

## Buddhism is Qualitative Research 2

**My second piece on Buddhism takes a light hearted look at Buddha's words and how these are updated in marketing speak.**

How can I say this? Surely its nonsense? The key point is that Buddhism is fundamentally the study of subjective experience [SE].

The Buddha was a teacher, not a saint or holy person. Such was the wisdom and value of his teaching that he is venerated, but idealisation is not what he sought. His mission (Objectives in research language), as he said all along was to show people a path to freedom from suffering. .

He said at one time: "Monks (that's us!), if one day you are asked 'what is the purpose of leading a life under the Buddha?' you should say: "In order to understand those things that should be fully understood."

It does not require any exaggeration to replace the original question with 'what is the purpose of qualitative research?' and arrive at the same answer.

The next question the Monks asked, unsurprisingly, was 'what are the things that should be fully understood?' Rather than answer in terms of brands or sales or impact, he said: 'the things that must be fully understood are (new bit of Buddha speak here): *'the five aggregates of clinging.'*

Again it is not hard to translate this into the language & objectives of a qualitative project, where it might say instead, 'the things that need to be fully understood are what leads to attachment (or 'clinging' in Buddha speak) to our brand/product/service and what is the nature of these attachments - or lack of them - so that we might influence them?'

By now the Monks were thinking, maybe he's onto something here, so they pressed him: 'Sir, what are these five aggregates?' On the left, I give you the Buddha's original, while on the right, I translate them into qualitative research or marketing language:

### **Buddha Speak**

1. Material form
2. Perceptions

### **Marketing Speak**

1. The product, service, brand, ads - *all the stuff*
2. The way this stuff is perceived, and what these perceptions are built on.

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|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. Feelings          | 3. The emotional impact of perceptions of product/brand/ads. Or lack thereof.                                                                                                                              |
| 4. Mental Formations | 4. States of Mind that flow from or are associated with the product or service. Does it make you feel cool? Well? Superior? Confused? Ripped off? Etc. How is the brand embedded as a feeling? [If it is!] |
| 5. Consciousness     | 5. All these play out on the screen of moment-by-moment experience. Called 'awareness' by marketing folk. We can contact this in our investigations by a number of methods.                                |

These are the very things we investigate in our qualitative inquiries - how do people think, feel, and perceive our brand/sector/product or service, and what moods or needs pervade these material and mental experiences? And how do they play out in consciousness?

Just as Buddha said, two thousand years ago.

Nearly there now, just one more thing: by now they wanted to get full value for money from this bloke - 'how do we understand these things?' they asked. He might have said, 'figure that out for yourselves, idiots!' but fortunately he did not. Compassionate kindness was one of his things.

Instead he said, **there are two elements to understanding: 'theory and practice'**. For me, this is so both in everyday life *and qualitative research*. Practice refers to experience - and in this case subjective experience or SE - while theory refers to the process of reflecting on that experience, yours or the participants', in the search for patterns that illuminate more of both its nature and its purpose.

So, if you want to be master or mistress of qualitative inquiry, you need to acquaint yourself with the five aggregates as they play out in your daily life, then find a way to allow others to tell you of their experiences (Method in your proposal) and finally, reflect upon the foregoing in the search for patterns of meaning - usually called **Insight** in marketing speak.

Now, you are a Buddhist researcher and you can go and buy that cool robe!

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