



Original Article

Theravāda Buddhist Perspective on the Behaviorist Theories: A Doctrinal Analysis

M.G. Nethmi Vithakshi

Abstract

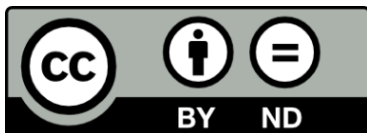
Behaviour with good conduct is an essential component for a healthy life in social, economic, mental as well as in physical aspects. In approaching to study Behaviorism, a rich repository of accounts can be extracted with the modern psychological and Buddhist philosophical contents which are relevant to different aspects of theories and analogies. Among the modern psychological interpretations, the Classical Conditioning Theory and the Operant Conditioning Theory can be shown as very important principles that demonstrate the different nature of behaviour. These theories can be clearly indicated when studying the Pāli canonical literature, and it is evidently proven how Buddhist teachings differ from the scientific basis of modern psychology that underlies principles of Behaviorism, while the Buddhist application takes a more spiritual approach both in theory and practice. By examining the very significant discourses such as the Madupīṇḍikasutta, Nalakalāpasutta, Patīccasamuppada-vibhaṅgasutta, and Cullakammavibhaṅgasutta, it can clearly prove how Buddhist thought emphasises its spiritual insights on the behaviour change that one could approach from the Buddhist framework mindfully. Through all these explanations given on modern psychology and Buddhist philosophy, this paper endeavours to highlight how Theravāda Buddhism explicates the core concepts in modern psychology on Behaviourism by elevating individuals through Behaviour modification towards the attainment of ultimate Emancipation.

Keywords: Behaviourism, Classical Conditioning Theory, Modern Psychology, Operant Conditioning Theory, Theravāda

Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna

nethmivithakshi@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1984-0476>



This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>). This license permits to use, distribute, and reproduce the contents of the publication for commercial and non-commercial purposes, provided that the original work is properly cited and is not changed anyway.



Original Article

INTRODUCTION

Behavioural Modification can be identified as a major theory that emerges from Modern Psychology, and in its broadest sense, it refers to the systematic process of altering behavioural patterns with the implementation of psychological principles. The harmful and maladaptive behaviours of the individuals due to various social, economic, mental and physical impacts are replaced by the psychological principles endowed within Modern Psychology in promoting individual well-being and social harmony. This implies shaping emotions as well as the environment in a positive way for individuals to adapt to the corrupting influences that they must face often.

The Soteriological framework which is offered within the Buddhist perspective on behaviour modification is oriented towards transformation of thought, emotion and actions, which will benefit the individuals to embrace morality, which also gradually directs them towards concentration and wisdom. The Pāli canonical interpretations have presented a rich repository of knowledge on identifying the causes for unwholesome behaviours, disrupting maladaptive cycles and cultivating wholesome or skillful patterns of conduct. The Modern Era of Psychology is considered to have started with the establishment of its first laboratory at the University of Leipzig in Germany in 1879. With this initiation, it

influenced to create many schools in Psychology such as Structuralism, Functionalism, Behaviorism, Gestalt Psychology and Psychoanalysis.

Behaviourism can be identified as a branch of philosophy which has been committed to study the behaviour of the human beings. In exploring the in depths of the psychological value of Behaviorism, it is beneficial to inquire the definitions which have been appeared upon the term "Behaviorism". "It purports to explain human and animal behavior in terms of external physical stimuli, responses, learning histories, and (for certain types of behavior) reinforcements" (Graham, 2025).

Not only the above definition provided by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, another very important definition can be extracted from the Dictionary of the American Psychological Association: "An approach to psychology, formulated in 1913 by John B. Watson, based on the study of objective, observable facts rather than subjective, qualitative processes, such as feelings, motives, and consciousness. To make psychology a naturalistic science, Watson proposed to limit it to quantitative events, such as stimulus-response relationships, effects of conditioning, physiological processes, and a study of human and animal behavior, all of which can best be investigated through laboratory experiments that yield objective measures under controlled conditions.



Original Article

Historically, behaviorists held that mind was not a proper topic for scientific study since mental events are subjective and not independently verifiable" (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

According to historical evidence, it explicates that, the American Psychologist, John B. Watson, is considered as the Father of Behaviorism and within Behaviorism, it has mainly explained about four theories that have emerged through Behaviorism. They are Classical Conditioning Theory, Operant Conditioning Theory, Cognitive Learning theory and Social Learning Theory.

While the Modern Psychology emphasizes four theories of Behaviorism, Buddhism addresses human behaviour in various discourses at different instances. By delving into the Suttapiṭaka, this study focuses on elaborating on how Buddhism has explicated the theories of Classical Conditioning Theory and Operant Conditioning Theory. As some of such discourses, the Kimatthiyasutta, Sīvakasutta, Soṇasutta, and Girmānandasutta can be shown as some literary records in which the Buddhist understanding of human behaviour is demonstrated. These discourses illustrate how the stimulus response should be maintained with proper restraint and can be used to weaken compulsive tendencies and foster mental clarity.

Within the studies of Modern Psychology, the contemporary contents can be seen in a scientific approach blended with Behaviorist theories, which open their discussions for various case studies of individuals through different kinds of applications. When referring to all those studies, it can be identified that mostly a scientific approach has been applied in finding information on Behaviorism. All the former mentioned theories of Modern Psychology on Behaviorism can be found in the Pāli Canonical literature. This study analyses Classical Conditioning Theory and Operant Conditioning Theory of Behaviorism as they appear in Pali Canonical literature.

By integrating Buddhist insights with modern psychology, this study can clarify that the scientific approach emanates with Modern Psychology while Buddhist Philosophy illustrates an everlasting solution which directs individuals on attaining the final liberation of Buddhism through a realistic understanding on the true nature of the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The book titled 'Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Pātimoksa Sutras of the Mahāsāṃghikas and Mūlasarvāstivādins' which was composed by Prebish (2002) can be shown a literary source which is important in getting the insights on the invaluable history and textual analysis of monastic rules that had been



Original Article

established within the early Buddhist time period. It provides the evidence that have consistent within the Sanskrit Pātimoksa texts, illuminating the ethical and behavioural expectations of monks within the Mahāsāṃghikas and Mūlasarvāstivāda traditions. This source provides minimal information about the Theravāda Buddhist thought on the behaviours, and it does not include any information belonging to the Western approach on Behaviorism. So that, my research will be focused on exploring the Classical Conditioning and Operant Conditioning Theories of Modern Psychology on Behaviorism by also finding information explicated in the Theravāda Buddhist thought about those two important theories.

The examination of behaviour is depicted from the Western psychological perspective through the source titled as 'Self Directed Behavior and Self Modification for Personal Adjustment' where Watson and Tharp (2014) explains detailing processes of self-regulation, planning, and behavioural control. The contemporary behaviour modification strategies such as goal setting, self-monitoring, and cognitive control can be clearly understood with the context provided within this source and as this sources endows the chapters namely, Skills of Self-Direction, Forethought: Planning for Success, Self-Knowledge: Observation and Recording, Staying in Control and also with the chapter on the Principles of Self-Direction: Theory and Practice, it is very clear about the

Western tendency this sources has adopted in explaining what behaviour is. To fill this gap, my study will focus on examining the psychological theories depicted through the Modern Psychological Behaviorism within the context of the Buddhist doctrinal and textual studies.

Bellack and Hersen (1982) with the sources titled as "International Handbook of Behavior Modification and Therapy" is a book that expands its chapters on History of Behavior Modification, the Experimental and Theoretical Foundations of Behavior Modification, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Applied Behavior Analysis, Behavioral Assessment: A Contemporary Approach, Behavioral Neuropsychology, Adult Medical Disorder, Pain, Crime and Aggression, Child and Spouse Abuse, Childhood Depression: Current Status and Future Directions and Habit Disorders. This literary record is very significant to understand the attitude that Modern Psychology contemplates Behavior Modification through its various theories. Though this book provides adequate information on the Modern Psychological approach to Behaviorism and the theories, it does not provide any information relevant to the Buddhist thought on Behaviorism. This study will focus on Buddhist thought on Behaviorism and how the Buddha addressed those theories on behaviour in various preachings and discourses.

The book titled as "Behavior Modification : What It Is and How to



Original Article

Do It” which has been authored by Martin and Pear (2015) highlights of Behavior Modification and its history, Behavioral Therapy in Clinical Settings, Behavioral Sport Psychology, Behavior Modification with Diverse Population, Behavioral Principles and Procedures, Increasing Behavior with Positive Reinforcement, Increasing Behavior with Conditioned Reinforcement, Decreasing Behavior with Punishment, Behavior Therapy for Psychological Disorders and Psychological Disorders Treated by Behavioral and Cognitive Behavioral Therapies. Behavior Modification Theory is presented through the Modern approach in clinical and scientific approaches within this source. As this book does not engage with the application of Buddhist perspectives on the theory of Behaviorism, this study aims to find more information on the historical and doctrinal insights on behaviour and its initiatives through the Buddhist canonical interpretations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data have been collected through Primary Sources in order to extract the explanations provided from the Pāli canon and the commentarial literature. Moreover, Secondary Sources on Buddhist and modern psychological perspectives have also been utilised to investigate the doctrinal and historical aspects of Behaviorism through various teachings exemplified in Buddhism.

In this study, the Qualitative Documentary Research Method is applied in collecting data from primary and secondary sources. Classification of data gathered from the historical evidence, explaining doctrinal insights on Behaviorism and some selected theories within the Buddhist psychological context and arriving at conclusion and suggestions will be followed methodologically in order to emphasise and conclude the information which have been extracted through the discourses of the Pāli Canon and the secondary sources.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Modern psychology can be identified as a Science that endeavours to find information of human behaviour in a clinical and scientific approach. In defining the term “Psychology”, the Cambridge University Press and Assessment (n.d.) has defined the term of “Psychology” as ‘the scientific study of the way the human mind works and how it influences behaviour, or the influence of a particular person's character on their behaviour’. The Encyclopaedia Britannica (2025) has defined the term “Psychology” as “a discipline that studies mental states and processes and behavior in humans and other animals” .

The Modern Psychological Stream, which was properly started with the initiation of the First Psychological Laboratory at Leipzig University in Germany in 1879, the field of



Original Article

psychology a very popular stream throughout the world due to the theories and clinical aids provided to cure people who suffered from various mental disorders. As a result, the psychological field was developed with the initiation of scientific experiments, clinical treatments as well as from the emergence of schools in psychology. Within the schools that emerged through psychology, the school of "Behaviorism" has become a significant school as it examines the analyses of behaviour from a scientific approach through various theories and models.

Within modern psychology, there are towering figures such as Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner who rendered a great service in creating different analogies and contexts for Behaviorism. In Behaviorism, four major theories evaluate its context from various aspects. The major theories of Behaviorism are Classical Conditioning Theory, Operant Conditioning Theory, Cognitive Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory.

The next section of this research paper will be allocated to extract information on instances where Classical Conditioning Theory, Operant Conditioning Theory, have been applied and referenced within the Pāli canonical Literature in a spiritual approach to cure or heal the maladaptive behaviours exhibited by various monks or nuns during the time of the Buddha.

Of the four major theories within Behaviorism, focus will first be drawn to the Classical Conditioning Theory, which was invented by Ivan Pavlov (Sanvictores et al. 2025). According to this theory, Ivan Pavlov "found that the rate of acquisition during the initial stages of learning depended on the prominence of the stimulus and the timing between the introduction of the neutral stimulus and the unconditioned stimulus. In Pavlov's experiment, this was reflected in the interval between the bell ringing and the presentation of food. Pavlov also noted that the conditioned response was susceptible to extinction. If the conditioned stimulus was continuously supplied without the unconditioned stimulus, the conditioned response progressively weakened until it disappeared. For instance, if Pavlov rang the bell without presenting food, the dogs would eventually stop salivating in response to the bell. However, Pavlov also observed that spontaneous recovery could occur" (Sanvictores et al. 2025).

In summary, this theory relies on two important components and they are namely, stimulus and response. Ivan Pavlov realised that, with the experiment he did using a dog by ringing a bell to see the response, as mentioned in the former paragraph, the behavior which can be seen through the dog's behaviour as a learned behaviour. Through the Classical Conditioning Theory, in this way, Behaviorist Ivan Pavlov has



Original Article

endeavoured to emphasise the emergence of learned behaviour which has been created through the stimulus and the response.

When considering the Classical Conditioning Theory through the lens of Theravāda Buddhist literature of, though Behaviorism in Western Psychology has been enriched by a scientific approach, it has explained this theory with a spiritual approach where the worldly beings can end the saṃsāric suffering from attaining the ultimate bliss of Buddhism, nibbāṇa. In explicating Buddhist perspective on the Classical Conditioning Theory, many discourses can be elaborated on this regard and mainly, Madupiṇḍikasutta, Nalakaḷāpasutta, and Patīcāsamuppāda-vibhaṅgasutta.

The Majjhima Nikāya, Madupiṇḍikasutta has described the stimulus response theory through its content in the following way:

“Cakkhuñcāvuso paticca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhu viññāṇaṃ. Tiṇṇaṃ saṅghati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā. Yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti. Yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi. Yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti. Yaṃ papañceti tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāskhandhā

samudācaranti atitānāgatapaccuppanesu cakkhuvīññesu rūpesu.... Sotañcāvuso paticca sadde ca uppajjati sotaviññāṇa tiṇṇaṃ saṅghati phasso, Phassapaccayā

vēdana. Yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti. Yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi. Yaṃ papañceti. Tato nidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāskhandhā samudācaranti atī tānāgatapaccuppanesu manoviññeyyesu dhammesu...” (Majjhima Nikāya I, Madupiṇḍikasutta, 2006, p. 280).

The above Pāli quotation means:

“Dependent on eye and form, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about it. What one thinks about, one objectifies. Based on what a person objectifies, the perceptions and categories of objectification assail him/her with regard to past, present and future ideas cognizable via the eye. Depend on eye and form, eye consciousness arises. Dependent on ear and sound, ear consciousness arises... Dependent on nose and aromas, nose consciousness arises... Dependent on body and tactile sensations, body consciousness arises. Dependent on intellect and ideas, intellect-consciousness arises. The meeting of three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about it. What one thinks about, one objectifies. Based on what a person objectifies, the perceptions and categories of objectification assail him/her with regard to past, present and future ideas cognizable via the intellect” (Madupiṇḍikasutta, 1999).



Original Article

From the explanation as mentioned earlier, which has been illustrated in Madupinḍikasutta, the sutta explains the way that the stimulus response arises with the contact that sensory organs get with the external sensory experiences. This sutta mentions how becoming appears due to craving created by attaching to worldly pleasures, which are experienced through the external sensory experiences. This discourse can be shown as a very important discourse where the Classical Conditioning Theory has elaborated in Buddhism as it discusses the spiritual context of the connection that exists between the stimuli and the response.

The Nalākalāpa Sutta, included in the Saṃyuttanikāya, can be viewed as another valuable literary source that elaborates on the Classical Conditioning Theory. This discourse has elucidated about the stimulus-response theory which has been described in Buddhism by emphasizing how the consciousness arises through the six sense media. The relevant Pāli quotation can be mentioned as follows:

“Seyyathāpi āvuso , dve naḷakalāpiyo aññamaññaṃ nissāya titṭheyyaṃ , evameva kho āvuso , nāmarūpapaccayā viññāṇaṃ viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ. Nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ, saḷāyatanaṃ phasso” (Saṃyuttanikāya 2, Naḷakalāpasutta, 2006, p. 180).

The meaning of the above quotation can be translated as follows:

“It is as if two sheaves of reeds were to stand leaning against one other. In the same way, from name and form as a requisite condition comes consciousness, from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name and form. From name and form as a requisite condition comes the six sense media. From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact. From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling. From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving” (Naḷakalāpa sutta, 2000).

The six senses namely, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, have their respective objects and functions. The Saṃyutta Nikāya , Patīccasamuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta also provides an explanation of these six sense media as follows:

“Katamañca bhikkhave saḷāyatanaṃ? Chakkāyatanaṃ sotāyatanaṃ ghāṇāyatanaṃ jivhāyatanaṃ kāyāyatanaṃ manāyatanaṃ. Idaṃ vuccati bhikkhave, saḷāyatanaṃ” (Saṃyutta Nikāya 2, Patīccasamuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta, 2006, p. 7)

The meaning of the above sutta is:

“And what is six sense media? These six are sense media: eye media, ear media, nose media, tongue media, body media, and intellect media. This is called “six sense media”.



Original Article

(Paticcasamuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta, 1997). The Paticcasamuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta is an ideal discourse which gradually expounds about the root causes for becoming with the stimulus response which is generated towards the six sense objects namely, form, sound, odours, tastes, tangibles, and mental objects through the sensory organs. This discourse further explains how these sense-organs giving rise to six types of consciousness which are recognized as “ Cakkhu Viññāṇa, Sota Viññāṇa”.

The Paticcasamuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta has illustrated how the consciousness arising in eye leads to contact, feelings and towards another existence. As this discourse sheds light on how the stimulus response is generated through the sensory organs, creating craving and a root for the next existence, the Classical Conditioning Theory, which has been described in the Theravāda Buddhism can be extracted and with that, it also draws the main focus to explicate the spiritual approach that Buddhist philosophy has endeavoured to make worldly beings aware about the pathway to get detached with the saṃsāric suffering and how to initiate the stimulus response in a mindful way to understand the true reality of the world and make an end in the saṃsāric cycle of existence.

The Majjhimanikāya, Vitakkhasaṅṭhānasutta is another important literary record to showcase the Stimuli Response nature that a person possesses towards the objects

which are perceived with the sense bases. It is recorded in the Majjhimanikāya, Vitakkhasaṅṭhānasutta as:

“Seyyathāpi bhikkhave cakkhumā puriso āpāthagathānaṃ rūpānaṃ adassanakāmossa so nimileyya vā aññena vā apalokeyya. Evameva kho bhikkhave tassa ve bhikkhuṇo tesampi vitakkānaṃ ādīnaṃ upaparikkhato upapajjanetava pāpakā akusalā jandūpasamhitāpi desupasamhitāpi mohūpasamhitāpi te pahīyanti te abhatthaṃ gacchanti tesam pahānā ajjattameva vittaṃ santitṭhati sattisīdati ekodi hoti samādhiyati” (Majjhimanikāya 1, Vitakkhasaṅṭhānasutta, 2006, p. 302)

The translation of the above quotation is:

“Just as a man with good eyes who did not want to see forms that had come within range of sight would either shut his eyes or look away, so too...when a bhikkhu tries to forget those thoughts and does not give attention to them...his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated” (Majjhimanikāya, Vitakkhasaṅṭhānasutta, 2006).

From the above-mentioned sutta explanation, it also shows how the stimulus response is generated mindfully to get detached from the external objects perceived with the sense bases.



Original Article

In examining the two selected theories of Behaviorism through Buddhist thought, the second theory is Operant Conditioning Theory, which provides explanations for behaviour shaped by its consequences. This is more like the Kamma Theory in Buddhism where the behaviour has been shaped by the consequences of actions. By going through the discourses such as Cullakammavibhaṅgasutta of Majjhimanikāya, Nibbhedhikasutta of Aṅguttaranikāya, the Devadutasutta of Majjhimanikāya, and also the Dhammapada, the Buddhist thought on kamma and its consequences can be clarified.

When paying attention on the Cullakammavibhaṅgasutta of Majjhimanikāya, it mentions about an incident that happened in Jetawanārāmaya. Once a youth called “Subha” met the Buddha at Jetawanārāmaya, and inquired about the causes which affect to be born different among people. In that occasion, the Buddha preached:

“Kammassakāmāṇava sattā,
kammadāyādā,
kammayonī, kammabandhū,
kammaṇṇasaraṇā, kammaṇṇasatte
vibhajati yadidaṃ
hīnappaṇītatāyā’ti”

(Majjhimanikāya 3,
Cullakammavibhaṅgasutta, 2006, p.
441)

The mentioned quotation clarifies that the “beings are the owners of kammas, students, heirs of kammas; they have kammas as their progenitor, kammas

as their kin, kammas as their homing-place. It is kammas that differentiate beings according to inferiority and superiority”

(Cullakammavibhaṅgasutta, 1994).

With the above clarification, the Buddha explained the causes of the inequalities of worldly beings. Some of the inequalities can be elucidated as :

- i. Appāyukā - The one who takes others’ lives (Short-lived)
- ii. Dighāyukā - The one who abstains from killing (Long lived)
- iii. Bahuabādhā- The one who tortures living beings (Suffers ill health)
- iv. Appabādhā - The one who abstains from torturing (Enjoys good health)

In this way, with the Cullakammavibhaṅgasutta, by explaining the actions and the consequences that the individuals have to bear on the actions they perform, it can be stated that the Operant Conditioning Theory, which is referenced in Buddhism, clearly emphasises spiritually how the consequences increases or decreases a behaviour and the consequences that is involved with reinforcement and punishment.

In Behaviorism in Modern Psychology, Operant Conditioning can be shown as a learning process where behaviour is modified through reinforcement and punishment. According to this theory,



Original Article

the reinforcement is twofold as positive and negative. Positive reinforcement adds a pleasant stimulus to strengthen a behaviour, while negative reinforcement involves removing an aversive stimulus to strengthen a behaviour. Positive punishment, which is explained under the punishment component of Operant Conditioning Theory, adds an aversive stimulus to weaken a behaviour, while negative punishment seeks to remove a pleasant stimulus to weaken a behaviour.

In Buddhism, the Operant Conditioning Theory is also explicated in Majjhimanikāya, Devadūtasutta. This discourse describes how worldly beings are born in the four realms, namely the human world, the realm of the hungry ghosts, the animal womb and the realm of hell according to their actions through the three doors of mind, body, and speech.

“Ime vata bhonto sattā kāyasucaritena samannāgatā vacīsucaritena samannāgatā manosucaritēna samannāgatā ariyānaṃ anupavādakā sammāditthikā

sammāditthikammasamādanā. Te kāyassa bhedā paraṃ maraṇā sugatiṃ saggamaṃ lokaṃ upapannā..Ime vā pana bhonto sattā kāyasucaritena samannāgatā vacīsucaritena samannāgatā manosucaritena samannāgatā ariyānaṃ anupavādakā sammāditthikā sammāditthikammasamādanā , te kāyassa bhedā paraṃmaraṇā

manussesu upapannā. Ime vata bhonto sattā kāyaduccaritena samannāgatā vacīduccaritena samannāgatā manoduccaritena samannāgatā...”

(Majjhimanikāya 3, Devadūtasutta, 2006, p. 384).

The above quotation means:

“Monks, it’s as if there were two households with doors, and a man of good eyesight, standing there were between them, would see people entering and leaving a house, wandering out and about. In that same way, by means of divine eye, purified and surpassing the human-see beings

passing away and reappearing , and I discern how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their actions: O, how these beings- who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech and mind who did not relieve noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views, with the break- up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a good destination, the heavenly world. Or how these who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech and mind, who reviled noble ones held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views with the break-up of the body, after death have reappeared in the realm of hungry ghosts. Or how these beings who were endowed with bad conduct of body, mind and speech, who reviled noble ones held wrong



Original Article

views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views, with the break-up of the body, after death have re-appeared in the animal womb. Or how these beings who were endowed with bad conduct of body, mind and speech, who reviled noble ones held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views, with the break-up of the body, after death have re-appeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower” (Devadūtasutta,1997).

In this way, the Devadūtasutta has emphasised the consequences of the good and bad actions that are performed by worldly beings. Buddhism contains rich accounts which show the actions and their results. The wholesome actions are strengthened, and the unwholesome actions are weakened through the preachings of Buddhism by making them understand the stimulus that the worldly beings perceive.

Buddhism elaborates on the Kamma theory by emphasising the moral responsibility that one should carry for one’s own actions. With these classifications, mainly in Buddhism, actions are twofold as wholesome and unwholesome. Wholesome actions are the actions free from lust, violence, and hatred, while unwholesome actions have been agitated with the unwholesome roots of lobha, dvesa and moha. The Dhammapada, Yamaka Vagga explains how actions performed bring about their consequences through the following verse:

“Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā - manōsetṭhā manomayā, manasā ce paduṭṭhena – bhāsati vā karoti vā,

Tato naṃ dukkhamanveti - cakkam’va vahato padaṃ” (Dhammapada, 2002, p. 3).

The meaning which is interpreted from the above-mentioned verse of Dhammapada is:

All thoughts begin in the mind; mind is supreme and mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts impure mind, pain follows him like the wheel the hoof of the ox (Dhammapada, 2002).

Through the meaning of the former-mentioned verse of the Dhammapada, it explains how the bad actions that are committed through the mind bring about bad consequences just as a wheel follows the hoof print of the ox that draws the cart. The Dhammapada also mentions how the actions done with a pure mind lead to eternal peace as a shadow that never leaves. This is expressed in the following quotation from the Dhammapada:

“Manasā ce pasannena - bhāsati vā karoti vā - tato naṃ sukhamanveti - chāyā’va anapāyini” (Dhammapada, 2002, p. 4).

Moreover, the Majjhima Nikāya, Bālappaṇḍita Sutta can also be considered as an important record when explaining the Operant Conditioning Theory in Buddhism. The following Pāli quotation explains how it is hard to be born as a human being



Original Article

and the importance of performing good actions. It is mentioned in the Majjhima Nikāya, Bālappaṇḍita Sutta in the following way:

“Seyyathāpi bhikkhave puriso ekacchiggaḷaṃ yugaṃ mahasamudde pakkhipeyya. tamenāṃ puratthimo vatho paccimena samhareyya paccimovato puratthimena samhareyya, uttaro vatho dakkhineyya samhareyya, dakkhino vatho uttarena samhareyya. tatrassa kano kaccapo so vassatasassa vassatassa accayena sakim umujjeyya. Tam kim maññaṭṭa, bhikkhave apinu so kano kaccapo amusmiṃ ekacciggaḷe yuge givaṃ pavaseyya’ti? Bhante kadaci karahaci dhigassa addhuno accayena’ti. Khippataraṃ khoso, bhikkhave kaṇho kacchapo amusmiṃ ekacciggaḷe yuge givaṃ pavaseyya ato dullabhatarahaṃ bhikkhave manussattaṃ vadami sakim vinipathagetēna balena. Tam kissa hethu? Na hettha bhikkhave attha dhammacariya samacariya kusalakiriya puññakiriya aññaṃaññakhadika ettha bhikkhave vattati dubbalakhādika” (Majjhima Nikāya 3, Bālappaṇḍita Sutta, 2006, p. 870).

The meaning of the above-quoted Pāli statement is:

“A wooden cattle-yoke floating on the waves of the sea, tossed this way and that by the winds and currents. The likelihood of a blind turtle, rising from the depths of the ocean to the surface once in a hundred years, putting its head through the hole in the yoke is

considered greater than that of a being in the animal realm, hungry ghost realm or hell realm achieving birth as a human-being. This is because, in these realms, there is no dhamma, no practicing what is right, no doing what is wholesome and no performing of merit” (Bālappaṇḍita Sutta, 1998).

The Bālappaṇḍita Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya emphasises how the beings are getting born on the woeful states for committing bad actions. When considering about the Operant Conditioning Theory, it emphasises how the consequences of an action can be strengthened or weakened with the involvement of a pleasant or aversive stimulus. In Buddhism also, to weaken a behaviour as well as to strengthen a behaviour the stimulus is used in a realistic way where the consequences of those performed actions can be reaped positively based on the preachings of the Buddha. Through these facts, it is clear that within the teachings of Buddhism, the Operant Conditioning Theory has existed with the great preachings of the Buddha.

From the rich accounts mentioned above, it is very clear that the Classical Conditioning Theory and the Operant Conditioning Theory are well proved within the preachings of the Buddha in a realistic way where the worldly brings are guided toward the attainment of the ultimate bliss of emancipation.



Original Article

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that both Classical and Operant Conditioning Theories, which are derived from Behaviorism, resonate deeply with Buddhist thought when examined through Pāli canonical evidence. By examining Pavlov's theory on Operant and Classical Conditioning Theories, it can be mentioned that Buddhism interprets a spiritual approach to both of these theories, and when looking at these theories rooted within the Western approach, along with the Buddhist interpretations, it can be seen that the Classical Conditioning Theory in modern psychology aligns with the Buddhist explanations on sensory contact and the Operant Conditioning theory integrates with the Buddhist explanations on the theory of Kamma. Specially, it should be noted that, though the surface-level facts look similar between the Buddhist thought and Behaviorism in modern psychology, these approaches bring different contexts through these teachings. In emphasizing these two approaches, it should be stated that Buddhist thought shapes the behavior changes through the mechanisms that function spiritually with mindfulness, moral responsibility, and liberation, while modern psychology processes and examines human behaviour through scientific methods.

References

- American Psychological Association. (n.d.). APA dictionary of psychology. Retrieved May 25, 2025, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/>
- Bālapaṇḍita sutta: The fool and the wise person (SN 12.19) (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Trans.). (1998). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.019.than.html> (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Bellack, A. S., & Hersen, M. (Eds.). (1982). International handbook of behavior modification and therapy. Plenum Press. Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (n.d.). Psychology. In Cambridge dictionary. Retrieved July 10, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/psychology>
- Cullakammavibhaṅgasutta: The shorter exposition of kamma (MN 135) (Ñānamoli Thera, Trans.). (1994). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.135.nymo.html> (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Devadutasutta: The deva messengers (MN 130) (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Trans.). (1997). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.130.than.html> (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Graham, G. (2025). Behaviorism. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2025 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/behaviorism/>
- Maduṇḍikasutta: The ball of honey (MN 18) (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Trans.). (1999). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.018.than.html> (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Majjhima Nikāya 1, Maduṇḍikasutta. (2006). Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.)
- Majjhima Nikāya 1, Vitakkhasaṅṭhānasutta. (2006). Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).



Original Article

- Majjhima Nikāya 3, Bālapaṇḍita sutta. (2006). Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Majjhima Nikāya 3, Chullakammavibhaṅgasutta. (2006). Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Majjhima Nikāya 3, Devadutasutta. (2006). Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Majjhimanikāya, Vitakkhasaṅṭhānasutta: The relaxation of thoughts (MN 20) (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Trans.). (1997). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.020.than.html> (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Martin, G., & Pear, J. (2015). Behavior modification: What it is and how to do it (10th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Naḷakalāpa sutta: Sheaves of reeds (SN 12.67) (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Trans.). (2000). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.067.than.html> (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Paticcasamuppāda-vibhaṅga sutta: Analysis of dependent co-arising (SN 12.2) (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Trans.). (1997). Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.002.than.html> (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Prebish, C. S. (2002). Buddhist monastic discipline: The Sanskrit Pratimoksa Sutras of the Mahasamghikas and Mulasarvastivadins. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Samyutta Nikāya 2, Naḷakalāpasutta. (2006). Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Samyutta Nikāya 2, Paticcasamuppāda-vibhaṅga sutta. (2006). Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.).
- Sanvictores, T., Mahabadi, N., & Rehman, C. I. (2025). Classical conditioning. In StatPearls. StatPearls Publishing. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470326/>
- The Dhammapada. (2002). The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation. (Original work published ca. 1st century B.C.E.)
- The Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2025, June 2). Psychology. In Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/science/psychology>
- Watson, D. L., & Tharp, R. G. (2014). Self-directed behavior: Self-modification for personal adjustment (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.