CONTEMPLATIVE PSYCHOLOGY / COMPARATIVE STUDIES

The Thirty-Two Functions of Human Integration

The sixteen kalās, Vajrayāna contemplative psychology, and a proposed framework for psychological development and therapy

ABSTRACT

Contemporary psychotherapy has developed sophisticated methods for identifying psychological difficulties, regulating emotional distress, and improving adaptive functioning. These approaches also raise a broader question concerning the relationship between psychological competence and the individual's identification with the capacities through which that competence is expressed.

A person may possess well-developed abilities in planning, emotional regulation, self-discipline, and social interaction while remaining strongly dependent upon maintaining a particular image of personal competence. Capacities that support effective functioning can also participate in rigid patterns of avoidance, control, and self-protection.

Indian contemplative traditions provide several perspectives relevant to this distinction. The sixteen *kalās*, described in the *Praśna Upaniṣad* as constituent powers of manifested existence, present a conception of differentiation and reintegration. Related lunar traditions employ sixteenfold symbolism in connection with the moon's changing luminosity. Buddhist philosophy approaches the organization of experience through dependent origination and the absence of an independently existing self. Vajrayāna further develops methods in which ordinary emotional, perceptual, and embodied processes become the basis for contemplative transformation.

Drawing upon these ideas, this article proposes a Thirty-Two-Function Integrative Model of psychological development. Sixteen functions concern inward regulation and sixteen concern outward agency. Each function is examined through three dimensions: its availability, its coordination with other functions, and the degree to which its exercise is associated with identification with a particular self-image.

The model distinguishes the cultivation of psychological capacities from their reciprocal integration and from changes in the individual's relationship to self-identification. It is presented as an original theoretical synthesis, not as an established Buddhist classification or validated clinical system. Its possible applications to psychotherapy and contemplative development are considered alongside its conceptual limitations and requirements for empirical investigation.

Part I — The Problem and Its Origins

1. Beyond psychological normality

Psychotherapy commonly aims to reduce distress, improve emotional regulation, restore adaptive behaviour, and support effective participation in everyday life. These objectives are important and often indispensable. They do not, however, exhaust the questions that can be asked about psychological development.

An individual may possess strong executive functioning, emotional control, intellectual ability, and social competence while remaining highly dependent upon maintaining those qualities. Planning can become compulsive anticipation. Emotional discipline can become avoidance of vulnerability. Identity coherence can become rigidity. Assertion can become defensive self-importance. Even the pursuit of calmness may become an attempt to exclude experiences that threaten a preferred self-image.

These examples distinguish the possession of a psychological capacity from the flexibility with which it is exercised. A person may be able to plan effectively without remaining preoccupied with an imagined future, establish boundaries without hostility, or experience grief without constructing an enduring identity around suffering.

Contemporary approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, mindfulness-based interventions, metacognitive therapies, and certain psychodynamic traditions already address aspects of psychological flexibility, experiential avoidance, and identification with mental activity. The present model seeks to organize related observations within a systematic account of differentiated psychological capacities, their relationships, and their possible transformation.

Three dimensions of psychological functioning

The proposed model distinguishes three dimensions.

Availability concerns whether a capacity can be accessed when circumstances require it. Can an individual recognize emotion, regulate physiological arousal, organize thought, establish boundaries, or initiate purposeful action?

Integration concerns how effectively a capacity operates in relation to other capacities. Can it be engaged, moderated, and relinquished according to circumstances, or does it become rigid, excessive, or disconnected from the wider psychological system?

Identification concerns the extent to which a capacity participates in maintaining a particular conception of self. Does the individual depend upon being competent, emotionally controlled, intellectually capable, independent, or morally correct to preserve psychological security?

These dimensions are related but not interchangeable. Someone may improve emotional regulation while remaining strongly attached to the need for control. Another person may develop insight into the constructed nature of identity while continuing to experience practical difficulties with organization or interpersonal communication.

The distinction therefore separates the development of capacities from their reciprocal coordination and from the individual's relationship to self-identification. It also provides the basis for considering psychological maturity as something broader than the accumulation of effective skills.

2. The sixteen kalās: differentiation and reintegration

The Sanskrit word *kalā* can mean a part, portion, digit, or division of time. It is associated both with traditional measurements of time and with descriptions of the moon's changing luminosity, particularly the symbolism of sixteen lunar digits or constituent portions. The waxing and waning moon provide a recurring image of manifestation and withdrawal. In several Indian philosophical and contemplative traditions, *kalā* also describes differentiated aspects of a more comprehensive reality.

An important early formulation occurs in the sixth question of the *Praśna Upaniṣad*, which describes the sixteen-part Puruṣa. The sixteen constituents are vital breath, faith, space, air, fire, water, earth, the senses, mind, food, strength, austerity, mantras, ritual action, worlds, and name.

This enumeration encompasses physical conditions, vitality, perception, cognition, nourishment, activity, and meaningful existence. It is not a classification of psychological personality types or neurological functions.

The text concludes with an image of reintegration. Just as rivers enter the ocean and lose their separate names and forms, the sixteen constituents return to Puruṣa. The account therefore describes two complementary movements: differentiation into constituent powers and their return to an encompassing unity.

In its original context, this teaching belongs to an Upaniṣadic metaphysics of the imperishable Self. Buddhist philosophy does not accept that metaphysical foundation. Nevertheless, the structure of the account suggests a question that can be considered independently of its original ontology: how do differentiated capacities participate in the functioning of a coherent whole, and what happens when their apparent independence is no longer maintained?

Lunar symbolism and the sixteenfold pattern

A related symbolism appears in traditions concerning the sixteen lunar *kalās*. The waxing and waning moon provides an image of emergence, increasing fullness, diminution, and renewal. In Śākta traditions, particularly Śrī Vidyā, sixteenfold symbolism is associated with Ṣoḍaśī, the Nityā goddesses, mantra, and lunar powers.

In these contexts, differentiated manifestation need not be understood as a departure from completeness. It may instead represent the expression of an underlying power through distinct modes. For the proposed psychological model, this symbolism offers an analogy: a capacity need not remain continuously active to remain available within an integrated system.

A distinction is necessary between the traditional sixteen *kalās* and the calendrical division of the lunar month. The latter normally comprises fifteen waxing and fifteen waning lunar days, or *tithis*, giving thirty *tithis* in a complete cycle. The sixteenfold lunar symbolism belongs to a related but not identical system of representation. In some traditions, the sixteenth *kalā* is associated with an enduring or transcendent aspect beyond the fifteen changing manifestations. The exact interpretation depends upon the textual and religious context.

It is therefore possible to interpret the waxing and waning movements symbolically as two complementary sixteenfold expressions, but this does not establish a traditional thirty-two-part lunar calendar or demonstrate that a psychological system of thirty-two functions was historically derived from it.

The synodic lunar month lasts approximately 29.53 days. Traditional sixteenfold lunar enumerations do not establish sixteen equally spaced astronomical phases or sixteen fundamental biological states. Nor is there an established astronomical requirement for a complementary group of sixteen solar powers.

The relevance of the *kalā* traditions lies in their treatment of differentiated powers within a larger organization, not in demonstrating a universal numerical structure.

The choice of thirty-two functions

The present model adopts sixteen as a symbolic and organizational starting point. A second group of sixteen is introduced to distinguish inward regulation from outward agency. Together, these form a provisional classification of thirty-two psychological functions.

The number has not been derived from neuroscience or established psychometric research. It is a heuristic framework used to organize capacities associated with bodily experience, emotion, memory, cognition, identity, purposeful action, and social participation.

Some proposed functions overlap. Others may eventually require subdivision or consolidation. Empirical investigation could therefore support a smaller, larger, or differently organized classification. The model's principal proposition concerns the availability, coordination, and flexible use of psychological capacities rather than the necessity of the number thirty-two.

Part II — The Buddhist Foundation

3. Buddhist psychology: conditioned experience and the absence of self

Buddhist philosophy approaches the nature of the person differently from the Upaniṣadic doctrine of an imperishable Self. Rather than explaining experience through an enduring entity possessing constituent powers, Buddhism analyzes experience as a collection of conditioned processes lacking independent selfhood.

The five aggregates, or *pañcaskandha*, provide a principal framework for this analysis.

Aggregate	Principal meaning
Form (*rūpa*)	The material dimension of embodiment
Feeling (*vedanā*)	The pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of experience
Perception (*saṃjñā*)	Recognition and discrimination of experiential characteristics
Formations (*saṃskāra*)	Intentions, dispositions, and other conditioned mental activities
Consciousness (*vijñāna*)	Awareness arising in dependence upon sensory or mental conditions

These processes account for conventional personal experience without requiring an independently existing owner. Memory operates, decisions occur, emotions arise, and purposeful behaviour takes place, yet none of these processes constitutes a permanent self.

The proposed thirty-two functions may be understood as a contemporary classification of certain capacities operating within this broader field of conditioned experience. They are not traditional subdivisions of the aggregates, nor can individual functions be assigned exclusively to particular aggregates.

Anxiety about an impending confrontation, for example, may involve bodily tension, unpleasant feeling, recognition of the anticipated situation, habitual expectations, and awareness of these processes. The experience emerges through their interaction. Likewise, bodily settling, future simulation, self-trust, and assertion are not independent psychological substances. They describe distinguishable aspects of an interdependent system.

The aggregates therefore provide a philosophical foundation for analyzing differentiated psychological functioning without attributing it to an enduring self.

Dependent origination and psychological rigidity

The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) describes the conditioned arising of phenomena. Its familiar twelve-link formulation includes ignorance, formations,

consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and aging-and-death.

This doctrine should not be reduced to a modern account of emotional regulation. Nevertheless, the relationship between feeling, craving, and clinging provides a useful conceptual comparison.

An unpleasant experience does not necessarily produce prolonged psychological suffering simply because it is unpleasant. Additional processes may arise: the desire to escape the experience, the pursuit of its opposite, and the development of habitual responses organized around avoidance or control.

Consider uncertainty. The capacity to anticipate possible outcomes is ordinarily useful. Yet when uncertainty becomes intolerable, anticipation may develop into compulsive planning. A capacity that supports effective action becomes incorporated into a defensive pattern that perpetuates distress.

The proposed model describes this process as *defensive functional inversion*. The comparison with dependent origination suggests that difficulties may arise not merely from the presence of a psychological function, but from the conditioned relationships through which it becomes compulsive. Therapeutic change may therefore involve altering the relationship between experience and response rather than eliminating either the experience or the capacity.

The two truths and conventional identity

Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy distinguishes conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) from ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). At the conventional level, persons remember, act, maintain relationships, make decisions, and bear responsibility. At the ultimate level, analysis does not disclose an independently existing essence underlying these activities.

The two truths are not separate realities. They describe different ways of understanding phenomena.

This distinction is important for the present model. The absence of an independently existing self does not imply that conventional psychological capacities are unnecessary. Nor does insight into emptiness require the destruction of memory, personal continuity, practical judgment, or agency. The functional person remains meaningful at the conventional level.

Psychological development can therefore involve strengthening capacities while reducing the tendency to regard them as attributes of an independently existing identity. The objective is not the elimination of conventional personhood, but the relinquishment of its reification.

Sixteenfold and thirty-twofold Buddhist classifications

Buddhist scholasticism also employs numerical classifications relevant to the present discussion. One example is the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths, consisting of four contemplative aspects associated with each truth: suffering, origin, cessation, and path.

These are not sixteen psychological faculties. Their relevance lies in demonstrating how a finite analytical classification can be used to transform understanding rather than merely describe experience.

The thirty-two major marks of a great person (*mahāpuruṣa-lakṣaṇa*) provide another example. Traditionally associated with a Buddha and, in earlier contexts, with the ideal universal monarch, these marks belong to a karmic and religious conception of perfected embodiment.

They do not correspond to thirty-two neurological or psychological capacities. Their conceptual significance is that Buddhist traditions envision realization as involving the transformation of the whole person, including embodiment, rather than intellectual understanding alone. This theme becomes particularly prominent in Vajrayāna.

4. Vajrayāna: the transformation of psychological functions

Vajrayāna places considerable emphasis on transforming ordinary emotional, perceptual, and embodied processes. Rather than treating every disturbing experience as something to be suppressed, tantric practice seeks to transform the conditions through which experience becomes afflictive.

This approach belongs within a religious framework involving ethical discipline, philosophical understanding, initiation, and sustained contemplative training. It should not be confused with unrestricted emotional expression or the indulgence of disturbing states.

The five afflictions and five wisdoms

One important traditional formulation concerns the transformation of five principal afflictive tendencies into five forms of wisdom. The details vary among tantric systems, but a familiar set of correspondences is:

Afflictive tendency	Corresponding wisdom
Ignorance or bewilderment	Wisdom of the dharmadhātu
Anger or aversion	Mirror-like wisdom
Pride or self-importance	Wisdom of equality
Desire or attachment	Discriminating wisdom
Envy or competitive jealousy	All-accomplishing wisdom

These relationships do not simply describe replacing negative emotions with positive ones. They express the possibility that the experiential potential associated with an affliction may manifest differently when ignorance and self-grasping no longer distort it.

Anger, for example, may involve acute recognition of distinctions and perceived threats. When organized through aversion, this becomes hostility. In the symbolism of mirror-like wisdom, clarity remains without the compulsion to reject what appears. Desire similarly involves discrimination of particular qualities. Its corresponding wisdom retains discernment without possessive attachment.

These are contemplative correspondences, not established neurological transformations. They nevertheless suggest a principle relevant to psychotherapy: the maladaptive expression of a capacity does not necessarily imply that the underlying capacity is inherently defective.

Functional and motivational transformation

Buddhist psychology distinguishes wholesome (*kuśala*) from unwholesome (*akuśala*) mental states according to their ethical and liberative significance, rather than merely their practical effectiveness.

Someone may concentrate effectively while pursuing an intention rooted in hostility. Another may reason brilliantly while defending pride, attachment, or the desire to dominate. The capacities may be highly developed, but their motivational organization remains afflictive. Conversely, a person may possess sincere compassionate intentions while lacking the practical abilities needed to express them effectively.

This distinction suggests two related forms of transformation. Functional transformation concerns the effectiveness, accessibility, and flexibility of a capacity. Motivational transformation concerns the intentions, fears, attachments, and assumptions about identity governing its exercise.

An individual can improve in one dimension without necessarily improving in the other. The distinction explains why psychological competence and contemplative liberation are not equivalent, while preserving the difference between Buddhist ethical evaluation and clinical diagnosis.

The dākinī and transformative activity

The dākinī occupies an important place in Vajrayāna as an enlightened female figure, tantric deity, manifestation of wisdom, guardian of teachings, or embodiment of transformative activity, depending upon context. Her significance cannot be reduced to psychological symbolism. Within traditional practice, dākinīs participate in a religious and soteriological framework extending beyond secular interpretation.

Nevertheless, their symbolism offers a useful comparison. Wisdom is represented not merely as passive observation but as dynamic transformative activity.

Tantric iconography frequently depicts feminine wisdom united with masculine method or compassionate means. Their union signifies inseparability rather than the superiority of either biological sex.

This relationship provides an analogy for inward regulation and outward agency. Inward awareness without the capacity for appropriate action may remain practically ineffective. Outward activity without sufficient awareness of its emotional and motivational foundations may become compulsive or harmful.

In an integrated process, awareness informs action, while action provides conditions through which awareness becomes more complete. The relationship is reciprocal. For example, emotional recognition may make effective communication possible. Successful communication may then reduce the physiological threat and defensive anticipation associated with the original situation. Similarly, self-trust may support purposeful action, while successful action may strengthen self-trust.

At a more developed level, inward awareness and outward activity need not be experienced as competing modes. Action need not represent a departure from presence. Acceptance need not imply passivity. Non-attachment need not entail indifference.

This is the proposed psychological analogy to the Vajrayāna union of wisdom and method. It is not an assertion that the two psychological orientations are identical with traditional tantric wisdom and method.

Mandalas and embodied differentiation

A tantric mandala organizes multiple deities, positions, attributes, and activities within a coherent symbolic structure. In some practices, this arrangement is internalized through visualization of the body as a mandala.

The Cakrasaṃvara body-mandala tradition provides a relevant example. Its twenty-four pairs of heroes and heroines are associated with sacred places and bodily locations, organized through wheels of body, speech, and mind. External sacred geography and internal embodiment are thus brought into a unified contemplative representation.

This example is better established than the suggestion that a universal thirty-two-dākinī system corresponds to thirty-two specific neurological functions. No such universal correspondence has been demonstrated from primary sources.

The significance of the body mandala for the present proposal is methodological: differentiated bodily locations and symbolic activities can be organized relationally within an encompassing contemplative structure. The proposed therapeutic model adopts this general organizing principle without requiring deity visualization or religious practice.

5. Embodiment and the subtle body

Tibetan tantric traditions describe subtle embodiment through channels (*rtsa*), winds (*rlung*), and drops (*thig le*). In completion-stage practices, transformations of consciousness are associated with transformations in the movement and organization of subtle winds. The details and

objectives differ among tantric systems, but the relationship between consciousness and embodiment is fundamental.

Generation and completion stages

Vajrayāna distinguishes generation-stage (*utpattikrama*) from completion-stage (*niṣpannakrama*) practice. Generation-stage methods cultivate transformed perceptions of identity, embodiment, environment, and activity through deity yoga and related contemplative techniques. Completion-stage practices, particularly within Highest Yoga Tantra, engage more directly with the subtle psychophysical processes described through channels, winds, and drops.

These stages are not equivalent to cognitive psychotherapy followed by bodily regulation. Their traditional methods and objectives are substantially different. Nevertheless, their relationship offers a conceptual analogy.

A person may adopt a new understanding of identity while continuing to experience habitual physiological reactions. Conversely, bodily regulation may improve while rigid assumptions about identity remain unchanged. The proposed model therefore considers both changes in psychological representation and changes in embodied response.

Contemporary psychophysiology

Modern neuroscience recognizes that cognition and emotion are closely related to bodily processes. Autonomic activity, interoceptive signaling, endocrine regulation, and motor readiness influence attention, memory, perception, emotion, and decision-making.

This does not establish that tantric winds are nerve impulses or that subtle channels correspond anatomically to known neural pathways. The comparison concerns the broader relationship between consciousness and embodiment.

Someone may know intellectually that a situation is safe while continuing to experience physiological threat. Another may understand what action is required but find initiation difficult. A third may achieve bodily calm while remaining absorbed in repetitive self-criticism.

Such discrepancies suggest that psychological functioning depends upon the coordination of several partially independent processes. The proposed model makes that coordination an object of therapeutic investigation. Its closest contemporary parallels include interoception, emotional regulation, embodied cognition, executive control, and psychological flexibility.

Tibetan constitutional medicine

Tibetan medicine provides another approach to differentiated embodiment through the three *nyes pa*: wind (*rlung*), bile (*mkhris pa*), and phlegm (*bad kan*). These principles are associated with physiological processes, constitutional tendencies, and patterns of imbalance.

Tibetan medicine incorporates Indian medical influences while developing its own theoretical synthesis. Broad similarities with *kalā*-related themes include vitality, nourishment, transformation, cohesion, and perception.

However, these similarities do not establish that Tibetan constitutional classifications derive from the sixteen *kalās*. In particular, a canonical system of precisely sixteen Tibetan body types has not been adequately demonstrated in the material considered here. Such an enumeration should therefore not be used as historical confirmation of the proposed thirty-two-function model.

The legitimate comparison is that Tibetan medicine and tantric subtle-body traditions both describe embodied experience through differentiated, interacting processes, although their classifications and purposes remain distinct.

Part III — The Proposed Model

6. The thirty-two capacities: inward regulation and outward agency

The proposed framework distinguishes two broad orientations of psychological functioning. Inward regulation concerns the reception, experience, stabilization, and interpretation of internal conditions. Outward agency concerns orientation toward the environment, communication, purposeful action, inhibition, completion, and participation in relationships.

Each orientation contains sixteen proposed functions. The distinction does not imply two separate nervous systems, a division between biological sexes, a cerebral-hemisphere correspondence, or literal lunar and solar mechanisms. It is a functional classification. Several capacities necessarily participate in both orientations, and their boundaries remain provisional.

The proposed classification

No.	Inward regulation	No.	Outward agency
1	Emotional calming	17	Postural stability
2	Self-soothing	18	Spatial orientation
3	Emotional openness	19	Boundary awareness
4	Emotional processing	20	Grounded movement
5	Respiratory flexibility	21	Action initiation
6	Physiological settling	22	Sustained effort
7	Rest and sleep regulation	23	Response inhibition
8	Visceral awareness and regulation	24	Action completion
9	Present-moment awareness	25	Naming experience
10	Memory integration	26	Cognitive organization
11	Flexible future simulation	27	Abstract reasoning

No.	Inward regulation	No.	Outward agency
12	Meaning-making	28	Effective communication
13	Identity continuity	29	Appropriate assertion
14	Self-trust	30	Boundary enforcement
15	Inner permission and acceptance	31	Social-role flexibility
16	Existential grounding	32	Cooperative engagement

These are proposed domains of psychological functioning, not thirty-two established neurological mechanisms. They were selected to encompass important aspects of bodily regulation, emotion, cognition, identity, agency, and social life. Their usefulness depends upon whether they can eventually be defined, measured, and applied reliably.

Eight functional clusters

For conceptual organization and preliminary assessment, the thirty-two functions can be arranged into eight clusters.

Inward cluster	Functions
Affective regulation	1–4
Physiological regulation	5–8
Awareness, memory, and imagination	9–12
Self-continuity	13–16

Outward cluster	Functions
Embodied orientation	17–20
Action regulation	21–24
Cognitive and expressive agency	25–28
Social agency	29–32

The grouping is intended to make the framework manageable, not to establish that each cluster contains four empirically independent mechanisms.

Some functions, including sleep regulation, physiological settling, and memory integration, describe complex processes rather than simple abilities under voluntary control. Future clinical

definitions would need to distinguish subjective experience, observable behaviour, learned skill, and physiological outcome.

The relationships among functional clusters

The proposed functions are not intended to operate as thirty-two isolated capacities. Their systemic relationships are central to the model.

Affective regulation and physiological regulation influence one another. Emotional arousal can alter breathing, muscular tension, sleep, and visceral experience. Physiological conditions can, in turn, influence emotional reactivity and the ability to remain receptive to experience.

These processes affect awareness, memory, and imagination. Heightened threat responses may narrow attention, intensify the anticipation of danger, or influence the interpretation of remembered events. The resulting experiences may influence self-continuity, including self-trust, identity coherence, and the capacity to accept uncertainty or imperfection.

Self-continuity, in turn, can affect outward agency. Someone who experiences persistent self-doubt may struggle to initiate action or establish boundaries, even when the necessary practical skills are present.

Embodied orientation provides another connection. Postural stability, spatial orientation, boundary awareness, and grounded movement contribute to the person's practical relationship with the environment. These capacities support action regulation, including initiation, sustained effort, inhibition, and completion.

Cognitive and expressive agency permits experience to be named, organized, reasoned about, and communicated. Social agency then extends these processes into assertion, boundary enforcement, role flexibility, and cooperation.

These relationships are reciprocal rather than strictly sequential. Successful action may strengthen self-trust. Effective communication may reduce emotional distress. Supportive social engagement may improve physiological regulation. Conversely, unresolved bodily threat may interfere with cognition and interpersonal functioning.

The eight clusters therefore describe distinguishable areas within a network of mutually influencing processes. This relational understanding is more important than the exact number of functions assigned to each cluster.

Coordination rather than isolated competence

A person may recognize anger yet remain unable to establish an appropriate boundary. Another may demonstrate exceptional productivity while remaining largely unaware of exhaustion. Someone else may understand the origins of a traumatic response but struggle to change it when activated.

Such difficulties cannot always be explained by the absence of an individual capacity. Effective boundary enforcement, for example, may require emotional recognition, bodily awareness, self-trust, response inhibition, communication, and purposeful action.

The proposed model therefore considers both individual capacities and the relationships through which they become effective. Its unit of analysis is not simply what the person can do, but how the relevant functions cooperate.

7. From dysfunction to integration

The thirty-two functions constitute the proposed functional architecture. Availability, integration, and identification describe dimensions of their operation.

These dimensions are not additional psychological states, nor do they constitute a mandatory sequence through which every function must pass. A person may possess a highly accessible capacity that remains poorly integrated and strongly associated with self-image. Another capacity may be less developed but employed without defensive attachment.

Three expressions of a capacity

Expression	Characteristic
Under-accessible	The capacity is difficult to employ when needed
Defensively organized	The capacity is used rigidly, excessively, or to maintain psychological security
Flexibly integrated	The capacity is available and can be moderated according to circumstances

Consider future simulation. One individual may struggle to imagine possibilities or formulate plans. Another may anticipate threats incessantly, attempting to overcome uncertainty through exhaustive rehearsal. A third may plan effectively while remaining engaged with present experience.

The same broad capacity is involved, but its organization differs. Assertion may likewise be inhibited, excessively aggressive, or proportionate to the situation. Treatment may therefore require strengthening a capacity, moderating its habitual expression, or reducing the identification associated with its use.

Defensive functional inversion

A psychological ability can become an instrument of its own restriction. Planning may be used to escape uncertainty. Emotional control may prevent vulnerability. Intellectual analysis may substitute for direct emotional experience.

The capacity remains active, sometimes exceptionally so, but its operation becomes restricted by a defensive purpose. The proposed term *defensive functional inversion* describes this recruitment of an adaptive capacity into a rigid self-protective pattern. The objective of therapy would be to restore its wider usefulness rather than suppress it.

This resembles, at a conceptual level, the Vajrayāna distinction between afflictive expression and wisdom.

A more distant symbolic comparison appears in Kabbalistic accounts of the sefirot and qlippot. In later Kabbalistic traditions, the qlippot are associated with shells, impurity, and the concealment or distortion of divine vitality. These religious concepts are not psychological categories. Nevertheless, the image of a shell offers a metaphor for a capacity constrained by defensive organization.

Functional development and self-identification

A person may improve the effectiveness of a capacity without substantially changing the self-conception that motivates it. Someone who is highly conscientious might learn to plan more efficiently while remaining convinced that personal worth depends upon flawless preparation.

The functional problem has improved, but the underlying identification persists. Conversely, a person may develop insight into the contingent nature of identity while continuing to experience practical difficulties with organization, communication, or emotional regulation.

A complete formulation must therefore consider the accessibility of a capacity, its contextual flexibility, its relationship to other functions, the motives governing its use, and the degree of identification associated with it.

Differentiation, individuation, and integration

The model distinguishes three broad developmental orientations.

Differentiation concerns the acquisition and stabilization of psychological capacities. When emotional recognition, bodily awareness, self-soothing, boundary formation, or purposeful action are difficult to access, therapeutic work may emphasize developing these abilities.

Differentiation allows experience to become more precisely recognized and responded to. For example, a person who initially experiences anxiety as a single overwhelming condition may gradually distinguish bodily tension, anticipated danger, self-critical thought, and the impulse to avoid action. This differentiation creates possibilities for response that were previously unavailable.

Individuation concerns the consolidation of a coherent functional self. As capacities develop, the individual becomes increasingly able to organize experience through a stable personal identity. This supports autonomy, responsibility, planning, continuity, and participation in social life.

Such development is psychologically important. Without sufficient continuity and agency, the person may struggle to maintain relationships, pursue objectives, or regulate experience. Yet individuation also creates opportunities for defensive identification.

The individual may become attached to being competent, independent, intelligent, emotionally controlled, morally correct, or spiritually accomplished. Capacities that initially supported autonomy may then become instruments for preserving a particular self-representation.

For example, someone whose identity depends upon intellectual competence may experience ordinary uncertainty as a threat to personal worth. Analytical thought may become compulsive, not because reasoning is inherently problematic, but because its exercise has acquired an identity-protective function. At this point, further development of reasoning alone may not address the difficulty.

Integration concerns the possibility that psychological capacities remain available without serving as compulsory foundations of identity. The individual can think without becoming entirely absorbed in thought, experience emotion without constructing a fixed identity around it, and act decisively without requiring the action to establish personal worth.

The significance of this orientation is that it does not require the abandonment of capacities acquired through differentiation and individuation. Memory, judgment, self-trust, planning, communication, and agency remain available. What changes is the degree of attachment to their operation and the extent to which they are recruited into maintaining a rigid self-conception.

The progression is not necessarily linear. Different capacities may develop unevenly, and a person may demonstrate substantial contemplative insight while retaining psychological vulnerabilities. Conversely, someone may possess excellent psychological integration without subscribing to Buddhist metaphysics. The three orientations therefore describe related aspects of development rather than universal stages.

Psychological integration and Buddhist non-self

The Buddhist doctrine of non-self adds a further distinction. Psychological integration may reduce rigid identification with particular abilities or roles. Buddhist contemplative realization, however, concerns a deeper understanding of the dependent and empty nature of phenomena.

Reduced defensiveness is not identical to realization of emptiness. Nevertheless, the two concerns may be related. A person who no longer depends upon maintaining a particular self-image may find it easier to observe experience without compulsively appropriating it. Conversely, contemplative insight into the contingent nature of self may reduce the defensive organization of psychological capacities.

Neither relationship is guaranteed. The model therefore treats psychological integration and contemplative realization as potentially complementary but distinct forms of development.

Non-attachment and pathological detachment

The distinction between contemplative realization and psychological dysfunction is particularly important. Reduced self-reference may accompany contemplative insight, but disturbances of self-experience also occur in depersonalization, dissociation, emotional numbing, and other conditions.

The report that one's ordinary sense of self has diminished does not establish spiritual realization.

Dimension	Contemplative non-attachment	Pathological detachment or dissociation
Attention	May become more flexible and responsive	May become involuntarily disrupted or narrowed
Emotion	Feelings remain accessible without compulsory identification	Feelings may become inaccessible, numbed, or alien
Agency	Effective action can remain available	Action and continuity may become impaired
Self-experience	Reduced insistence upon a fixed self	Possible alienation from self, body, or experience
Relationships	Potentially greater responsiveness and compassion	Possible withdrawal, disconnection, or impairment

These comparisons describe possible tendencies, not diagnostic criteria. Dissociative experiences are heterogeneous, and contemplative practices can sometimes produce destabilizing experiences.

The central distinction is between losing access to a capacity and becoming free from compulsive identification with it. Inability to plan because of cognitive impairment is not liberation from attachment to the future. Emotional numbing is not necessarily equanimity. The disappearance of ordinary self-referential thought does not, by itself, establish insight into emptiness.

A clinically responsible model must preserve these distinctions.

Part IV — Therapeutic Application and Evaluation

8. An integrative approach to psychotherapy

The proposed clinical approach begins by examining how a person accesses, organizes, and moves among psychological capacities. Assessment would consider whether a capacity can be engaged when needed, whether its operation is flexible, whether it becomes excessive, and whether it can be relinquished when circumstances change.

Someone may be exceptionally capable of analytical thought yet find it difficult to stop analyzing when distressed. In that case, the difficulty may not be insufficient reasoning ability. It may be the habitual use of reasoning to avoid emotional uncertainty.

Treatment could focus on recognizing the urge to analyze, allowing manageable emotional experience, and choosing when reasoning is genuinely useful.

The governing therapeutic principle is to develop capacities that are difficult to access, moderate capacities recruited into rigid defensive patterns, and improve the transitions through which capacities cooperate.

Three interacting mechanisms of change

The proposed therapeutic mechanism comprises three related processes.

Differentiation involves recognizing psychological processes that previously seemed inseparable. Bodily tension, anxious anticipation, and compulsive planning, for example, may initially be experienced as one condition. Learning to distinguish them creates new possibilities for response.

Reciprocal coordination involves moving among psychological functions without allowing one to dominate. Emotional acknowledgment, bodily settling, reasoning, and purposeful action become available as complementary responses rather than competing strategies.

De-identification involves reducing the extent to which a psychological process defines the person. Anxiety may be recognized as an occurring experience rather than proof of an anxious identity. A mistake may be acknowledged without becoming evidence of personal worthlessness.

These processes may reinforce one another. Differentiation can facilitate coordination. Improved coordination may reduce defensive reliance upon a single capacity. Reduced identification may permit still greater flexibility.

This proposed interaction is a central hypothesis of the model. It has not been established experimentally. Its explanatory value would depend upon whether it predicts clinical outcomes beyond existing constructs such as psychological flexibility, emotion regulation, and cognitive defusion.

Circulation training

The practical application emphasizes transitions between inward experience and outward response.

Consider someone who becomes immobilized during interpersonal conflict. A therapist might help the person notice bodily sensations, recognize the accompanying emotion, identify the relevant need, practise an appropriate verbal response, and observe the consequences of acting. Attention then returns to immediate experience rather than remaining absorbed in anticipation or self-judgment.

The process can be summarized as a recurring cycle:

Stage	Purpose
1. Recognize	Notice the current bodily, emotional, and cognitive condition

Stage	Purpose
2. Regulate	Establish sufficient stability and flexibility for an appropriate response
3. Act	Engage a manageable outward capacity suited to the circumstances
4. Integrate	Observe consequences, revise understanding, and return to awareness

The cycle is repeated according to need, not as a rigid procedure.

The purpose is not to maintain permanent calm before acting. It is to develop greater flexibility in moving among emotion, cognition, bodily experience, and behaviour.

Repeated practice might strengthen confidence in that flexibility. The procedure overlaps with behavioural activation, exposure, mindfulness, skills training, and acceptance-based interventions. Its proposed contribution is the explicit organization of these transitions within a broader classification of psychological capacities.

Clinical illustration: competence and anxiety

Consider a fictional individual who is intelligent, conscientious, and professionally successful but experiences persistent anxiety, excessive planning, and difficulty tolerating uncertainty.

Analytical reasoning is highly developed. Nevertheless, it has become the person's principal means of managing emotional discomfort. Possible adverse outcomes are repeatedly considered, decisions are revisited, and action is postponed until an unattainable degree of certainty seems available.

The proposed model might describe the pattern as follows:

Function	Hypothesized difficulty
6. Physiological settling	Persistent tension and difficulty relaxing
11. Future simulation	Excessive anticipation of possible problems
14. Self-trust	Difficulty trusting decisions without exhaustive reasoning
15. Inner permission	Difficulty accepting uncertainty and imperfection
21. Action initiation	Delays associated with the need for certainty
26. Cognitive organization	Compulsive analysis used to restore a sense of control

The problem is not that planning or reasoning exists. These capacities have become organized around avoiding uncertainty and preserving an identity founded upon competence.

Treatment could begin by differentiating bodily anxiety, future-oriented anticipation, and the urge to analyze. The individual might practise tolerating manageable uncertainty, making proportionate decisions, and acting without exhaustive preparation. Afterward, attention could return to bodily experience and the actual consequences of the decision.

Over time, such practice might reduce dependence upon analysis as the exclusive means of obtaining psychological security. Further work could address the conviction that personal worth depends upon always being intelligent, prepared, or correct.

The therapeutic objective would then encompass both more flexible decision-making and reduced identification with the role of the competent individual.

Comparable interventions already exist within cognitive-behavioural and acceptance-based therapies. The proposed model would therefore need to demonstrate additional explanatory or clinical value rather than merely provide new terminology for familiar techniques.

Trauma-related difficulties

Trauma provides a potentially important application because psychological capacities can be affected unevenly. A person may retain considerable intellectual understanding while experiencing persistent physiological threat, emotional numbing, disrupted self-continuity, or difficulty with interpersonal agency.

Some processes may become excessively active, such as threat anticipation. Others may become difficult to access, such as assertion, emotional awareness, or action initiation.

The model would interpret these patterns as hypotheses about functional organization rather than literal absences of neurological capacities.

One patient might benefit from bodily orientation and emotional stabilization. Another might require greater emphasis on avoidance and restricted behavioural engagement. A third might struggle primarily with excessive control and analytical thinking.

No fixed treatment sequence follows from the numbering of the functions. The framework should not be used to delay evidence-based trauma-focused treatment until an arbitrary series of preliminary capacities has been mastered.

Research on phase-based approaches for complex post-traumatic stress disorder has found benefits in some contexts, but the necessity and superiority of fixed phase-based treatment remain debated. The proposed model is therefore best regarded as a possible adjunct to established clinical formulation and treatment, not a replacement for evidence-based care.

9. Assessment, validation, and limitations

The model is intended to assist clinical formulation rather than establish new psychiatric diagnoses. Its preliminary SRM-32-R questionnaire attempts to explore functional availability, compensatory behaviour, defensive overuse, and flexibility across the thirty-two capacities.

The eight thematic groups correspond to the eight functional clusters described earlier. Multiple-response questions are intended to capture different ways a capacity may operate.

Simply asking whether someone frequently plans, for example, cannot distinguish constructive anticipation from compulsive worry. Likewise, someone who rarely asserts personal needs may lack the necessary communication skills, become inhibited under particular conditions, or habitually prioritize another person's needs.

The behaviour alone does not establish its underlying organization.

Interpreting apparently absent capacities

A person may report little awareness of a capacity for several reasons. The function may genuinely be difficult to employ. It may become inaccessible under stress. Another process may habitually substitute for it. Alternatively, the person may lack the language needed to recognize the experience.

A questionnaire cannot reliably distinguish these possibilities merely from the absence of an endorsement.

Someone who responds to distress through intellectual analysis may report little emotional awareness. That does not establish that emotional capacities are absent. They may become inaccessible in certain circumstances or be rapidly displaced by analytical activity.

Clinical investigation would need to examine when emotional awareness becomes available, what happens when it is uncomfortable, and whether the person can remain engaged with emotion without immediately substituting another strategy.

The questionnaire should consequently be treated as a source of hypotheses. A credible assessment would combine self-report with clinical interview, behavioural observation, established symptom measures, and repeated observations across contexts.

Selecting therapeutic priorities

The model does not require every patient to master the sixteen inward functions before developing outward agency. Priorities depend upon clinical circumstances, safety, symptom severity, functional impairment, and the patient's goals.

Someone experiencing severe emotional dysregulation may require stabilization. Another person whose main difficulty is avoidance may benefit from behavioural engagement or graded exposure. A person with strong practical capacities but persistent self-criticism may benefit from addressing perfectionism and defensive identification.

These priorities are not mutually exclusive. Action can improve internal regulation, while bodily awareness can support more effective action. Successful interpersonal engagement may itself reduce anxiety.

The model's emphasis on reciprocity is intended to accommodate such relationships.

Research requirements

For the framework to progress beyond theoretical synthesis, it must generate predictions that can be tested. Four areas of investigation are particularly important.

Construct validity. Researchers would need to determine whether the thirty-two proposed capacities are meaningfully distinguishable. Clear definitions, carefully designed assessment items, and statistical investigation might reveal that some functions overlap substantially or require consolidation.

Assessment reliability. A clinical instrument would need to distinguish accessibility, rigidity, defensive overuse, and flexibility with acceptable reliability. Relevant tests would include test–retest consistency, agreement with independent observations, convergent and discriminant validity, and sensitivity to change. Defensive motivation is especially difficult to infer reliably from self-report.

Mechanism testing. Research would need to establish whether improvements in reciprocal coordination predict clinical outcomes beyond improvements in individual capacities. For example, flexible transitions among emotional awareness, cognitive organization, and action might be examined in relation to anxiety, avoidance, and functioning.

Clinical comparison. The model's practical value could be tested by comparing established treatment delivered conventionally with the same treatment supplemented by thirty-two-function assessment and circulation training.

Outcomes could include symptoms, functioning, psychological flexibility, quality of life, and the durability of improvement. The additional framework would need to demonstrate benefits sufficient to justify its complexity.

Conditions requiring revision

The model must remain open to disconfirmation. If its thirty-two capacities cannot be distinguished reliably, the classification would require revision. If reciprocal coordination offers no explanatory value beyond established psychological constructs, its proposed mechanism would be weakened.

If the framework does not improve treatment formulation or clinical outcomes, its therapeutic usefulness would remain unsubstantiated.

Such findings would not invalidate the broader philosophical questions from which the model arose. They would help determine which aspects are empirically useful and which remain symbolic or interpretive.

10. Wider parallels and concluding synthesis

Sixteenfold and thirty-twofold classifications occur in several spiritual traditions, inviting comparison without establishing a shared historical origin.

The Kabbalistic *Sefer Yetzirah* describes thirty-two paths of wisdom formed through ten sefirot and twenty-two Hebrew letters. This differs from a sixteen-plus-sixteen psychological division, although both employ differentiated principles within a larger structure.

Daoist traditions involving internal spirits and the refinement of *qi* provide another comparison. Their understanding of the body as a dynamically organized field has certain structural similarities with personified psychophysical systems in Buddhist Tantra.

West African Ifá divination employs sixteen principal Odù and their combinations. Its concern with interpreting human circumstances and identifying appropriate responses offers a functional analogy, but the Odù are not psychological faculties.

Egyptian accounts of the dismemberment and restoration of Osiris offer a symbolic parallel involving fragmentation, reconstitution, and renewed wholeness.

The differences among these systems are substantial. Kabbalistic thirty-twofold symbolism arises from ten and twenty-two, not two groups of sixteen. The sixteen principal Odù generate 256 combinations. Buddhist mandalas employ varied numerical and symbolic arrangements.

There is insufficient evidence for a universal thirty-twofold psychophysical classification inherited from a single ancient source.

The more cautious observation is that differentiation, transformation, polarity, and reintegration recur as themes in human attempts to understand consciousness and existence. The present model draws upon this general architecture without asserting historical identity.

Psychological maturity and the integration of capacities

The proposed model does not claim to have discovered thirty-two fundamental neurological states. Its central concern is the relationship among functional availability, reciprocal integration, and identification.

These distinctions permit different interpretations of outwardly similar behaviour. A person unable to establish boundaries may need to develop assertiveness. Someone who asserts boundaries compulsively may need to moderate defensive activation. A person who asserts appropriately but depends upon appearing strong may benefit from loosening identification with that self-image.

The outward behaviour may appear similar, yet the underlying developmental task differs.

Psychological completeness, on this account, does not require every capacity to remain maximally active. Nor does it consist in maintaining permanent calm, positivity, or control. It involves differentiated capacities remaining available within a flexible and coherent whole.

The *kalā* traditions provide a symbolic image of differentiated powers participating in unity. Buddhist dependent origination and emptiness offer a different philosophical account in which effective functioning does not require an independently existing self.

The resulting therapeutic conception is neither the inflation nor the destruction of ego. It is the development of a sufficiently coherent and adaptable person who need not continually defend a rigid conception of self through the exercise of particular capacities.

The relationship between therapy and contemplation

Psychotherapy generally seeks to reduce suffering, improve functioning, and cultivate adaptive capacities. Buddhist contemplative traditions may include these objectives, but place them within the wider aim of liberation from ignorance and attachment.

The two forms of development may support one another. Emotional stability can facilitate sustained contemplation. Greater awareness of self-grasping may reduce defensive reliance upon particular psychological abilities.

Yet neither achievement guarantees the other. A psychologically capable individual may remain strongly attached to identity. A contemplative practitioner may continue to experience emotional, interpersonal, or practical difficulties requiring ordinary psychological attention.

The distinction between functional competence and freedom from identification is therefore relevant to both domains. In psychotherapy, it helps explain why effective skills may sometimes become instruments of avoidance or self-protection. In contemplative practice, it helps distinguish the development of stable conventional capacities from the insight through which those capacities cease to be appropriated as an independently existing self.

The two concerns need not be opposed. Psychological development can strengthen the capacities through which an individual participates in the world, while contemplative development can alter the relationship through which those capacities are experienced as belonging to a fixed identity.

Their relationship is not necessarily sequential, nor does one automatically produce the other. They may instead represent complementary aspects of human development whose interaction varies among individuals.

Conclusion

The sixteen *kalās* provide an ancient account of differentiated powers arising within, and returning to, a more encompassing unity. Vajrayāna offers a distinct contemplative understanding in which ordinary emotional and embodied processes can become the basis for wisdom.

The Thirty-Two-Function Integrative Model brings these themes into conversation with contemporary psychology. Its sixteen inward and sixteen outward functions provide a provisional classification of capacities. Its three developmental dimensions distinguish availability, reciprocal

coordination, and identification. Its concept of defensive functional inversion describes how an otherwise useful capacity may become organized around avoidance or the protection of self-image.

The model further proposes that differentiation, coordination, and de-identification may operate as mutually influencing processes of therapeutic change.

These propositions remain hypothetical. The numerical classification, assessment procedures, proposed mechanisms, and clinical effectiveness require systematic investigation. The framework should complement rather than replace validated therapeutic approaches.

The broader conceptual distinction is between cultivating psychological capacities and becoming less dependent upon identifying with their exercise.

These are not necessarily competing objectives. A capacity may become more effective as its use becomes less compulsive. A coherent personal identity may continue to support responsibility and purposeful action without being regarded as an independently existing self.

From this perspective, psychological development encompasses both the differentiation of human abilities and their participation in a flexible, integrated system. Buddhist contemplative psychology introduces the further possibility that such functioning can occur with progressively less attachment to the processes through which personal identity is constructed.

The proposed model treats these as related but distinguishable dimensions of human development.

Selected references and further reading

The following works provide historical foundations, scholarly interpretation, and relevant clinical context. They do not establish the validity of the proposed thirty-two-function classification.

Indic and Buddhist foundations

Praśna Upaniṣad, Sixth Question, especially 6.2–6.5. Primary source for the sixteen constituent powers of Puruṣa and their reabsorption.

Vasubandhu. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. Translated by Leo M. Pruden as *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. Asian Humanities Press, 1988–1990. Relevant to Buddhist analysis of conditioned experience, mental factors, afflictions, and the path.

Tsongkhapa. *The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*. Translated by Jeffrey Hopkins. Snow Lion, 1987. For the philosophical and practical organization of Tibetan tantric practice.

Daniel Cozort. *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet*. Snow Lion, 1986. Discusses generation-stage and completion-stage practice.

"Bodies of Knowledge: Bodily Perfection in Tantric Buddhist Practice." *Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021). Relevant to body mandalas, deity visualization, and subtle-body practice. Complete bibliographic information requires verification before formal publication.

Psychotherapy and clinical research

Steven C. Hayes, Kirk D. Strosahl, and Kelly G. Wilson. *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change*. 2nd ed. Guilford Press, 2012. For psychological flexibility, acceptance, and cognitive defusion.

Marsha M. Linehan. *DBT Skills Training Manual*. 2nd ed. Guilford Press, 2015. For emotion regulation, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, and mindfulness.

"Phase-based psychological interventions for complex post-traumatic stress disorder: A systematic review." *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports* 14 (2023). Bibliographic details and findings require independent verification before formal citation.

American Psychological Association. *Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Adults*. The current official edition should be consulted for evidence-based treatment recommendations.

Comparative metaphysics

Sefer Yetzirah (*Book of Formation*). Relevant to the thirty-two paths, ten sefirot, and twenty-two Hebrew letters.

Isabelle Robinet. *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-shan Tradition of Great Purity*. State University of New York Press, 1993. For Daoist internal visualization and body spirits.

Status of the proposal: The Thirty-Two-Function Integrative Model is an original theoretical synthesis, not a recognized Buddhist classification, validated clinical assessment, or established neurophysiological taxonomy. Its present significance lies in generating testable hypotheses concerning psychological flexibility, defensive identification, and the coordination of human capacities.