

The Human Mind & Buddhist Meditation

**Essay #2 for “Buddhism and Modern Psychology” - by Dr. Tyler Wasson, Psy.D.
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This essay will attempt to answer the following two questions from the assignment prompts: 1) Does modern science lend support to Buddhist ideas about the human mind? And 2) Does modern science lend support to the logic behind Buddhist meditation practice? It is my belief that modern science does indeed lend support to Buddhist ideas about the human mind, as well as the logic behind Buddhist meditation practice.

In general, the teachings of the Buddha assert that the nature of the mind is that in its natural, “unenlightened,” un-practiced state, it is full of distortions, and it itself distorts reality and therefore does not see reality clearly, as it truly is. The Dalai Lama teaches that “Normally, our forms of sense cognition--such as eye consciousness, ear consciousness, etc.--perform their function on external phenomena in a manner involving gross distortion.”¹ The Buddha described these distortions in the Five Hindrances which “obstruct” the mind and cause it to not be able to see clearly and accurately--they consist of: sense desire, hatred, sloth and torpor (“laziness of mind, sluggishness”), restlessness, and doubt.²

Evolutionary theorists of many subtypes (i.e. psychologists, neuroscientists, etc.) have asserted in recent years the theory of a “modular view of the mind,” as described by Robert Wright in his lectures, and in his subsequent book *Why Buddhism Is True*. This theory asserts the idea (based on various observations including split brain experiments) that rather than an all-knowing and in-charge CEO self that governs the self and the actions of the self, rather there is a complex network of several “modules” or drives constantly competing for control of perceptions and direction of internal and external behaviors by the human body within which they are situated. The suggestion is that these modules serve as a sort of lens through which internal and external stimuli are processed and interpreted, and then what sorts of behavior will then be enacted by the human under their control. It is posited that these modules serve an adaptive, survivalist function for their human body, and as such, their primary job is to keep their human alive, not only as an individual, but also as a species beyond the lifespan of the individual (i.e. descendants).

The modular view of the mind seems to fit nicely (although not without unanswered questions, to be sure) with the template of the five hindrances in that it provides a scientific model of how the mind may not view the world starkly as it really is, but rather through a self-serving filter. To be clear, the assertion of this essay is not that science *proves* the Buddhist assertions of the nature of the mind, but rather that it does seem to “lend support” to these ideas.

Not to leave one with a sense of hopelessness of ever being able to see clearly (which is the antidote to “suffering” or “unsatisfactoriness” inherent to the human condition), the Buddha offers the Eightfold Path in his Fourth Noble Truths. The last three elements of the eightfold path

¹ Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, & Mehrotra, R. (2006). *Essential Dalai lama: his important teachings*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. (p.169).

² Goldstein, J. (1987). *The experience of insight: a simple and direct guide to Buddhist meditation*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications. (pp.51-59).

concern meditation, and they are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The remainder of this essay will focus primarily on the element of mindfulness, which is also the “first factor of enlightenment.”³ However it should be noted that mindfulness meditation typically incorporates the skill and practice of concentration in a sort of reciprocal fashion, for in concentration practice one becomes increasingly mindful (i.e. aware) of various states (or modules?) of the mind, and with this heightened awareness one is able to not engage the impulsiveness of the primal drives or modules, and therefore increase and fall back into concentration on a single object, whether breath, sound, process of thinking mind, etc.

Meditation, particularly mindfulness meditation, is the practice of awareness and observation of the various modes of perception, i.e. the five physical senses of smell, taste, touch, hearing, and seeing, as well as the internal experiences of thinking and emotions. The idea is that by observing these sources of input, one can begin to notice the bare qualities of these inputs of information and begin to distinguish the inputs themselves from the interpretations and judgments layered on top of the bare reality of them, such as the sense of desire and/or aversion (i.e. noticing the bare process of hearing vs. the judgment of what is being heard, a beautiful piece of music) . As one of the featured guests in the lectures noted, instead of tasting a “great” glass of wine, one can begin to experience the actual flavors of the wine, noticing any reactions and judgments brought to bear on the flavors as good or bad, and thereby acknowledging the judgments as arising from the perceiver, and not the perceived, or put another way, divesting the wine of goodness or badness as an inherent quality possessed by the wine.

Many studies have shown that this is indeed in line with the way the mind tends to operate, and that these snap judgments and their sources and influences are often unknown to the subject, and seen as attributes of the object, such as when majorities of people are subjected to subliminal influences that then reliably influence their judgments about subsequent objects without their explicit knowledge of having been impacted by the subliminal messaging, and their tendency to then provide meaning-making explanations for their opinions and behaviors--enacting what some have referred to as the “public relations” module.

To summarize, Buddhism asserts that the mind is clouded and cannot perceive reality in the mind’s natural state, and that only through meditation can one hope to distinguish between reality and perception/judgment of reality. Today some 2,500 years later, modern science has begun to shed light on the nature of the human mind and behavior, lending support to these assertions and showing that humans in their natural state tend to not be fully aware of their own motivations, influences, judgments, and reactions, and that long-term meditators have shown remarkably enhanced awareness of these unconscious processes and tend to be less driven by them and beholden to them.

³ Goldstein, J. (pp. 141-150).