, whatever country they call ‘home’—the Buddha’s language is truth. He was clothed in truth, and the whole world was his home; for truth is everywhere for all time to be realised by each one individually. This is what is meant by the universality of the Dhamma.

Truth is not conceptual, and therefore, cannot be passed on by means of words or other symbols. An Enlightened One could guide us by showing the way to truth, but we ourselves should pursue the method of self-inquiry called meditation in Buddhism so that the hidden workings of the mind could be revealed, truth realised, and power within contacted.

What the Buddha taught during a period of forty-five years

is so vast, its aspects so varied and fascinating that scholars called Buddhism a religion; a philosophy; an ethical code; a religio-philosophical system; and ethical idealism. But one has still to find a religion where psychology looms so large as in Buddhism. The commonly called academical psychology—like other academical sciences—defined mind in static terms, whereas Buddhist psychology defines mental life in dynamic terms. However, after many struggles and persistent efforts modern psychology has left the dilapidated abode of orthodox schools, and is rediscovering the old doctrine of a dynamic mind. There are some variations no doubt, but the basic principle is one. Today many a psychologist accepts the dynamic nature of the human mind, and modern text books of psychology have abandoned the concept of a soul, and are regarding psychology as the science of human behaviour. Let us hope that it will not deviate from its well-found track.

To the Buddhist even the question of religion and its origin is not a metaphysical one, but a psychological and intellectual one. To him religion is no mere creed or code of revelation or fear of the unknown, fear of a supernatural being who rewards and punishes the good deeds and ill deeds of his creatures. It is not a theological concern, but rather, a psychological and intellectual concern resulting from the experience of *dukkha*, that is, suffering, conflicts, unsatisfactoriness of the empirical existence, of the nature of life.

When we consider the doctrinal contents of Buddhism we

are necessarily compelled to regard the Buddha's teaching as distinguished and different from other systems of religion where the central feature is the concept of a creator God. It is correct to say that there is much religion in Buddhism, but it cannot be included among the many religions in existence today, at least in the sense in which anthropologists understand the word religion. Generally the concept of religion is associated with a system centred around God and supernatural forces. Buddhism, however, does not advocate any prescribed system of ritual and worship and supplication of deities, or gods. There is no recognition, on the part of man, of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny. In Buddhism, man attributes all his attainments and achievements to human effort and human understanding. Buddhism is anthropocentric and not theocentric. Thus to a Buddhist, religion is a way of life, in the sense of a way of moral, spiritual and intellectual training leading to complete freedom of the mind, highest attainment of Insight which puts an end to all sufferings and repeated existence.

Looked at from the point of view of philosophy, the Buddha was not concerned with the problems that have worried philosophers both of the East and West from the beginning of history. He was not concerned with metaphysical problems which only confused man and upset his mental equilibrium. Their solution, he knew, will not free mankind from suffering, from the unsatisfactory nature of life. That was why the Buddha hesitated to answer such questions,

and, at times; refrained from explaining those which were often wrongly formulated. He was not ready to answer such questions as: Is the world eternal or not? Is it finite or infinite? Has the world an end or not? What is the origin of the world? At times the Buddha was silent to such, seemingly important but futile questions, because silence was the best answer to such speculations and meaningless questions. The only way to resolve these doubts and difficulties is by exploring the innermost recesses of the human mind which can only be effected by deep self-introspection based on purity of conduct and consequent meditation.

All the principal tenets of Buddhism like the doctrine of kamma (Skt, *karma*), volitional activities or moral causation, and rebirth, meditation and the resultant mental attainments are best studied and investigated as workings of the human mind, and therefore, Buddhism can most fittingly be described as a study of the highest psychology.

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka of the Buddhist Canon gives a very comprehensive account of the mind and the mental factors in a manner so as to help the Buddhist way of life. However, a close study of the dialogues, or the discourses of the Buddha, tends to produce the conviction that psychology plays a significant role in the Sutta Piṭaka, too. What the Buddha had to say with regard to the nature of the human mind, the method of cleansing it and the art of becoming its master and not its slave, is clearly enunciated in the discourses of the Sutta Piṭaka. In this respect the

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, [1] the discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta, [2] the Removal of Distracting Thoughts, and such other cardinal discourses are glaring examples.

Buddhism is the most psychological of religions. It is significant that the intricate workings of the human mind are more fully dealt with in Buddhism rather than in any other religion, and therefore, psychology works hand in hand more with Buddhism than with any other religion.

One may ask, “Is Buddhism related to modern psychology?” Yes, but with some difference. Buddhism is more concerned with the curative rather than analysis. Buddhism helps us to get beyond the intellect to the actual experience of life itself. Through meditation the Buddha had discovered the deeper universal maladies of the human heart and mind. The remarkable insight into the workings of the mind makes the Buddha a psychologist and scientist of the highest eminence. Admittedly his way of arriving at these truths of mental life is not that of an experimentalist, yet what the Buddha had discovered remains true, and in fact has been corroborated by the experimentalist. But the purpose in engaging in these inquiries is quite different from that of the scientist. The statements of the Buddha about the nature of the mind and matter are directed towards specific ends. They are simply the deliverance of man, supreme security from bondage. The Buddha places so much emphasis on mind and mental phenomena because of the crucial role that our inner life occupies in the genesis of

human action. In theistic religions the basis is God. In Buddhism, which is non-theistic, the mind is the basis.

The Christian Bible begins by saying, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” whereas in the Dhammapada, which may be regarded as the Buddhist Bible, the opening lines read: *Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā manoseṭṭhā manomayā*, “Mind precedes things; mind dominates them; mind creates them”; The words of the Christian God, as a matter of fact, the words of Gods of all theistic religions, point the way to God and heaven, to the Beyond. The Buddha gives the greatest importance to mind in the scheme of deliverance, directs man to the ways of discrimination and research, and urges him to get busy with the real task of developing the inner forces and qualities of the mind. The Buddha says: “You yourselves should put forth the necessary effort, and work out your deliverance; the Buddhas only show the way.” [3]

In order to understand fully the ideal of freedom of the mind, it is necessary to appreciate the importance of the mind. If there is no proper understanding of the importance of the human mind, we cannot appreciate to its fullest extent the reason why it is so necessary to develop and safeguard the freedom of the mind.

Of all forces the force of the mind is the most potent. It predominates every other force. It is a power by itself and within itself. Any attempt to thwart the growth of this force is a step in the wrong direction. No one has understood the

power of the mind so clearly as the Buddha.

Buddhism, while not denying the world of matter and the great effect that the physical world has on mental life, emphasises the very great importance of the human mind. Once a monk asked the Buddha: "Pray, Venerable Sir, by what is the world led? By what is the world drawn along? Under the sway of what one dhamma have all gone?" The Buddha's answer is categorical: "*Well, monk, the world is led by mind (thought); by mind the world is drawn along; all have gone under the sway of the mind, the one dhamma.*" [4] The Buddhist point of view is that the mind or consciousness is the core of our existence. All our psychological experiences, such as pain and pleasure, sorrow and happiness, good and evil, life and death are not attributed to any external agency. They are the results of our own thoughts and their resultant actions.

The Buddhist way of life is an intense process of cleansing one's speech, action and thought. It is self-development and self-purification resulting in self-realisation. The emphasis is on practical results and not on mere philosophical speculation, logical abstraction or even mere cogitation. The Buddhist ethos and psychology is built on the eternal truth of *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of all sentient beings, all empirical existence. The Buddha said:

"One thing only do I teach  
Suffering and its end to reach." [5]

To understand this unequivocal saying is to understand Buddhism; for the entire teaching of the Buddha is nothing else than the application of this one principle. It seems to me that what can be called the discovery of a Buddha, is just the Four Noble Truths: namely *dukkha*, the arising or the cause of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*. And the rest are logical developments and more detailed explanations of the four truths. This is the typical teaching of the Buddhas of all ages. [6]

The Buddha was a practical teacher. He was more concerned with beings than with inanimate nature. His sole object was to unravel the mystery of existence, to solve the problem of becoming. This he did by comprehending in all their fullness the four truths, the eternal verities of life. To those who listened to him, he explained in its detail the problem of *dukkha*, the universal fact of life, and tried to make people feel its full force, and convince them of it. He had definitely told us what he explains and what he does not. To one who views the world, and all it holds, in its proper perspective, the primary concern of life is not mere speculation or vain voyaging into the imaginary regions of high fantasy, but the gaining of true happiness and freedom from *dukkha*, unsatisfactoriness. To him true knowledge depends on the central question: Can this learning be of use to us in the conquest of mental peace and tranquillity, of real happiness? The Buddha says: *“In this very body, a fathom long, with its consciousness and perception I declare are the world, its cessation and the path that leads to the cessation of the*

*world.*" Here the word 'world' denotes *dukkha*.

According to his teaching, suffering cannot be separated from the five aggregates, from this fathom-long body with a mind. The five aggregates and suffering are same, and not two different things. "What is suffering?" the Buddha asks, and answers: "It should be said that it is the five aggregates of clinging." [7]

Now it becomes clear that to understand the first truth *dukkha* as well as the other three truths, it is essential to have a clear idea of the five aggregates that comprise man. In ordinary parlance we speak of a "being," but in the ultimate sense there is no such "being," there is only a manifestation of ever-changing psycho-physical forces or energies. These forces or energies form the aggregates, and what we call a being is nothing but a combination of these ever-changing five aggregates. Now, what are the five aggregates?

According to Buddhism man is a psycho-physical combination of mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*). The components of the "mind" are classified into four groups, namely: feeling (*vedanā*); perceptions, that is sense-impressions, images or ideas and concepts (*saññā*); mental formations or conative ideas and their concomitants (*saṅkhāra*); and consciousness, (*viññāṇa*). These four mental groups which are the non-physical factors in man are collectively regarded as mind (*nāma*). With the physical factor body (*rūpa*), the so-called man comes to be known as the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*) composing an

individuality.

In our study of psychology, Buddhist or otherwise, we feel obliged to ask whether the mind and the brain are different from each other. It is true that there is a close connection between mind and brain. Mental actions are related to brain charges. Mind is not something that can be handled, that can be submitted to any chemical test. It is invisible, intangible and as such cannot be discerned by the five senses. It lies outside the realm of the physical world; we can however form some idea of its nature and structure and how it works as a whole. But the brain is otherwise. We can speak of its actual position, its structure and also its function.

The mind, whilst not impervious to external influences, is not under the control of other factors, but it is the master of them. It is with a man's mind that he seeks truth, that he probes into the inner meaning of things, by which he learns their secret and significance.

In this talk I do not intend to go into details regarding the aggregate of material form or body as the subject is "The Psychological Aspect of Buddhism." In brief, matter, the physical body of man, contains and comprises the Four Great Primaries (*cattāri mahābhūtāni*) which are traditionally known as solidity, fluidity, heat or temperature and motion or vibration (*paṭhavī, āpo, tejo, vāyo*). In this context, they are not simply earth, water, fire and wind, though conventionally they may be so called. In Buddhist thought,

especially in the Abhidhamma teaching, they are more than that. Very briefly, *paṭhavī* or solidity is the element of expansion. *Āpo* or fluidity is the element of cohesion. *Tejo* is the element of heat or temperature. *Vayo* is the element of motion, it is displacement. Every material object is made up of the four Great Primaries though one or other seems to preponderate.

As discussed earlier, the four non-physical factors of man, all his mental and emotional processes, are included in the word mind. Students of Buddhism are familiar with the three Pali terms: *mano*, *citta*, and *viññāṇa*. These terms are often translated as mind in some context or other, although a more discriminating student will translate *viññāṇa* as consciousness or cognitive consciousness. The English word mind does not adequately convey the meaning of the Pali words *mano* or *citta*. These three terms, *mano*, *citta* and *viññāṇa*, however, are synonyms (*yañ-ca kho bhikkhave vuccati cittam itipi mano, itipi viññāṇam*), [8] but they have their distinct and special uses in certain contexts and with all their different shades of meaning they indicate the psychological aspects of Buddhism.

The term *viññāṇa*, has a deeper connotation in Buddhist psychology. In western psychology mind is generally defined as: “The organised totality of psychical structures and processes, conscious, unconscious and endopsychic, philosophically, rather than psychologically, the entity or substratum underlying these structures and processes.” [9] According to philosophy: “Mind is used in two principal

senses: (a) the individual mind is the self or subject which perceives, remembers, imagines, feels, conceives, reasons, wills, etc. and which is functionally related to an individual bodily organism. (b) Mind, generically considered, is a metaphysical substance which pervades all individual mind and which is contrasted with matter or material substance." [10]

Let us now discuss the four aggregates *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra* and *viññāṇa* which form the psychical parts of the mind.

Vedanā is the aggregate of feeling which accompanies our impressions and ideas. Feelings are threefold: pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. They are dependent on contact. Seeing a form or visible object, hearing a sound, smelling an odour, tasting a flavour, touching some tangible thing, cognizing a mental object (an idea or thought), man experiences feeling. These six kinds of feelings are experienced through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and the mind, respectively (the faculty of mind, *manindriya*, is regarded as the sixth faculty in Buddhist psychology). When for instance, eye, form, and visual consciousness (*cakkhu viññāṇa*) come together, it is their coincidence that is called contact. Contact means the combination of the organ of sense, the object of sense, and sense consciousness. When these are all present together there is no power or force that can prevent the arising of feeling.

Next comes the aggregate of perception (*saññākhandha*).

The function of perception in Buddhist psychology is recognition (*sañjānana*) of objects, both physical and mental. Perception, like feeling, also is six-fold: perception of forms, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily contacts and mental objects. Perception in Buddhism is not used in the sense of Western philosophers like Bacon and Descartes.

Spinoza and Leibnitz used the term, but as a mere sense perception. Extra-sensory forms of perception such as telepathy and clairvoyance are also included in the aggregate of perception.

There is a certain *affinity* between awareness (*vijānana*), which is the function of consciousness, and recognition (*sañjānana*), the function of perception. While consciousness becomes aware of an object, simultaneously perception takes the distinctive mark of the object and thus distinguishes it from other objects. This distinctive mark is instrumental in cognizing the object a second and a third time, and in fact, every time we become aware of the object. Thus it is perception, *saññā*, that brings about memory.

It is important to note that perceptions often deceive us. Then they become known as illusion or perversity of perceptions (*saññāvipallāsa*), It is always when we fail to see the true nature of things that our views become clouded; because of our preconceived notions, our attachment and aversion, our likes and dislikes (*anurodha, virodha*) [11] we fail to see the sense organs and sense objects in their respective and objective natures, and go after mirages and

deceptions. The sense organs delude and mislead us, and then we fail to see things in their true light, in their proper perspective, so our way of seeing things becomes perverted (*viparita dassana*). Right understanding alone removes these illusions and helps man to cognize the real nature that underlies all appearances. It is only when man comes out of this cloud of illusions and perversions that he shines with true wisdom like the full moon that emerges brilliant from behind a black cloud.

When a particular perception, perverted or not, occurs frequently, it grows stronger and grips our mind. Then it becomes difficult to get rid of that perception, and the result is well explained in this verse of the *Suttanipāta* (verse 841):

“Who is free from sense perceptions  
In him no more bonds exist;  
Who by insight freedom gains  
All delusions cease in him;  
But who clings to sense perceptions  
And to viewpoints wrong and false  
He lives wrangling in this world.”

Perception is followed by the aggregate of mental (volitional) formations (*saṅkhārakkhandha*). It is good to keep in mind that volitional formations is the popular term for the word *saṅkhāra* in the list of the five aggregates. In other contexts *saṅkhārā* does signify anything conditioned and compounded. In the statement *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* or *aniccā vata saṅkhārā* (all compounded things are impermanent), the

term *saṅkhārā* applies to all compounded and conditioned things, i.e. all things that come into being as the effect of causes and conditions and which themselves act as causes and conditions in turn again to give rise to other effects.

In this group of mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) are included all mental factors except feeling (*vedanā*) and perception (*saññā*) mentioned earlier. The Abhidhamma speaks of fifty-two mental concomitants or factors (*cetasika*). Feeling and perceptions are two of them, but they are not volitional formations. The remaining fifty are collectively known as *saṅkhāra*, mental or volitional formations. Volition plays a vital role in the mental realm, and we shall discuss this when we deal with the psychology of *karma*.

The aggregate of consciousness (*viññāṇakkhandha*) is the most important of the five aggregates which comprise man. Now what is the function of consciousness? Like feeling, perception and volitional formations, consciousness also has six types and its function is varied. It has its basis and objects.

All our feelings are experienced through the contact of sense faculties with the external world. The faculty of mind which cognizes mental objects is not something tangible and perceptible like the other five faculties which cognize the external world. The eye cognizes the world of colours (*vaṇṇa*) or visible objects, the ear audible sounds, and so forth. The mind, however, cognizes the world of ideas and thoughts. When it comes to the world of thoughts and ideas,

the faculty of the mind is lord over the mental realm. The eye cannot think thoughts, and collect ideas, but it is instrumental in seeing visible forms, the world of colours.

It is very important to understand the function of consciousness. Although there is this functional relationship between the faculties and their objects, for instance, eye with forms, ear with sounds, and so forth, awareness come through consciousness. In other words, sense objects cannot be experienced with the particular sensitivity without the appropriate kind of consciousness. When the three things: eye, form and visual consciousness come together, it is their coincidence that is called contact. From contact comes feeling and so on as explained in the dependent origination or conditioned genesis (*paṭicca samuppāda*). [12]

When it is said that consciousness arises through the interaction of the sense organs and objects (*indriya* and *ārammaṇa*), it does not mean that consciousness is some thing created by the sense organ and object which are purely physical. Otherwise we will be subscribing to the theory of the materialistic schools which believed that consciousness is a mere by-product of matter. The function of *viññāna*, consciousness, is to become aware of objects (*vijānana*). The human eye may come in contact with the visible object, but unless there is awareness we are not conscious of the object. Consciousness also is conditioned and subject to change, and so it is not a spirit or soul opposed to matter, nor a projection, an offspring of matter.

The concept of *viññāṇa* occupies a very high place in the teachings of the Buddha, but it is not studied or understood by many in all its aspects; it is the least understood. To many, *viññāṇa* is just one of the five aggregates, which becomes aware of sense objects. Its deeper interpretation, the broader aspects involved are ignored. When we discuss the concept of *viññāṇa* in relation to the doctrine of survival or the rebirth process of beings, it becomes clear that consciousness plays an important role in the process of becoming (*punabbhava*).

This fact is clearly brought out in the *paṭicca samuppāda*: *saṅkhāra-paccaya viññāṇaṃ*, dependent on the *kamma* or good and evil actions (*saṅkhāra*) of the past births is conditioned the conscious life in this present birth. Consciousness, therefore, is the first factor (*nidāna*) or first of the conditioning links belonging to the present existence. As this, consciousness or *viññāṇa* is the first of the stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*) belonging to one single existence (*bhava*), it is also known as *paṭisandhiviññāṇa*, relinking or rebirth consciousness. *Saṅkhāra*, in the form of *kamma*, is the 'motive force' that causes rebirth. We must understand the dynamic importance of the two psychic factors, *saṅkhāra* and *viññāṇa*. *Saṅkhāra* means *karma*, good and evil actions, all actions, physical, verbal and mental (*kāya-saṅkhāra*, *vacī-saṅkhāra*, *citta-saṅkhāra*) which will bring out reactions giving rise to rebirth. Thus *saṅkhāra* determines that part of consciousness in the next life influencing the new personality.

What we call life here is the functioning of the five aggregates which we have already discussed, or the functioning of mind and body (*nāmarūpa*) which are only energies or forces. They are never the same for two consecutive moments, and in this conflux of mind and body we do not see anything permanent. The grown-up man is neither the child nor quite a different person; there is only a relationship of continuity. The conflux of mind and body or mental and physical energy, is not lost at death, for no force or energy is ever lost. It undergoes change. It resets, reforms in new conditions. This is called rebirth, re-existence or re-becoming (*punabbhava*). Karmic process (*kammabhava*) is the energy that out of a present life conditions a future life in unending sequence. In this process there is nothing that passes or transmigrates from one life to another. It is only a movement that continues unbroken. The 'being' who passes away here and takes birth elsewhere is neither the same person, nor a totally different one (*na ca so, na ca añño*). [13]

There is the last moment of consciousness (*cuti-viññāṇa* or *cuti-citta*) belonging to the immediately previous life; immediately next, upon the cessation of that consciousness, but conditioned by it, there arises the first moment of consciousness of the present birth which is called (*patī-sandhi viññāṇa*) relinking- or rebirth-consciousness, the first stirring of mental life in the newly begun individual. Similarly the last thought moment in this life conditions the first thought moment in the next life. In this way consciousness comes into being and passes away yielding

place to new consciousness. Thus the perpetual stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa sota*) goes on until existence ceases through the eradication of the root causes leading to becoming or existence (*bhava*). The root causes are: lust, hate and delusion (*raga, dosa, moha*). [14] Existence, in a way, is consciousness, the will to live.

The Pali word *pati-sandhi viññāṇa* is a term found only in the Abhidhamma literature, and a detailed account of the term is found in the commentaries and treatises on the Abhidhamma. *Paṭisandhi* or Sanskrit *praṭisandhi* literally means re-linking, re-uniting, re-joining. It is called re-uniting through its being the thing which links one existence to another (the succeeding one). *Paṭisandhiviññāṇa* is the resultant consciousness (*vipāka-viññāṇa*) present at rebirth, or owing to the presence of which at the moment of rebirth the new existence is connected with the immediately preceding existence, and through that with the entire past of the individual reborn. This resultant consciousness is due to previous re-birth producing mental factors *saṅkhāra*, volitional formations, or *kamma*. [15]

It is interesting to note that the counterpart of the Abhidhamma term *paṭisandhi viññāṇa* is found in the Sutta Piṭaka. In the Āneñjasappāya Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (No. 106), this *vipāka viññāṇa* is referred to as the *saṃvaṭṭanikaṃ viññāṇaṃ*, the consciousness that goes on, that proceeds from one life to another as *vipāka*. The consciousness that evolves into the next life. But be it noted that this consciousness, is not an unchanging entity.

Dependent on consciousness arises mentality-materiality (*nāma-rūpa*), the psycho-physical personality. Consciousness, on the other hand, is conditioned by mentality-materiality (*nāma-rūpa-paccayā viññāṇaṃ viññāṇa-paccayā nāma-rūpaṃ*). [16] They are mutually dependent and the two together form a new being. In the Mahā Nidāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya the question was raised by the Buddha in the course of a discussion with his attendant disciple Ānanda Thera as to whether the *nāma-rūpa* will develop, and grow into maturity if *viññāṇa* were not to descend into the mother's womb (*mātukucchimhi na okkamissatha*), or being entered into the mother's womb were to leave (*okkamitvā vokkamissatha*). Ānanda Thera's reply was in the negative: "Lord, the development of the embryo will not be successful". The answer was approved by the Buddha. According to modern biology, "A new human life begins in that miraculous instant when a sperm cell from the father merges with the egg shell or ovum within the mother." This is the moment of birth. Science speaks of only these two physical common factors. Buddhism, however, speaks of a third factor which is purely psychic.

As the Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya points out, a conception (*gabbhassa avakkanti*) of a being takes place by the conjunction of three factors. If the mother and father come together (there should be coitus of parents), and it is the mother's proper season (the mother should not have her period), and the *gandhabba* is also present (*paccupaṭṭhito hoti*) then a germ of life is planted there.

The third factor *gandhabba* is simply a term for the *viññāṇa*, or *paṭisandhiviññāṇa*, or the *saṃvaṭṭanika viññāṇa*, rebirth consciousness. According to Ācariya Buddhaghosa, the commentator, *gandhabba* means the being about to enter the womb (*paccupaṭṭhito hoti*). What is meant is that a *satta*, a being, about to be born in that situation, is being driven on by the mechanism of *kamma*. It should be clearly understood that this *gandhabba* is neither a “semi-god who presides over child-conception [17] nor a ‘discarnate spirit’ as implied by the Vedic *gandharva*. It is quite clear from the early Buddhist texts that there is no spirit or soul, or ego-entity going from birth to birth. It is the *viññāṇa* conditioned by *saṅkhāras* or *kamma* formations, that brings about the rebirth of an individual after his death.

Consciousness, which is the psychic factor that determines the rebirth of an individual or being, is not something permanent in the form of a self or soul or an ego-entity. Even consciousness is conditioned and subject to change. There were many during the time of the Buddha who thought, and there are many who continue to think, that consciousness in the form of a permanent, enduring self or soul exists in man, continues through life, and at death transmigrates from one life to another, and binds life together. During the Buddha’s time some metaphysicians held the view: “whatever there is to be called *citta* or *mano* or *viññāṇa*, that is the soul; permanent, constant, eternal, unchanging” [18]

We also see a glaring instance of this in the thirty-eighth

discourse of the Majjhima Nikāya. One of the Buddha's own disciples, Sati by name, held the following view: "In so far as I understand the Dhamma taught by the Buddha, it is the same consciousness, *viññāṇa* that fares on and continues (*sandhavati saṃsarati*), that transmigrates and wanders about (in rebirth)." When Sati intimated his point of view to the Buddha, the Master questioned him: "What is this consciousness, Sati?" "It is that which expresses, which feels and experiences (*vādo vedeyyo*) the result of good and evil deeds now here now there." The Buddha, however, dispelled his erroneous belief by explaining to him that apart from conditions there is no arising of consciousness, that consciousness arises depending on conditions.

Sati erred when he said that the same consciousness continues as speaker and experiencer thus regarding consciousness as an agent behind all mental activities.

Now this consciousness referred to as the stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa sota*) [19] is not a unity that abides unchanged, and continues in the same state without perishing throughout the cycle of existence. Consciousness also is conditioned, and therefore, is not permanent. It does not, as Sati thought, transmigrate from one life to another. The eminent American psychologist, William James, only echoes the words of the Buddha when he writes referring to consciousness: "It is nothing jointed. It flows. A 'river' or 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described ... *Let us call it the stream of thoughts, the stream of consciousness or of subjective life.*" [20] (the italics are his)

If I do not even make a passing reference to the Bhavaṅga aspect of Buddhist psychology I shall not be doing justice to the subject. *Bhavaṅga citta* or *Bhavaṅga sota* plays an important role in the mental life of man.

Modern psychology postulates three levels of the mind: the conscious, the sub-conscious, the unconscious. The conscious level is one of awareness. During our waking life the conscious mind works through the five channels known as the five sense faculties.

The sub-conscious stratum of the mind is the area which holds those memories that we can recall at will. It is said that the subconscious level of mental life which lies immediately below that of the conscious is a repository of memories which can be brought back into consciousness at will. The level of the unconscious is a store-house for all past experiences that cannot be recalled at will, but can, at times, on its own, manifest itself in the conscious level without any external stimulation, or under such special methods as hypnosis.

Sigmund Freud who, was chiefly concerned with the unconscious mind as the store-house of mental causes for a nervous breakdown, gives in *Psychopathology of Every Day Life* numerous examples of the fact of unconscious activity. Though some local scholars identify the Bhavaṅga citta with the sub-conscious or unconscious mind, I do not see a complete parallel. In Buddhist psychology there are no such levels of consciousness. Abhidhamma speaks of two types

of mind, the *Vithi-citta* and *Bhavaṅga-citta*. *Vithi-citta* is a thought process which occurs always at conscious level, that is during waking life. It works through the five sense faculties. The *Bhavaṅga-citta* operates during waking life as well as in the dreamless state of deep sleep, and, therefore, it may be said that it functions below the level of consciousness. It can also be called a sub-conscious or an unconscious mental process not identical with the full range of the Western concept of the sub-conscious or unconscious mind. It does not cover the entire ground of the Western conception of the sub-conscious or unconscious mind.

The *Bhavaṅga*, which is made up of *bhava* (becoming or existence) and *aṅga* (cause or instrumental, rather than factor) is an essential condition for continued existence. 'Life continuum' is the closest English equivalent for the Pali word *Bhavaṅga*. By reason of the existence of the *Bhavaṅga citta*, the stream of consciousness is kept going without interruption.

If our present birth here is the beginning, and our death is the end of this life, there is hardly any need to worry, and try to understand from a psychological point of view the problem of *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of all empirical existence. A moral order in the universe, the reality of right and wrong, may not be of any practical significance to us. To enjoy and gratify the senses at any cost may seem to be the sensible thing to do during this brief span of life. This view, however, does not explain the inequality of mankind. An inquiring mind will always strive to seek the cause of

this inequality.

There are two principal teachings of the Buddha which should be studied from a psychological point of view. They are *kamma* and *rebirth*. Kamma is the law of moral causation that shapes the destiny of beings and brings about rebirth. Basically it is volition (*cetana*), action prompted by will. The Buddha says: “Volition, O monks, I declare is kamma, having willed man acts by deed, word and thought.” [21] Volition, which is will, is the deciding factor in all our activities, good or ill. *Kamma* is the action or seed. The reaction, the effect, or fruit is known as *kammavipāka*. Volition may be good or bad, so actions may be wholesome or unwholesome according to their results. This endless play of action and reaction, cause and effect, seed and fruit, continues in perpetual motion, and this is becoming (*bhava*),—a continually changing process of the psycho-physical phenomena of existence discussed earlier. Man acts through body, speech and mind; actions bring about reactions. Craving (*taṇhā*, Skt. *tṛṣṇā*), our thirst, which is a factor of the mind, gives rise to deeds, deeds produce results; results in turn bring about new desires, new craving and thirsting. The process of cause and effect, actions and reactions, is natural law. It is a law in itself with no need for a law-giver. An external agency that rewards and punishes the good and evil deeds of man has no place in Buddhist thought. Man is always changing either for good or for ill. This changing is unavoidable and depends entirely on his own will and action. “This is merely the universal natural law of the

conservation of energy extended to the moral domain.”

It may be observed, from a psychological point of view, that Buddhism does not support the idea of repentance, for it will not do any good to oneself or others. According to Buddhism wrong-doing is not regarded as a 'sin,' for that word is foreign to the teaching of the Buddha. There is no such things as 'breaking the Buddha's law' because he was not a law-giver, an arbitrator or potentate who punished the bad and rewarded the good deeds of beings. The doer of the deed is responsible for his own actions; he suffers or enjoys the consequences of deeds, and it is his concern either to do good or to do bad. It must also be stated that all actions, good or ill, do not necessarily mature. One's good kamma may suppress the evil kamma and vice versa. We must also understand that the Buddhist doctrine of kamma is not fatalism, is not a philosophical doctrine to the effect that human action is not free, but necessarily determined by motives which are regarded as external forces acting upon the will, or predetermined by God. The Buddha neither subscribed to the theory that all things are unalterably fixed; that all things happen by inevitable necessity, that is strict determinism, (*niyata-vada*) nor did he uphold the theory of complete indeterminism (*adhiccasamuppanna*). According to Buddhism there is no life after death or life before birth independent of kamma or volitional actions. Kamma is the corollary of rebirth; rebirth, on the other hand, is the corollary of kamma. Birth precedes death, and death on the other hand, precedes birth, and the pair thus accompany

each other in unbroken succession. Still there is no permanent self or soul or fixed entity that passes from birth to birth. Though man comprises a psycho-physical unit of mind and matter, the 'psyche' or mind is not a soul or self, in the sense of an enduring entity, something ready made and permanent. It is a force, a dynamic continuum, capable of storing up memories not only of this life but also of past lives.

To the scientist matter is energy in a state of stress, change without real substance. To the psychologist the 'psyche' is no more a fixed entity. And when the Buddha emphatically stressed that the so-called 'being' or 'individual' is but a combination of physical and mental forces or energies, a change with continuity, did he not antedate modern science and psychology by twenty five centuries?

An individual existence is thus a succession of change, something that comes into being and passes away not remaining the same for two consecutive moments. This psychophysical organism, though, undergoes incessant changes, creates new psycho-physical processes every instant, thus preserving the potentiality for future organic processes and leaving no gap between one moment and the other. We live and die every moment of our lives. It is merely a coming into being and passing away like the waves of the sea.

This change of continuity which is patent to us in this life does not cease at death. The mind flux continues

incessantly. It is the dynamic mind-flux that is termed as kammic energy. This mighty force, this will to live, keeps life going. Thus this perpetual stream of consciousness (*viññāna-sota*) goes on without end so long as that myriad-faced thirst (*taṇhā*) in the company of ignorance (*avijjā*), the crowning corruption of all our madness, generate it.

All forms of appetite are included in *taṇhā*: greed, thirst lust, burning, yearning, longing, inclination, affection, household love are some of the many terms that denote *taṇhā*, which, in the word of the Buddha, leads to becoming (*bhava-netti*). Becoming which manifests itself as *dukkha*, as suffering, frustration, conflicts, painful excitement, unsatisfactoriness, is our own experience. Beings in their intense thirst for either possession or the satisfaction of desires, become bound to the wheel of existence, are twisted and torn between the spokes of agony, and securely close the door to final deliverance.

The enemy of the whole world is lust through which all evil comes to living beings. It is not only greed for and attachment to pleasure caused by the senses, wealth and property, and by the wish to defeat others and conquer countries, but also attachment to ideas, views, opinions and beliefs (*dhamma-taṇhā*) which often leads to calamity and destruction and brings untold suffering to whole nations, in fact to the whole world. This *taṇhā*, this craving of man, is three-fold, and the mind is urged to act under the influence of these three types of *taṇhā*. Whenever craving for objects is connected with sense pleasures it is called sensuous

craving (*kāma-taṇhā*). When it is associated with the belief in eternal personal existence, then it is called craving for existence, for becoming (*bhava-taṇhā*). It is the desire for continuing, to exist for ever, self-preservation (*jīvitukāma*). When craving is associated with the belief in self-annihilation, it is called craving for non-existence, for destruction (*vibhava-taṇhā*). the three-fold *taṇhā* or craving may be compared with that of the Freudian conception of the *eros*, *libido*, and *thanatos*.

According to Buddhism many are the defilements (*kilesa*) of the mind, but the root causes of all evil are: lust or craving; hatred or ill will; delusion or ignorance (*lobha, dosa, moha*). They are the motive forces by which man acts. Actions performed through these defilements bring about repeated existence, for it is said “Without abandoning lust, hate and delusion one is not free from birth.” [22] When a person totally eradicates the trio he is liberated from the shackles of *saṃsāra*, repeated existence. He is free in the full sense of the word. He no longer has any quality which will cause him to be reborn as a living being, because he has realised Nibbāna, the entire cessation of becoming (*bhava nirodha*); he has transcended common or worldly activities, and has raised himself to a state above the world while yet living in the world; his actions are issue-less, are kammically ineffective; for they are not motivated by the trio, by mental defilements. He is immune to all evil, to all defilements of the heart. In him there are no motivating underlying tendencies (*anusaya*); he has given up both good and evil

(*puñña-pāpa pahīna*); [23] he is not worried by the past, the future, nor even the present. He clings to nothing in the world, and so is not troubled. He is not perturbed by the vicissitudes of life. His mind is unshaken by contact with worldly contingencies; he is sorrowless, taintless and secure (*asokaṃ, virajaṃ, khemaṃ.*) [24] Thus Nibbāna is a 'state' realisable in this very life (*diṭṭhadhamma-nibbāna*). The thinker, the inquiring mind, will not find it difficult to understand this state which can be postulated only of the Arahāt and not of any other being either in this world or in the realm of heavenly enjoyment.

As the Buddha has so clearly pointed out: "Whatever there is of evil, connected with evil, belonging to evil, all issue from mind (literally, mind precedes them all: *mano pubbaṅgama*)". Whatever there is of good, connected with good, belonging to good, all issue from mind." [25]

Hence the need for man to scrutinise his own mind with a view to understanding how the human mind works, how thoughts arise and pass away. As Sigmund Freud says:

"Psychological changes only come about very slowly. If they occur quickly and suddenly it is a bad sign". Knowing good thoughts as good, and evil as evil, an attempt should be made to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome thoughts not yet arisen; to abandon the evil thoughts already arisen; to produce and develop good thoughts that have not yet arisen; and to maintain the good thoughts already arisen. This is the function of Right Effort (*sammā*

*vāyāma*), a doing in the mind: to prevent, to abandon, to develop and maintain (*saṃvara, pahāna, bhāvanā , anurakkhana*). [26] Thus in Buddhism even ethics is studied from the psychological point of view. This emphasis on right effort by the Buddha explains in unmistakable language that Buddhism is not a philosophy of pessimism, a teaching for the feeble-minded who look at things from the most unfavourable point of view, but that it is a true warrior's religion.

Hard it is to give up what lures and holds us in thrall, and hard it is to exorcise the evil spirits that haunt the human heart in the shape of unwholesome thoughts. These evils are the manifestation of lust, hate and delusion discussed earlier. Until one attains the very crest of purity by constant training of the mind, one cannot defeat these hosts completely. The mere abandoning of outward things, fasting and so forth, these do not tend to purify a man; these things do not make a man holy and harmless. Self torture is one extreme which the Buddha in his first proclamation of the dhamma cast off as wrong, and so also did he reject sensual indulgence calling it ignoble. Avoiding these two extremes the Buddha revealed to the world the Middle Way, the Ancient Path, which still beckons the weary pilgrim to the haven of Nirvana's security and peace.

Virtue, concentration and wisdom or insight (*sīla, samādhi, paññā*) are the cardinal teaching which, when fully cultivated, raise man from lower to higher levels of mental life; lead him from darkness to light; from passion to

dispassion; from turmoil to tranquillity. These three are not isolated reactions, but integral parts of the path. This idea is crystallised in that oft-quoted but ever fresh admonition of the Buddhas of all ages: [27]

*Sabba pāpassa akaraṇaṃ  
Kusalassa upasampadā  
Sacitta pariyodapanaṃ  
Etaṃ Buddhānasāsaṇaṃ*

The giving up of all evil  
The cultivation of the good  
The cleansing of one's mind  
This is the Buddhas' teaching.

I think we have now sufficiently dealt with the psychological aspects of Buddhism. In conclusion I wish to take your minds back to the introductory paragraph in this talk where I stated that the life story of Sir Baron Jayatilaka richly illustrates the power of the human mind. The one lesson that we all can learn from his unique life is that we can improve and develop our minds on the lines indicated in Buddhist psychology. Mere learning bereft of the elevating and purifying influence of a mind trained in the Buddhist way of life carries us nowhere. Let us hope that the life story of Sir Baron Jayatilaka, and this talk inspired by that life story, will help us to rise above the passions and prejudices, great and small, which beset us at every turn in life, and introduce us to those higher realms of noble living which the Buddha has been at pains to emphasise. May we

all, leading that higher life, attain the bliss of Nibbāna.

Be loving and be pitiful  
And well controlled in virtue's ways,  
Strenuous, bent upon the goal,  
And onward ever bravely press.  
That danger both in dalliance lie,  
That earnestness is sure and safe,  
This when you see, then cultivate  
The Eightfold Path, so shall ye touch, [28]  
So make your own, the Deathless Way. [29]

# Notes

1. Translated in The Wheel series, No. 19. Also read *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Its Application to Modern Life*, V. F. Gunaratna, The Wheel series, No. 60.
2. The Wheel series, No. 21.
3. Dhammapada, v. 276.
4. Aṅguttara Nikāya II 177.
5. Majjhima Nikāya I 22.
6. Vinaya Mahāvagga I 16, II. 136; Dīgha Nikāya I 110; Majjhima Nikāya I 380; Aṅguttara Nikāya IV 186.
7. Saṃyutta Nikāya III 138.
8. Saṃyutta Nikāya II 94.
9. *A Dictionary of Psychology*, James Drever, Penguin Books.
10. *Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by Dagobert D. Runes, Littlefield, Adams & Co. New Jersey.
11. Majjhima Nikāya I 266.
12. See “*Dependent Origination*”, Piyadassi Thera, The **Wheel No. 15**.
13. *Milindapañhā*, P.T.S., p. 40.

14. See below.
15. Vide *Vibhāvini*, M-a.
16. *Samyutta Nikāya* II 104.
17. Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary*, under the word *gandhabba*.
18. *Samyutta Nikāya* II 94.
19. *Dīgha Nikāya* III 105, cp. *Suttanipāta*, 1055. Also stream of becoming (*bhava-sota*), *Samyutta Nikāya*, IV 291.
20. “*Psychology: Brief Course*”, see chapter on “*The Stream of Consciousness*.”
21. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* III 415.
22. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II I.6.
23. *Dhammapada* 39.
24. *Maṅgala sutta*, *Suttanipāta* 270.
25. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I.VI. 6.8; I.VI. 7.9.
26. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. II 15, (suttas 13, 14).
27. *Dhammapada*, v 183.
28. Touch—i. e. 'realize'.
29. *Psalms of the Brethren*, 979, 980.

# THE BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or write an e-mail or a letter to the:

Administrative Secretary  
Buddhist Publication Society

P.O. Box 61

54 Sangharaja Mawatha

Kandy • Sri Lanka

E-mail: [bps@bps.lk](mailto:bps@bps.lk)

web site: <http://www.bps.lk>

Tel: 0094 81 223 7283 • Fax: 0094 81 222 3679

# Table of Contents

Title page	2
Piyadassi Thera	2
The Psychological Aspect Of Buddhism	4
Notes	38