



CONCEPT OF PERSONALITY IN ABHIDHARMA

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ABSTRACT

Human personality, the most important and distinct aspect of an individual's life, plays prominent role in the success and failure of one's life. Hence, the importance of personality nowadays increases as our social life becomes more and more complex. Today people across the world are becoming more personality-conscious than in the past. Therefore, the ways through which one can improve one's personality are very important. The attempts to provide a systematic interpretation of human personality and behaviour did not originate only in contemporary Western psychology but a philosophical approach of such well-formulated psychology can be seen in ancient Indian systems also, especially the contribution made by the Buddhist philosophy is amazing and remarkable. This paper intends to provide a picture of the early Buddhist psychology mainly the Abhidharma trend to signify the contribution made by this particular school of Indian Philosophy towards the development of the most important concept of human life.

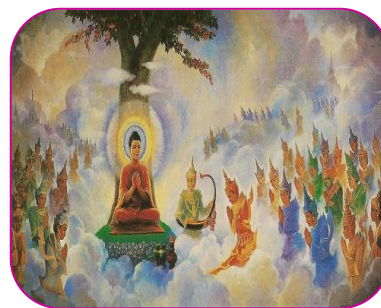
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INTRODUCTION

Personality is one of the most important aspects in an individual's psychological and physical life. In some ways all human beings are same by having a human body, mind and thoughts. Yet in some other ways, we all are completely different and particularly unique. The common thing is recognized as humanity and the difference is our unique identity. This unique identity of human beings is called the personality, which is recognizable in the speech and action of an individual. In other words, it is our diverse ways of being human. Personality can be regarded as a determining factor in the success and failure of one's life and even helps to recognize the individual characteristics of a person.

The term "personality" comes from the Latin word "*persona*", which means "mask" (Hurlock, 2006). Therefore, personality is something which people use as a mask while presenting themselves to others. There are several definitions of personality, among which the most accepted one given by Gordon W. Allport that "Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psycho-physical systems that determine his characteristic behaviour and thought" (Ryckman, 2008). Personality makes us the people we are by controlling our behaviour, thoughts, emotions and even unconscious feelings. It distinguishes one person from another by influencing the way a person reacts and responds to a particular situation and social environment around him/her.

Attempts have been made to provide a systematic interpretation of human personality and behaviour not only in contemporary Western psychology; a philosophical approach of such well-formulated psychologies can be seen in the Indian systems also. Regarding this, the contribution made by the Buddhist philosophy is amazing and remarkable but it is very little known. While other religions ponder mostly upon theology, Buddhism concerns itself with the mind as well as what person and personality are. The psychological significance of the Four Noble Truths (*catvāri-ārya-satyāni*), the Eight-Fold Path (*aṣṭāṅga-mārga*) and its techniques of meditation have much relevance even in modern world.



The Abhidharma:

There are three scriptures or *piakas* in Buddhism, together called the Three Baskets of Knowledge or *tripiakas*, viz., the *Vinayapiaka*, the *Suttapiaka* and the *Abhidharmapiaka*. Among these three, the *Abhidharmapiaka* has been given utmost importance in Buddhism and the rest of the *piakas* are often understood and interpreted in terms of the *Abhidharmapiaka*. *Abhidharma* means the “higher” or the “special teaching”. It is the collection of the systematically arranged, tabulated and classified doctrines of Gautama Buddha. Some teachers of Buddhism even believe that without comprehending the *Abhidharma*, our knowledge of Buddhism will be incomplete. The *Abhidharmapiaka* is a combination of philosophy, psychology and ethics. In this book, there is a precise description of the psycho-ethical aspects of Buddhism. The *Abhidharmapiaka* analyses and explains the teachings of the Buddha in purely psychological terms. The *Abhidharmapiaka* consists of seven books, viz.,

1. *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, it is the classification of *dhammas* with an analysis of consciousness (*citta*) and its concomitant mental factors (*cetasikas*);
2. *Vibhaṅga*, containing eighteen divisions on the analysis of phenomena distinct from the first one;
3. *Dhātukatha*, a small discourse in the form of catechism with elaboration of phenomena of existence with reference to *skandhas*, *āyatana* and *dhātu*;
4. *Puggalapaññatti*, a treatise with description of various types of individuals and the concept of personality;
5. *Kathāvatthu*, the points of controversy on the Buddha *dharma*;
6. *Yamaka*, a book on applied logic in which analytical procedure is arranged in pairs; and
7. *Paṭṭhāna-pakaraṇa*, the book of causal relations together with *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, consists of twenty-four *paccayas*, conditions or relations (Lay, 1992).

These seven books of the *Abhidharma* deal with different types of topics within themselves. The *Kathāvatthu* helps the scholars to understand the concept of person in terms of non-substantiality (*anātman*) and dependent arising (*pratityasamutpāda*). Another book - the *Vibhaṅga* helps in the understanding of the system of classification of the *Abhidharma* where each and every conception is connected in different ways. The *Vibhaṅga* is regarded as the most important work of the *Abhidharma* because it consists of many important concepts of the *Sūtras* such as the aggregates (*skandhas*), sense spheres (*āyatanas*), matters (*dhātus*), etc. The *Dhātukatha* deals with the process to determine the subject matter of the *Abhidharma* text. The *Yamaka* discusses the characteristics, subordination and organization of important concepts of the *Abhidharma*. The *Puggalapaññatti* discusses various types of persons. It discusses about person and the typology of persons. The Pali word “*puggala*” means a person or individual. The *Abhidharma* conception of person is different from other metaphysical conceptions of person. It is always non-metaphysical and different from other non-metaphysical explanations of the psychic and physical elements. According to the *Puggalapaññatti*, the so called “person” is only a mere convention and this view is established by enumerating five concepts given below:

- (1) the concept of aggregates (*skandha-paññati*),
- (2) the concept of gateways (*āyatana-paññati*),
- (3) the concept of elements (*dhātu-paññati*),
- (4) the concept of Truth (*satyā-paññati*), and
- (5) the concept of persons (*puggala-paññati*).

In this book, the last concept regarding person has been explained extensively than the first four concepts because they have already been mentioned and discussed in the earlier canons and treatises of the *Abhidharma*. Therefore, this book entirely concentrates on the study of person and personality. In order to do this, the book is divided into ten chapters. The first chapter deals with single individual, the second with pairs, the third with groups of three, etc. upto tenfold different classification of persons. According to Nyanatiloka, “It contains not merely brief definitions of the various human types, but also some fairly long descriptions, and a number of beautiful and elaborate similes” (Kalupahana, 1992). The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and *Paṭṭhāna-pakaraṇa* are regarded as the most mature works within the *Abhidharma*. According to some scholars, these two books together present the actual methodology of the whole *Abhidharma* system. In the *Abhidharma*, the connection or conditionality between two things is described in the *Paṭṭhāna-pakaraṇa*. The

Dhammasaigani deals with relational existence which illustrates how a single moment of consciousness is formed by innumerable mental factors bound together in terms of their interdependence.

PERSONALITY IN THE ABHIDHARMA:

The *Abhidharma* as similar to modern Psychology deals with the mind, thoughts, thought-processes, and mental states. But it does not admit a psyche or a soul. Hence, Buddhism teaches a psychology without a psyche (Thera,1979). In the *Abhidharma*, the study of personality is not taken only for the theoretical interest but for the purpose of evolving a practical and ethical living. In the *Abhidharma*, human beings are made up of mind (*nāma*) and body (*rūpa*). Of the two, *nāma* can be called as the leader and *rūpa*, the follower; so *nāma* is aware of the senses and *rūpa* is not. But in the sense sphere and the fine-material sphere, *nāma* needs the support of *rūpa* for its arising (Sircar,1999). It can be illustrated well by comparing *nāma* with a person having good eye-sight but no legs; while *rūpa* with a blind person having good legs. So, these two can accumulate and enhance each other while performing any deed.

The *Abhidharma* perspective of personality is emphasized on the process of understanding “who I am” and “what I am”. The world of spiritual progress consists of desires on one side and their elimination on the other; this understanding is the central importance in the study of personality in the *Abhidharma* (Sircar,1999). When the Buddha asserts that there is no “I” or “self” and there is nothing called “permanent”; it appears puzzling and frustrating for common human beings as it goes against our ordinary perception of the world and our place in it. It seems to weaken the solid ground of our very existence in this world. But in reality, by impermanent Buddha did not mean that nothing exists. He only tries to show the impermanent character of everything around us; as according to him, one element perishes, another arises, succeeding each other simultaneously. Therefore, even within the individual, there is no personal identity but only an ever changing phenomenon which has the element of continuity. Regarding this, Buddha has given the example of a flame or a flowing river. The flowing river and the flame of a lighted candle always appear as the same. But, in reality, every moment it is a new one because their identity is constituted by a unity of the succeeding streams of water and flames appearing as one respectively. Similarly, human personality too appears to be the same to the ordinary eyes; but, every moment it is a new one. Hence, in Buddhism, the personality of an embodied soul is like a continuously flowing stream of consciousness where an event involving consciousness is preceded and succeeded by another.

If we examine the *Sūtras*, there is a distinction between the conventional truth (*samvṛti satya*) and the absolute truth (*paramārtha satya*). The conventional truth is where one can speak about “person”, “personality”, “I”, “me” etc. According to Buddhist psychology, all such terms designating a personal identity are mere names or conventional modes of expression (*voḥāra- vacana*) (Sircar,1999). In the absolute truth, a person is seen only as a collection of some parts and therefore, there is no need to clutch to a personal identity. From the perspective of *Abhidharma*, a person is ultimately only mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*) or the totality of five aggregates (*pañca-skandhas*), viz., matter (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*sañjñā*), mental formation (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*vijñāna*). Therefore, in the *Abhidharma*, the answer to the query, “Who and what I am” is always given by enumerating these five aggregates by calling it a “being”, “person” or “personality”. There is nothing extra which exists apart from these five aggregates. It can be explained with the help of the example of a chariot. A chariot is a chariot only when all its parts, e.g., its body, wheels, axles, etc. are combined in a correct manner. Apart from this combination, there is nothing called as a chariot. Likewise, in the *Abhidharma*, only with the combination of the five aggregates a person can be called as a person.

According to the *Abhidharma*, a healthy personality is the one whose actions are neither harmful to oneself nor to others. These actions should be able to regenerate good and wholesome results which cause harmonious and peaceful living. The *Abhidharma* discusses how one can change unwholesome personality traits to wholesome ones. But, there is no certainty and permanency in maintaining these particular personalities. According to the *Abhidharma*, in order to maintain a healthy personality one has to go through the practice of meditation and the triadic principle of virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). By following these principles, the different types of personality can be developed into an enlightened personality which is called an *Arhat* in Buddhism. An *Arhat* is the final product of the *Abhidharma* personality development, which attains internal freedom from impurities. An *Arhat* is having a healthy mind by the result of right knowledge (*prajñā*) and by eliminating the unwholesome greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). For that, one needs to understand correctly the three signs of existence: impermanence (*anityatā*),

suffering (*duḥkha*) and impersonality (*anātman*). This ultimate goal of the “self” is called *Nirvāṇa*. It is a state which is free from all negativity like greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). *Nirvāṇa* means the end of all suffering. But the most important point about *Nirvāṇa* is that it is not a state of extinction as it is misunderstood. It is a permanent state of perfect peace which can be achieved in this very life itself. Once it is achieved, it cannot be lost. Therefore, it is called the final and permanent state of happiness.

CONCLUSION:

In the *Abhidharma*, the study of personality is not taken only with theoretical interest in mind but also for the purpose of evolving a practical and ethical standard of living. The *Abhidharma* psychology is distinct from Buddhism as a religion. While there is no “Self” in Buddhist philosophy, its psychology is highly compassionately concerned with person and personality. In contrast to the conventional academic psychology, which attaches value exclusively to empirical evidence and human behaviour, it is evident that Buddhist psychology is exceedingly concerned with the inner experiences of an individual. Therefore, verification of the Buddhist methods is possible through personal experience only. However, the critical part about Buddhism is that they do not associate mental phenomena with the activity of a substantial, independent, and enduring Self or soul. Rather, Buddhist theories of mind and personality are centered on the doctrine of no-self (*anātman*), which holds that human beings are reducible to the physical and psychological constituents and processes which comprise them. The most important point in the *Abhidharma* is that human beings have to understand the way things really exist. It means that comprehending the reality of the world as such. This outlook of the *Abhidharma* helps one eliminating the false attitude of “ego”, “personality”, “I” etc. In this way, human beings can keep themselves away from the common miseries seen in an ordinary life.

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