

Strengthen the mind towards resilience with Buddhist psychology: how to cultivate positive qualities of the mind and reduce antagonists

“Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.

“Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow.”¹ – Dhammapada, The Buddha

VIEW (THESIS) 1 – Mind is foremost

In Buddhism it is assumed that everything we are, everything we experience, the world we perceive and react to is perceived and formed by the mind. You need a mind to imagine or see a house. You need a mind to distinguish your house from someone else’s house.

The concept of a house depends on the mind, the creation of the house depends on the mind (the architect’s constructions, virtual at the beginning and drawn later, as well as the motivation of the workers to come day after day to actually build the house) – all of this, including the maintenance of the house, depends on the mind having a motivation to do so.

Also the experience of being in the house depends on the mind. Different people with different mindsets will perceive and experience the house differently. Someone whose wish to have their own roof over their head is finally being fulfilled – after perhaps missing it for a long time – may be very grateful and happy to be living in the house. Another person may see all the

¹ <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.01.budd.html>

existing construction defects and remain in a mode of complaining about the construction company. Yet another one may simply feel uncomfortable because they have traumatic memories associated with the house. And everyone who enters and lives in the house brings their own backpack of past experiences and perceptual schemes that shape the experiences made in the house.

This is why the Buddha says that the mind is foremost. While events outside a person's mind very often cannot be controlled and – as it often seems – unfold quite arbitrarily, the way one relates to these events is seen in Buddhism as a matter of choice. A choice that can be learned.

Besides the temporary reparenting, in schema therapy the model of triggers and modes plays a key role. It is quite similar in Buddhism, we investigate and observe how we respond to outer events and if our response is wholesome. In schema therapy you call this the “clever and wise mode” (for children and teenagers) or the “healthy adult mode” (for adults).

A wholesome response in Buddhism means, you chose a behaviour that leads to a good result for yourself and others. There is also a differentiation between short term and long-term results of behaviour. However, to be able to choose a wholesome response you must find a space between the emotion that pushes you to act and the pushed action. As Victor Frankl put it:

“There is a space between stimulus and reaction. In this space lies our power to choose our reaction. In our reaction lies our development and our freedom.”

Or as the meditation teacher Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche has put it,

“Ultimately, happiness is a matter of choosing between the discomfort of being aware of one’s mental distress and the discomfort of being dominated by it.”

And the mind changes. The person who initially felt gratitude and happiness may later feel bored or uncomfortable. The person who was initially complaining may become so attached to the house and the life there that she or he is terrified of having to leave it one day.

VIEW (THESIS) 2 – In pursuit of happiness and freedom from suffering

The first teaching the Buddha gave after his awakening is known as a key teaching within Buddhism, The Four Truths For The Noble Ones.² This core teaching can be considered as that of a physician or psychologist, who made a diagnoses, identifies the causes of the disease, makes a prognosis and prescribes a therapy (there is pain, the pain has causes, there is a state of healing that can be achieved and there is a therapy to achieve a healed state.)

Besides this understanding, there is another fundamental view of life in Buddhism, which states that wherever mind is, there is the wish to be happy (or to experience well-being) and the wish not to suffer (or not to experience discomfort, pain and trouble).

² <https://info-buddhism.com/Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta-Harvey.html>

VIEW (THESIS) 3 – Mental happiness / freedom from mental suffering is more important than material happiness / freedom from material suffering

Buddhism usually assumes six types of consciousness, the five sense consciousnesses and the mental consciousness. Happiness and suffering, joy and sorrow – and basically anything else – can all be experienced through them.

The Dalai Lama emphasises that spiritual happiness is more important than material happiness. Why? Imagine a Sunday morning with your family when you are feeling bad, depressed, dissatisfied or a bit aggressive: all the wealth in your life, the full fridge, your health, a good income, an apartment etc. cannot override your mental state of sorrow, lamentation or bad feeling. All the material things that can bring happiness or joy will not work. But if you get up on Sunday morning with a happy state of mind, with joy, you will have the strength to deal with a limited material situation. Little or nothing in the fridge, ok, the mind will find a solution or maybe feel happy to have at least something small (better than nothing) etc.

A joyful, happy mind can override poor material or disturbing external conditions. To give an admittedly rather extreme example: Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk from Austria, who also holds a doctorate in psychology, recently recalled in a TV interview³ that he and his friends were happier in their youth during the Second World War period than after the Second World War, after most of the difficult and life-threatening circumstances had subsided and a stable status quo had gradually been established. The reason for this was that death was always “right in front of their eyes” during the war, death was so close that every moment was

³ https://youtu.be/3rLNALMh_yk?si=jG8m9CnsP6TG1Soc

experienced as much more precious and special. Being in touch with the present moment, not being caught up in worries about the past and future, and seeing the preciousness of the here and now based on the proximity of death, gave him and his friends one of their happiest times. These are states of mind. Others, of course, have also experienced horror, trauma and a heavy burden. These experiences are also states of mind.

VIEW (THESIS) 4 – Detecting or analysing causes for happiness and freedom from suffering

An important part of the Buddha's teachings contains analyses of the causes of wellbeing and the causes of suffering. Among these causes, wholesome states of mind are seen as causes of wellbeing and inner peace, whereas unwholesome states of mind are explained as causes of suffering and inner conflict. Wholesome and unwholesome states of mind have immediate effect in the here and now but can also effect very much future experiences.

To give an example: Affection and aversion; empathetic joy and envy
[example shared and explained to the audience]

Now imagine that in your mind there are more states of affection than of aversion, or more of empathetic joy than of envy. What does that mean for yourself, how will your world feel? And what effect will it have on the people you meet or work with?

So it is safe to say that the more wholesome mental states there are in a person's mind, the more peace and happiness he/she can experience. The more unwholesome states of mind are present in a person's mind, the more inner conflict and suffering a person will experience.

Therefore, increasing wholesome states of mind and decreasing unwholesome states of mind is part of the spiritual effort (effort, skt. *vīrya*) in Buddhism.

Effort – often also explained as “joyous perseverance” – comprises four activities:

1. preventing the initial development of destructive mental states (which have not yet manifested in the psyche)
2. abandoning the destructive mental states that have already manifested in the psyche
3. cultivating constructive mental states (to initiate and build up healthy mental resources), and
4. maintaining these constructive mental states (to strengthen the healthy mind and thereby develop resilience).

You may want to replace the terms “wholesome/unwholesome” with “constructive/destructive” or “strengthening/weakening” mental states or “qualities of mind”, and “conflict-causing emotions”, “happiness-causing emotions” etc.

BASED ON THIS FRAMEWORK THE QUESTION THEN IS

What are wholesome (destructive) and unwholesome (destructive) states of mind?

Buddhist psychology has some suggestions, and it is a matter of investigation or rational analysis to see how you feel about this and whether you can utilise this centuries-old “inner science” (Dalai Lama) that Buddhism has to offer.

It is said that the Buddha used to say “ehipasiko”, which means “come and see for yourself”.⁴ So I would like to invite you to check out the following explorations and see for yourself.

The vast variety of mental qualities that bring about inner peace, resilience, strength, happiness and joy and which are investigated, explained and meditated upon in Buddhism, can be summarised into three categories as outlined by Ullrich Ott, (Psychologist, Bender Institute for Neuroimaging at the University of Giessen)⁵:

Typologie – drei Familien



- **Aufmerksamkeit**
 - Fokussiert
 - Offenes Gewahrsein

- **Konstruktiv**
 - Liebende Güte, Mitgefühl
 - Werte, Wahrnehmungen, Vorstellungen

- **De-konstruktiv**
 - Einsicht durch Analyse von Objekten/Subjekt
 - Nicht-Dualität

Dahl et al. (2015)

The first group of qualities that can be cultivated, strengthened or nourished include mindfulness (sanskrit: smṛti), self-observation or self-knowledge (skt. samprajñāna) and concentration (concentration of the mind, unification of

⁴ <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel433.html>

⁵ MBSR Ausbildung vom Forum Achtsamkeit im Odenwald-Institut, Tromm, 6.09.2018

the scattered mind, skt. samādhi). Many of these qualities are already known and applied in modern psychology where mindfulness methods are used – e.g. MBSR and its derivatives (MB Eat), MBCT etc.

I will not discuss the last group. While methods that promote deconstructive skills can also be very helpful in a therapeutic context – including the change of perspective, reflecting on impermanence or a “dynamic” self and deconstructing stressful mental patterns so that they lose their grip over oneself – they can also be destabilising for certain persons.

Let us now illustrate this and give some examples.

From here on I'll focus on the second group mentioned by Ott which I would call “exercises for the development of the heart” or maybe just “exercises for healthy relationships to oneself and others” – please change and rename this category as you see fit.

Some of the qualities in this group are already established in the therapeutic field, such as metta meditation (loving kindness), the cultivation or training of gratitude, compassion training, etc.⁶

Buddhism assumes that every quality of mind has an antagonist. Or each antagonist has an opposite quality. To name a few examples:

- Love vs. hate
- Empathetic joy vs. envy
- Appreciative attitude vs. contempt

⁶ See methods such as “Mindful Self Compassion (MCS)”, “Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT)” (research by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer) or “Mindfulness-Based Compassionate Living (MBCL).” Or see, the Compassion Training by Tanja Singer (Max-Planck-Institute) <http://www.compassion-training.org/?lang=en&page=home>

- Patience (peaceful acceptance) vs. anger
- (being able to live in peace with pain and difficulties, as opposed to intolerance of unpleasant feelings, or tolerance of uncertainty as opposed to intolerance of uncertainty ...)
- Gratitude vs. taking everything for granted (being in a constant complaining mode)
- Non-*greed (or contentment) vs. greed (* letting go of greed)
- Understanding (or wisdom) vs. ignorance (Hannah Arendt: "I want to understand!")
- Compassion vs. cruelty
- Affection vs. aversion
- Generosity vs. stinginess
- "wholesome" vs. "unwholesome" motivation (doctor who earns money / helps patients)
- joyous perseverance vs. sluggishness / laziness
- Faith (in trustworthy things) vs. (excessive) disbelief (in trustworthy things)
- Trust in one's own intuition / vs. no trust in one's own intuition
- Pride vs. humility
- Ethical orientation vs. non-ethics
- Self-discipline vs. lack of self-discipline
- mental pliancy vs. a harsh or tied attitude
- tolerance vs. intolerance
- indulgence vs. revenge/grudge
- forgiveness vs. grudge or revenge
- Conscientiousness vs. non-conscientiousness
- Authenticity vs. incongruence in relation to one's own values (or "inner being")
- Respect vs. disrespect

- Shame vs. non-shame (complex topic, shame as power⁷)
- Concentration (flow, collection of the mind) vs. distraction (being inwardly distracted)
- calm mind vs. restless mind
- Openness vs. narrow-mindedness
- impartiality vs. partiality
- Letting go vs. clinging
- Serenity vs. narrow-mindedness
- Bravery vs. insecurity (complex!)
- Truthfulness vs. deception
- Honesty vs. lies and deception
- Being self-aware vs. not being self-aware [mindfulness & introspection]
- being relaxed vs. being stressed out
- Humor vs. taking yourself and things too seriously
- Introspection (self-awareness) vs. non-introspection (lack of self-awareness)
- Mindfulness vs. non-mindfulness
- Loose self-centredness vs. tight self-centredness
- Being able to admit mistakes vs. hiding mistakes
- ...
- there are many more qualities, e.g. helpfulness, creativity, curiosity, inner fulfilment ...

These mental qualities and their counterparts can be divided into the three categories presented by Ullrich Ott, which either refer to

- 1) a calm, peaceful mind / a joy of being in the present moment,
- 2) increasing heart qualities – this includes methods for self-acceptance,

⁷ THE POWER OF SHAME, Agnes Heller, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29790037>

self-love, self-compassion but also for reducing strong egoistic patterns, love and compassion for others, gratitude, forgiveness etc.

- 3) deconstructing complex and clinging inner patterns or the deconstruction of delusions (distorted self-perceptions or distorted perceptions about others [all are against me])

Buddhism mentions four qualities of the heart, or wholesome emotions, that promote a healthy way of relating to oneself and others. They are called the Brahmavihāras (divine abodes) and are,

- compassion (pali: karuna),
- loving kindness (an unconditionally benevolent attitude towards someone) (pali: metta),
- empathetic joy (pali: muditā), and
- equanimity (pali: upekkhā)

Each of these wholesome emotions has a counterpart (“distant enemy”), an emotion that could be described as the exact opposite (i.e. hate instead of love). And each of these mental qualities has a “near enemy” – meaning that it feels similar to but is not actually the mental quality itself (e.g. *pity* instead of *compassion* // or *emotional empathy* instead of *compassion*).⁸ And the near enemy is also seen as rather unwholesome, which is why it is particularly important to differentiate between the quality and its near enemy – even if the difference may be very subtle.

⁸ There is also a difference between emotional empathy as understood in neuroscience and compassion!. See: “Differential pattern of functional brain plasticity after compassion and empathy training”, Olga M Klimecki, Susanne Leiberg, Matthieu Ricard, Tania Singer. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23576808/>

Brahmavihara	Near Enemy	Far Enemy
Compassion	Pity	Cruelty
Love	Selfish attachment (clinging)	Hatred (ill will)
Empathetic joy	Exuberance	Envy
Equanimity	Indifference	Craving, clinging

The success in cultivating a particular quality depends on regular training – just as the development of muscles depends on regular workouts. Qualities are “muscles of the mind” and regular exercise, like a meditation practice, is the mental gym that strengthens them.

There are two types of training:

- 1) a formal and, at best, regular meditation practice and
- 2) a daily life in which the specific mental quality you wish to enhance is applied.

It is also seen as very supportive (if not crucial) to have a good spiritual friend who has a caring attitude towards the trainee, and who lives these qualities, so that she or he can be a role model and a wise guide for developing these qualities in a trainee. (Similarly to schema therapy where temporary reparenting of a mature and trained psychologist plays a key role.)

And to develop and follow an inner ethical compass is also seen as basis for developing qualities. (“Just as every harvest grows in dependence on the earth, in the same way, the highest virtues depend on ethical discipline, and grow by being watered with the water of compassion.”)

Other, modern methods of mental training can be improvisational theatre or theatre pedagogical methods, in which a given situation is acted out and the skilful methods can be applied and tested.

Or the work with strength lists [Example of children course] or journaling etc. Furthermore, success in increasing healthy mental qualities depends on the ability to recognise and work with the antagonistic power of a particular quality. In relation to the latter, methods for dealing with “destructive emotions” – the antagonistic forces – are therefore very useful. At the end of this article I will mention four methods that I am familiar with and that I work with for myself or in prison and in courses for the public.

Before engaging in training, **motivation is crucial**. Reflection and remembrance of the benefits of the quality and the benefits of increasing freedom from the tight grip of the antagonistic power of that quality is a common method in Buddhism to keep the mind on the path (or in training).

To cultivate a nurturing quality like loving-kindness, there are secular meditation practices – e.g. by Tara Brach or Jack Kornfield (both psychologists).⁹ These can be used by a person who wants to increase or enhance this quality like loving-kindness in a formal meditation practice. Of course these methods can be also used in daily life and without and spiritual intention e.g. when meeting a friend or standing in line at the grocery store. Bringing forth a feeling of loving kindness even for just 2-5 minutes can be very helpful! You could make 3-10 (or more) attempts per day to reactivate this wholesome emotion briefly (or longer) in everyday situations. (It's a bit like some bodybuilders who see a bar and immediately use it to do a few pull-ups). In doing so over and over again, it is possible to slowly model your

⁹ See the additional material from the MMTCP training

daily experiences according to this quality – or to see the world through the lens of this quality.

For some people it may be more difficult to give loving kindness to themselves, for others it may be more difficult to give loving kindness to an evil person, a close but hated relative, etc. It's all part of the training, but you shouldn't set the bar too high! It needs a gradual approach and you start where it's easy – especially at the beginning. It's about familiarizing yourself with the taste of the quality, elevating it, nourishing it and increasing it. It's not about making it difficult for yourself. So you start where it's easy. For instance with a person you love or like a lot.

The great enemy of loving kindness is hatred, the wish to harm. So, in order to become more aware of feelings of hatred (which includes schadenfreude) and then take a mindful step back, observe this feeling when it arises, feel it, be with it. Then you could ask yourself, "Is this what I want?" Is this feeling in line with my values (or psychological/spiritual goals)?

If there is a clear answer to this question, such as "No!", the underlying insight and reluctance to follow hatred will start a process of either letting go of it immediately, or it may evolve into a desire to get rid of it (or gain more freedom from its grip) sooner or later. Also, a curiosity about how to get rid of this feeling (in the sense of not holding oneself as its slave) might arise, which can activate further inquiry/learning or creativity to become more able to deal with hatred.

One could call the ability to let go of hatred by mindfully observing it "an insight-based letting go" - or "an insight that forms a power to renounce hatred".

Similar to the qualities, where one reflects on and remembers the advantages of the quality, here one can reflect on or remember the disadvantages of the unwholesome state of mind of hatred (or the antagonistic force to the quality). Insight is a wisdom that understands the disadvantages more clearly, and wisdom can give the inner strength needed to let go of hatred (or let go of envy or any antagonistic force).

(A side note: Given the disadvantages of antagonistic forces, be careful not to develop hatred upon hatred or anger upon anger, or to be disappointed or unhappy when envy arises. Whatever arises can be welcomed as a teacher and used for one's own inner growth). Ayya Khema's (a known German Buddhist nun) formula: "Recognise – don't blame – change".

To summarise one way to cultivate qualities:

1. reflecting on or remembering the merits or demerits of a quality and its countervailing force
2. cultivating the quality through a formal (if possible regular) meditation practice
3. applying the quality in daily life (setting specific goals for where and when to reactivate/train the quality)
4. learn to recognise the antagonistic force of the quality as it arises and then work skilfully with it (there are various methods, see list at the end) to release its grip on yourself
5. in the evening you could recap your training, be happy about where it worked, think about why / where it didn't work and develop a motivation to train again the next day. When you wake up in the morning, you could remind yourself of your training, make a firm decision to use the day to continue training and make a dedication: "May my training be successful and may this quality increase like the waxing moon – in me and in others. ..."
6. Alternatively, journaling and other methods such as visualisations or

role-playing games which are already used – for instance in gratitude trainings – can be used here too.

7. Using inspiring stories or (living) examples (role models) regarding people who lived or live these qualities.

A list Of Four Possible Methods for dealing with “counter forces” (or destructive emotions or hindrances) to qualities

R.A.I.N. (Tara Brach¹⁰)

- **R**ecognise what is happening;
- **A**llow the experience to be there, just as it is;
- **I**nvestigate with interest and care;
- **N**urture with self-compassion // (alternatively non-identification)

Self-Compassion (Kristin Neff)

- This is a moment of suffering,
- Suffering is a part of life,
- May I be kind to myself in this moment

B.E.L.L.A (Gil Fronsdal¹¹)

- **B**e with it (not acting on it, not reacting to it)
- **E**xamine (conditions that caused its arising and its dissolving)
- **L**essen (the grip of it, soften the tension)
- **L**et go
- **A**ppreciate

Five Ways (Tilman Borghardt & Wolfgang Erhardt¹²)

1. pause mindfully in the emotion
2. use appropriate tools
3. take a different view of the emotion
4. recognise the actual nature of the emotion
5. use stressful emotions as a pathway

¹⁰ <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain/>

¹¹ “Unhindered A Mindful Path Through the Five Hindrances”, Gil Fronsdal, 2013, Tranquil Books

¹² Tilman Borghardt, Wolfgang Erhardt “Buddhistische Psychologie Grundlagen und Praxis”, Arkana. 2016