

An analytical study of “introspection” in Buddhist and western psychology

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Abstract : *Introspection is a technique where specially trained people carefully observe and analyze their own mental experiences. This subjective nature of the introspective method quickly became the target of criticism from other psychologists who argued that its reliance on self reports based on the subjects' observation of themselves renders it unscientific and in contrast to methods that adopt objective measurements. However, introspection, also adopted in Buddhist psychology, has still value in western psychology in spite of the criticism it has received from behaviorists. In this paper, my aim is to do a comparative study of the Buddhist and western psychological approaches to “introspection” as a research method. I expect to conduct this study from critical and analytical perspectives using descriptive and explanatory methods following the Buddhist teachings in Sutta Pitaka and works of modern psychologists. Although the method of ‘introspection’ was rejected by psychologists who came after Wundt, there is still value in introspection as a research method provided it is used after proper training. I argue there are many insights that can be taken from Buddhist psychology for the practice of “introspection” in western psychology which can contribute towards a more meaningful approach at both theoretical and at practical levels.*

Keywords: *Buddhism, introspection, research method, western psychology*

I. Introduction

The oldest research method in western psychology is introspection. Wundt, who introduced this method, aimed at training his followers to describe their conscious thoughts, emotions and sensory experiences by themselves through introspection or by looking inwards. Nevertheless, with the emergence of behavioral psychology, introspection got neglected as a research method due to its unscientific nature. Though western psychologists rejected introspection as an unscientific research method, it is the most valuable method of looking inwards, as the Buddha preached. It is my belief that Western psychologists have neglected introspection due to their immature attitudes regarding its application. In Buddhism, the Buddha has illustrated how to use introspection as a research method under various approaches for the improvement of the individual as well as of the society. It is time to motivate researchers to practice introspection as a research method for strengthening the task of psychology because the major objective of psychology is to offer solutions to human problems either at the level of behavior or at the mental level. At present, due to excessive scientific development many behavioral and psychological problems are available in society due to lack of introspection among people. Hence, this research would help to a certain extent to fill the exiting knowledge gap and to motivate psychologists to re-use introspection as a research method while experimenting with new scientific methods.

II .Introspection and western psychology

Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt (1832-1920), a professor of Biology and philosophy at Harvard University, was a pioneer psychologist who founded the approach of structuralism. Edward Bradford Tichener and J. Henry Alston were other notable early structuralists. Wundt was born in Neckarau, a suburb of the important commercial center of Mannheim, on August 16. He established the first psychology laboratory in 1879 and is considered the father of psychology. Structuralism analyzes the structure of mental life into basic ‘elements’ or ‘building blocks’. Since analyzing the structure of mind was the major task of Wundt and his followers, they were called "structuralists" and their approach was named "structuralism". They believed that it is possible to determine the structure of the mind by identifying the basic elements that compose it. Moreover, structuralism focused on the study of the most basic elements, primarily sensation and perceptions that make up our conscious mental experience. Introspection or ‘looking inward’ was a method of exploring conscious mental processes by asking subjects to look "inside themselves" and report their feelings and perception. Vision, learning, taste, touch, memory, time perception were main topics Wundt discussed over the years. For some psychologists, Wundt asked some interesting questions and got psychology to a good start (Schultz & Schultz, 2008).

Structuralists made great use of the method of introspection, in which the subject taking part to the experiment attempts to accurately describe his or her conscious thoughts, emotions and sensory experiences. According to Santrock (1998, p8), it was a method used by philosophers for several thousands of years, but they had never used varied conditions in so systematic ways. This idea of Santrock is debatable since he expressed it without having studied the philosophical approach to introspection properly. As I believe, philosophers are more advanced than psychologists when analyzing introspection as a research method. This view is clarified by studying the points we discuss on introspection in Buddhist psychology in the next section. If philosophical teachings and psychological teachings were integrated, introspection can be a practical research method even for today.

Santrock (1998, p7) further argues that introspection is a technique whereby specially trained people carefully observe and analyze their own mental experiences. Therefore, it is the method of observing one's own self. In other words, it is a method that induces the subject to observe his/her own emotions, feelings etc, which helps the researcher to study nature of the subject's mind at a particular time. The subjective nature of the introspective method quickly became the target of criticism from other psychologists who argued that its reliance on self reports based on the subjects' observation of themselves renders it unscientific and in contrast to methods that adopt objective measurements. The critics argued that by observing him-/herself the subject was put into an unfamiliar situation which affected his/her own psychological condition. Therefore, the mental processes reported by the subject could not be the ones taking places in normal circumstances. For example, a subject asked to describe the feeling of anger, by the fact that s/he took the role of the observer of his/her own feelings altered his/her feeling for anger, so what s/he reported could not have been the result of direct observation of the feeling of anger. Mutulingam (1975, p.8) discusses three more defects of “introspection” in addition to the above criticism.

1. Introspection cannot be used for observing others' behavior, i.e. if the researcher wants to observe the mind of a criminal he/she has to become a criminal. Hence, this is not a successful method that can be used in the research field.
2. Since the observations differ from person to person introspection is not objective.
3. The researcher can observe only the conscious process by introspection. But he/she cannot observe the unconscious mind

III. Criticism against introspection

William James (1842-1910) viewed that that structuralism gave rise to a barren approach to psychology. Behaviorists, who define psychology as the scientific study of behavior, challenged both structuralism and functionalism. John Watson (1878-1958) did not agree with introspection as a method for studying psychology since its results could not be scientifically verified by other psychologists (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian undated, p.13). As Watson believed, introspection is unscientific since there is no way to settle disagreements between different observers.

William McDougal (1871-1938), who defined psychology as the science of behavior questioned the value of introspection as a research method (McDougall 1908, P.1). Hull's idea about introspection was the same as that of John Watson's. He strongly opposed the use of introspection as a scientific tool, believing that subjective experiences are too vague and unreliable to be of much use.

To some psychologists, in spite of criticisms, introspection has made many contributions to the expansion of modern psychology (Powell, Symbauk & Honey 2009, p.9). For example, modern cognitive psychology too studies mental processes, but it does it with different scientific strategies and much broader interests than those of Wundt. The introspective perspective was further experienced by Edward Lee Thorndike (1874-1948) in his research. He held the belief that introspective analysis could play a useful role in the study of human consciousness (Samelson 1981, p.399-425).

According to the discussion above, it is clear that while some psychologists have rejected introspection as a barren research method some psychologists have seen value of introspection though it displayed some shortcomings as a research method. Nevertheless, the voice of those psychologists who saw introspection positively was not enough to re-implement it as a research method. However, when studying their views from a critical lens, it can be argued that psychologists would have implemented introspection as a research method than rejecting it by avoiding its shortcomings while more scientific research methods are implemented, since the main objective of psychology is to study humans and their behavior. Introspection is one valuable method which helps psychologists to fulfill that objective since this method motivates the researcher to examine his/her behavior and the mental situation by him/her self without being subjected to third person's view point. According to the complex nature that has been sprung in this scientifically developed world introspection is a need of present society than to the past.

The man has forgotten the basic purpose of his life and he chases endless desires. The so-called competitive mentality has created a stressful psycho-social environment where most of people suffer due to mental problems. If psychology motivates people to have a reflection on what they do, this problem can be solved to a

certain extent. For that, if the situations available are not enough what psychologists need to do here is introducing proper training methods and criteria for self-evaluation under an introspective environment. Then, psychology would become more practical subjects among other discipline as well as among people. This approach would be more successful if psychologists move with religious institutes while protecting their identity as a discipline no matter whatever the religious institute they combine because every religion has a well directed vision to motivate its followers to monitor a proper reflection on what they do. In relation to that, we should not forget that there is already a trend among European psychologists, especially in the field of psychotherapy and counseling psychology, to integrate insights from Buddhist psychology when they introduce new approaches. In other words, they tend to practice their theories with teachings of Buddhist psychology. I further argue that research works should be done with more advanced scientific research methods, but there should be attention paid on developing research methods like introspection too, because it would help ordinary people to deal with the industrialized, developed world with better introspection. If someone carefully observes the Buddhist teachings, he/she can find more insights to develop introspection as a research method among researchers as well as for ordinary people in fruitful ways.

IV. Introspection and Buddhist psychology

The method of introspection used by structuralists was a successful way to collect information about oneself in addition to information obtained from the five sensory organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue and bodily contact according to the Buddha. The Buddha’s interpretation regarding introspection was the same as that of western psychologists. In Buddhism, introspection is the method looking into one’s mind in order to study more penetrating insights that emerge in various level of spiritual development. This method, adopted in Buddhist psychology has still value in western psychology in spite of the criticism it has received from behaviorists. The major reason to reject introspection in western psychology is the belief that data obtained with this method are not reliable. In other words, psychologists have been worried that individuals cannot provide reliable data about the feelings they experience, like anger sorrow, happiness etc. just by relying on introspection: the degree of subjectivity is too high, so few scientific conclusions could be based on such data. Another criticism raised against introspection has been that someone’s introspection cannot be observed by another individual (the researcher) from outside. To Buddhist psychology, one who develops introspection as a research method can read his/her mind as well as the minds of others too. For the Buddha, the best way to get reliable information about someone’s mind is by allowing the relevant person to see his or her mind by himself or herself rather than observing it from a third person’s point of view.

Another important point is that, since the Buddha could read one’s both overt and covert behavior, due to the special mental skill he had, which is referred to as *Cetopariyanana* (telepathy), he could guide his disciples successfully (DN I, 47). With *Cetopariyanana* the Buddha observed the behavior of target disciple and data collected through observation used to help the relevant person to change towards a better spiritual life. To Buddhism, anyone can reach this mental ability by developing his/her mental capabilities. According to *Sutta pitaka* it is obvious that there were some Bhikkhus who developed their mind and reached this *Cetopariyanana* (TG, 620-631). This remarkable achievement one can gain by developing mentality provides a good answer to one of common criticism sprung against the introspection in western psychology. One major reason to reject introspection by western psychologists is their belief that introspection cannot be used for observing others’ behavior. But Buddhism shows that anyone who develops mentality can use introspection for his/her own improvement as well as the improvement of others too. I believe that introspection was rejected by western psychologists not because of inherent faults of the method, but because of the faults of the people who implemented it as a research method. Especially, their comprehension and experience regarding this method was very little. Otherwise, it is a good research method, valid even today.

One who studies *Anupada Sutta* can get valuable information about introspection. The contents of this *Sutta* are full of references to people ready to find faults in others and eager to raise criticism of them, who try to teach others how to behave but they are bad listeners and they do not listen to what others tell them. In such cases, the Buddha recommended continuous reflection about one’s own mental qualities. The technique used in this way, so that the individual reflects on his/her own self, is known as a method where “the self ought to be reflected by the self” and “the self ought to be measured against the self”.

Another important text for the examination of the Buddhist view on introspection is *Rahulovada Sutta*. In this *Sutta*, the Buddha asked small *Rahula* “what is the importance of the mirror”? Then Rev. *Rahula* answered to the Buddha that people would use the mirror to see their faces. To the *Rahula*’s answer the Buddha replied in a similar way that we should reflect (*paccavekkhati*) on what we do so that we reach a good understanding of our behavior (MN I, 414). In this case, the Buddha showed Rev. *Rahula* how to use three criteria when selecting which action to do. These three criteria are the following: if the result of the action is beneficial for the doer, others around him and both the doer as well as others around him, only such types of actions should be done. *Adipateyya Sutta* in *Anguttaranikaya* is also important, when discussing the Buddhist conceptualization of introspection (AN V, 528).

Once, *Kalamas*, who lived at *Kesaputta*, had the problem of ‘How to select *Kusala* (wholesome thoughts) and *Akusala* (unwholesome thoughts)’. The Buddha, who went to *Kesaputta* of Kalama, preached them to practice introspection of themselves when deciding whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome (*Yada tumhe kalama attanava janeyyata ime dhamma kusala ime dhamma savajja ime dhamma vinnugarahita ime dhamma samatta samadhinna ahitaya dukkhaya sanwattatiti atha thumhe kalama pajaheyatha* (AN I, 188). The Buddha further explains to them that, if the action is done with non-greed (*Alobha*), non-hatred (*Adosa*), and non-delusion (*Amoha*), such cases are of wholesome thoughts. If the action follows greed (*Lobha*), hatred (*Dosa*) and delusion (*Moha*) such actions belong to unwholesome thoughts (*Akusa*). The nature of action should be decided by the doer him/herself according to the criteria above and it cannot be done by someone else for another person. Another important idea mentioned in the above teaching is that, if the action is criticized by the learned men (*Vinnu garahita*), such actions should not be carried out. If the action is praised by the learned men (*Vinnu pasatta*) such actions should be done. In this discussion, it is clear the extent to which the Buddha has admired introspection as a research method of self evaluation.

According to *Dasadhamma Sutta* in *Anguttara Nikaya*, reflection is a valuable method to be mindful about one’s behavior (AN V, 87). In this *Sutta*, the Buddha asked his disciples to reflect on their behavior by themselves in order to attract the lay community. It could visible in the past that Bhikkus who behaved without proper introspection damaged the Buddha’s doctrine. It is a common issue at present Bhikkhu community too.

Wundt trained his students to use introspection as a research method to give solutions to problems that would emerge in their ordinary lives, but the Buddha motivated his disciples to develop introspection for a better worldly as well as spiritual life. Godman (2013 p, 576), who studied introspection in western psychology and Buddhism, shows shortcomings in “introspection” in western psychology and the distinct features of introspection in Buddhism. According to him, Buddhist could reply by drawing a distinction between trained and untrained introspection. In most people, they could argue, the faculty of attention is weak and undeveloped, and, as a result, attempts at serious introspection will typically be overwhelmed by various form of distraction; but those who, through meditation practice, reduce the intensity and frequency of distractions and gradually develop their capacity for attention are eventually able to look at mental phenomena and see them as they actually are (Godman 2003, p.576).

Both *Samatha* (one pointedness) and *Vipassana* (insight meditation) help someone to become master in introspection. To Buddhism, when one achieves such a highly developed level in introspection, they are able to guide and work for the betterment of others too (*attana meva pataman- patirupe nivesaye- attanna manusaseya.....* DP, 160). The Buddha and disciples who reached *Chetopariyanana* helped others in many ways to end rebirth (*Samsara*). The Buddhist teachings on introspection are valid even for today since they can be matched and practiced at any time (*Akalika*). In addition to that, when comparing the training method used by Wundt with that of the Buddha for better introspection, it can be concluded that the Buddha is ahead of western psychologists.

V. Conclusion

Since psychologists who followed Wundt, especially behaviorists, needed to introduce scientific methods in the study of psychology, Wundt’s method of “introspection” lost its place due some defects it had. The main criticism against the introspective method was its subjective nature. I would argue that the major reason behind the failure of introspective method in western psychology is that the methods used by Wundt for this purpose were not perfect. In spite of drawbacks, introspection was considered to be the only good method for quite long time in the history of psychological studies. Nevertheless, the introspective method in Buddhist psychology has occupied a distinct place since the Buddha used it in a correct and appropriate way. The major reason to establish the introspective method in Buddhism as successful research method is the Buddha preaches his disciples to have a constant reflection on what they do, what they say and what they think. Not only that, the Buddha motivated his disciples to practice Buddhist methods in how to read the mind of students who would come to them for a better teaching learning process. Because of these reasons, there are many lessons that can be taken from Buddhist psychology to inform the practice of “introspection” in western psychology in a productive way. When comparing the western psychological approach with the Buddha’s teachings for better introspection, the latter are ahead of western psychologists. Moreover, the Buddhist teachings, as can be seen from the study of *Sutta Pitaka* can provide many valuable insights to researchers who practice introspection as a method at both theoretical and practical level.

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Abbreviations

DN- Dega Nikaya
MN- Majjima Nikaya
AN- Anguttaran Nikaya
DP - Dhammapada Pali
TG- Thera Gatha

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