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THEORETICAL RESOURCES

Thai Buddhist Philosophy and the Action Research Process

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ABSTRACT Certain aspects of Thai Buddhism offer interesting support for some key concepts in action research. In particular, Buddhist notions of 'insight' and 'mindfulness' are helpful in clarifying the 'reflection' phase in the well-known action research 'spiral', and the concept of 'Dependent Origination' can be seen as embodying the whole action research cycle.

While some aspects of Thai culture may be seen to inhibit the research process, other aspects have the potential to assist it. Traditional aspects of culture can be particularly important when emancipatory modes of research are contemplated. When the participants in an action research study not only have their Thai culture to draw upon, but also have a strong background in Buddhism, there are possibilities for heightening the reflective stages of the action cycle through meditation, developing a 'mindfulness' which is akin to the western notion of 'consciousness raising' and using the Mandala Wheel to add a Buddhist dimension to studies of cause and effect. This leads to an examination of 'dependent origination', the Buddhist Law of Conditionality.

There have been criticisms of the effectiveness of action research in that it depends more on personal and interpersonal factors than methodological factors (Reason & Rowen, 1981). The model (see Figure 1) outlined here helps individuals to overcome personal limitations by developing mindfulness (Satipatthana). Since mindfulness helps to free the mind from self-confusion and bias, the individual is able to focus more on the method than on personal factors. In this way, the introduction of a specific Buddhist method would enhance the actual process of action research.

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Figure 1. Action research spiral based on Buddhist culture.

This model, which arose from an original study in a nursing context (Chuaprapaisilp, 1991), is a spiral of action research based on Buddhist culture. It is a modification of the action research spiral developed by Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) highlighting the importance of Buddhist culture to participants in the study. The central theme of this model is 'Satipatthana'. 'Satipatthana' (Sati = mindfulness, Panthana = cultivating, developing) is a Buddhist technical term which means the 'foundation of mindfulness' (Khantipalo, 1981). The foundation of mindfulness is to be actively aware of the present moment. Mindfulness is also the state of mind which represents full awareness of present actions, feelings, state of the mind, and truth. Satipatthana is similar to what Fay (1987) called 'consciousness raising' in developing critical thinkers. Satipatthana can be developed through meditation and is a cause for the arising of self-awareness and wisdom. This can be explained through the process of Samatha and Vipassana meditations. Samatha meditation leads to a state of relaxation and concentration where you focus on only one thing and are able

to block out distractions. Vipassana meditation follows Samatha meditation and includes the process of contemplation of four foundations of mindfulness: contemplating the body/daily activities, (Kayanupassana), the feelings (Vadananupassana), the state of the mind consciousness (Cittanupassana) and the mental objects (Dhammanupassana) which are in turn divided into five categories: hindrances, bases, aggregates, factors of enlightenment and truths (Sujiva, 1991). Contemplation of the four foundations of mindfulness leads to the emancipation of the mind and understanding of truth. In this state, the mind becomes calm, clear and unbiased, you can see things 'as they really are'. Then reflective skills are heightened further, leading to insight and wisdom. This Buddhist teaching complements the action research process (plan, act and observe, reflect and revise plan), and thereby enhances knowledge development and improvement of practice.

At this level connections can be made between Buddhist teaching, the reflection stage of the action research cycle and concepts such as emancipation. According to Samyutta Nikaya (Ajahn Brahmavamso, 1991; cited in Forest Sangha Newsletter by the kind permission of the Pali Text Society):

Concentration is the supporting condition for the knowledge and vision of things as they really are,

The knowledge and vision of things as they really are is the supporting condition for disenchantment,

Disenchantment is the supporting condition for dispassion,

Dispassion is the supporting condition for emancipation,

Emancipation is the supporting condition for knowledge of the destruction of the most deeply rooted obstructive habits (asavas).

(Samyutta Nikaya 2, 29.)

The above formulation of linking factors shows the link by which one can develop (or purify) the mind to gain freedom from confusion and bias, to attain wisdom and enlightenment. This state of the mind (i.e. mindfulness) helps us to overcome what Marxist philosophy calls "false consciousness" and to see things as they really are. thus, mindfulness is the way in which we gain insight and enlightenment since it enhances understanding and eliminates confusion through the attainment of a penetrating wisdom. It is the personal knowledge that one must practise (through meditation) to gain the results (i.e. understanding).

Through Vipassana meditation, individuals are able to achieve emancipation at a personal level. A distinction should be made here between the forms of group emancipation which are mentioned in the literature on action research and individual forms. However, forms of collaborative consciousness associated with emancipatory action research are more likely

to occur when participants have refined their individual skills are then able to apply them in a group situation.

The benefits of meditation are not only recognised by those following an Eastern philosophy, but also by researchers in the west. In recent times, significant research has been carried out by Wallace (1991) on the “neurophysiology of enlightenment”, showing how Transcendental Meditation transforms the human body. For health care workers using action research there are double benefits. Not only can meditation help them in their research, but it can also be used by patients and researchers alike to improve their own health. Worth mentioning here are the works of Simonton (1994) and Gowler (1992).

The Buddhist Mandala Wheel and Action Research

One aim of action research is to learn from experience. Action research is already familiar, but to non-Buddhist readers and researchers it may now be helpful to provide details on the philosophy's underlying beliefs. What do we mean by Dependent Origination and what is the link with the Mandala Wheel? How can Dependent Origination be interpreted? What are the implications for practising Buddhists involved in action research?

The notion of Dependent Origination, or the Buddhist Law of Conditionality, is well described by Payutto (1994). Payutto's translator, Bruce Evans, argues that the principle of Dependent Origination is one of the most profound and intellectually intriguing of all the Buddha's teachings. Payutto argues that the teaching of causal interdependence is the most important of the Buddhist principles, describing the law of nature. the progression of causes and conditions is the reality which applies to all things. It includes the natural environment which is an external physical condition, and also the events of human society, ethical principles, life events, happiness and suffering, which are all manifest in our minds. As all things are seen to be interconnected, and all tend to affect one another, success in dealing with the world depends on creating harmony with it. The Mandala Wheel is a symbol showing how, as in action research, all things are connected.

There are two significant interpretations of the Buddhist Law of Conditionality. One involves a process of moving from lifetime to lifetime. The other is a more immediate process, occurring in the space of moments of consciousness (from moment to moment). The former may be of more significance when we consider action research as a vehicle for long-term personal and professional development, while the latter may be of more significance when we are working within one phase of an action cycle. Whether we interpret ‘Dependent Origination’ as covering many lifetimes or occurring in one mind moment, we are dealing with matters beyond normal perception.

The main implication for practising Buddhists is that they can bring techniques from meditation to be applied in the reflection process of action research. In addition, the main purpose of the Buddha's teaching is to

overcome suffering, and similarly the purpose of action research is to overcome the contradictions and suffering of participants' practice. Furthermore, when Buddhism and action research are operating in harmony or unison, happiness and 'loving-kindness' ('Metta') are consistently in evidence, which results in the spontaneous conducting of action research to achieve the desired outcome. In this process every factor of the situation is integrated harmoniously, like the Mandala Wheel that moves forward together with reflection from the past to improve the present practice and plan for the future, so that the results will be successful and appropriate.

Conclusions

Buddhism thus provides a world view and a set of insights which may help participants to view events in a highly perceptive manner. This world view is likely to produce results which are very different to those experienced in a western non-Buddhist setting. Those Thai practitioners who are experienced in Vipassana meditation may be well placed to apply their reflective skills to an enhancement of the action research process and work is currently in progress to explore the practical implications of the ideas presented in this outline.

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THEORETICAL RESOURCES

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