



A Buddhist Concept of Mind and its Location

Phra Sujan Maharjan (Sujano)

Varapunya Meditation Centre, Aberdeen, Scotland

Corresponding Author, Email: Sujanbhante@gmail.com

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Abstract

“What is mind and where is it located?” Whilst the question is rather simple in form, to answer it begs a profundity and insightfulness, which was immensely wide yet simple. It is therefore a breath-taking and daunting task to answer, which has been philosophically debated in the East and West for centuries. The philosophical and spiritual value of the question may have been deep or quintessential, it would not be possible to illustrate and explore this deep and fundamental aspects here, but rather intends to closer look and understand the concept of the mind and its location in Buddhism, including some western thought on the concept of mind, which is one of the important factors for the cultivation of mind until to achieve liberation.

Keywords: Mind; Consciousness; Citta; Buddhism

Introduction

Ancient Greek classical philosophers like Plato (348/347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC) both shared a dualistic view of the mind/body relationship. They saw the mind and the body as being fundamentally different. The body, which includes the brain, is composed of physical elements, whereas the mind is composed of a non-physical ‘matter’ which is governed by ‘psychic’ principles. These ‘psychic principles’ pointed to the existence of a soul, this being the preserve of ‘God’.

Plato saw the body and its senses as inferior to the mind. The mind, according to him, is rational and can lead to truth, (www.thestargarden.co.uk). Aristotle describes a mind (nous, often also rendered as ‘intellect’ or ‘reason’) as ‘the part of the soul by which it knows and understands’. He also describes it later as ‘deathless and everlasting’ (<http://plato.stanford.edu/Aristotle>).

The age of Enlightenment also known as the age of reason was an intellectual and philosophical movement that occurred in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. During that period, deductive reason and scientific thought was pitted



against religious doctrine and faith. In this interception, the concept of mind, its location and functionality also had been widely outspoken for, such as Rene Descartes, and against such as Thomas Hobbes.

An English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (17th Century) although famous for political philosophy, a materialist and empiricist thinker questions about the existence of mind that we can only have an idea of physical things. Therefore, he believes that we cannot become aware of the presence of the mind/soul (SEP. T. 2023). We simply rationally infer that there is something within the human body, and we call this 'something' a soul. We have no idea of a soul.

Descartes on the other hand believed that the mind/soul maybe be that the only thing we can be aware of. He was a physicist, mathematician, and devout Christian and yet tried to define the mind utilizing scientific and rational thought. Nevertheless, like Plato and Aristotle, he was also held a dualistic conception of the mind/body relationship (SEP. R. 2023).

According to Descartes, the body is a mechanical structure or a 'machine' which operates according to the scientific laws of biology, chemistry, and physics. Conversely, in *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes identified that the mind differs from the physical world in the following ways (Descartes, 1996.14, 23, 26):

- The mind experiences sensations that cannot be explained mechanically.
- The mind does not exist in physical space like the brain does.
- The mind is a necessary whole, it cannot be divided or replicated in the same way that a physical object can.

Descartes doubts the existence of the material world in the second meditation whereas the existence of the mind can be observed and also refrained that mind is distinct from the body. He believed that the mind is at work even during sleep (Rene, 1996. 27). It was a great swift and also challenge to the religious authority at that time. Further, he was the first person in Western philosophy to delineate a clear distinction between mind and body. Similarly, Scottish born enlightenment thinker David Hume rejected any idea of a 'substance of the mind', that would account for, among other things, personal identity (Pitson, 2000).

In agreement with Plato and Aristotle it appears that Descartes explains the mind as corporal ghostly entity which resided in the body, the soul. Thus, Descartes viewed the mind body relationship as '*the ghost in the machine*' because God has created it (SEP. R. 2023). It seemed that Descartes tried to reconcile the world of science and religion through employing a systematic method of methodical doubt, (a 'meditation on doubt'). Descartes began his 'meditations' by systematically doubting



the existence of all external phenomena: the world, nature etc. which he found philosophically tenable to do then went on to doubt the existence of all internal phenomena, including self and mind. Descartes concluded that since he was using thought to doubt, thought was therefore indubitable (beyond doubt). He concluded therefore that since thought existed, self-existed (Descartes,1996).

Another philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) was an agnostic who believes something exists out there, but its real nature is inconceivable to us (Han Kyul Kim, 2008) that made a complete break-away from the ‘inclusive’ dualistic mind-body concept advancing that the mind is not a ‘divinely bestowed-furnishing’. The idea of mind he refers to the set of typical features attributed to it, called ‘nominal essence’ (Han, 2008.442). John Locke concludes that ‘thinking is the action, and not the essence of the soul and neither something that is physically constituted (Han,2008).

A Concept of Mind in Buddhism

Buddhist thoughts on the concept of the mind and its location exclusively based on the teaching of the Buddha who ever lived in 6th century BC. His entire teaching is concentrated to understand the nature of mind, its existence and being free, attainment of nonexistence and unconditioned state. So, one entire large section of Buddhist scripture, *Abhidhamma*, is dedicated explaining meticulously the existence of mind and its function.

These words *citta*, *ceta*, *cittuppada*, *mana*, *mano*, *viññāna* and *hadaya* are commonly used as a synonymous term for consciousness or mind in Buddhism (Mehm Tin Mon, 2002). The word consciousness and mind which occurs distinct to one another as in Buddhist terms above are often intertwining modes - as active process and as passive flow that may have different roots yet often used interchangeably and collectively. Bhikkhu Bodhi therefore defines *citta* as consciousness or mind (2012).

Abhidhamma, one of the three main Buddhist scriptures presents analysis of mind/consciousness and classifies into variety of types, specifies that factors and functions of each type etc (Bodhi, 2012.4). It appears from the *Abhidhamma* point that mind is a compounded factor of at least two, *citta* which is widely translated as consciousness and *cetasikas* which is translated as mental factors, that arises moment by moment dependent on conditions. The holistic compound concept is a ‘mind’ (Bodhi, 2012; Silananda, 2012).

In Buddhism it indicates that mind is not defined as an object nor part of the body that is impossible to describe like a chair or book or denial of its existence.



When we start to think we know what mind is, it becomes an object, and we will never be able to know what it is. Instead, mind is the subject that perceives objects, or the moment when we become conscious of the object there emerges a mind. Mind, according to Buddhism therefore defined in three ways, an agent, that cognizes an object, an instrument that by means of which the accompanying mental factors cognize the object, and an activity that is a process of cognizing the object (Bodhi, 2012).

Furthermore, Buddhist concept of a mind analyzed in four devices: characteristic, function, manifestation and proximate. The characteristic of a mind is to know the object, function is to be a forerunner. Its manifestation is a continuation of process and mind-matter is its proximate cause (Bodhi, 2012).

Factors of mind

The most fundamental view that opposed to many eastern thoughts as well as Western concept of self that there is not a permanent self or ego, an individual permanent existence which is belong to the concept of 'atta' doctrine rather in Buddhism mind is described as an agent or an instrument of cognition (Bodhi, 2012; Jayatilleke, 2010). Doctrine of atta in Buddhism is known to be based on Wrong Understand. Instead, Buddhism explains that self is an accumulation of aggregates and elements which make up psycho-physical phenomena known as mind and body respectively.

The body, according to Buddhism, the first aggregate of the five is made of four basic elements: earth, water, fire, and air (wind). These elements are material and are not conscious, which is the reason that the physical body does not have the ability to feel, nor to think or to know. It is a mindless object, a matter (Rewata, 2004). The mind on the other hand consists of four remaining aggregates, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. As such, the mind has an ability to feel, perceive, think, and know.

Buddhism explains the compound of these four aggregates is a mind. The initial three aggregates, feeling, perception, and volition are regarded as mental factors which arise when a moment of mind arises. The last factor, consciousness, is the arising of a mind moment by moment. A moment of mind always arises with any one of the mental factors. However, a mental factor cannot function independently of consciousness nor consciousness alone.

The mind, therefore, can be defined as the awareness of an object, which always associated with either of those three initial components. The awareness of an



object can be divided into two ways: ‘cognition through five sense doors’, and ‘cognition through the mental door’. Cognition through the five sense doors exists when objects enter through the five sense doors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. Cognition through the mental door occurs when recognition of the object that conditions to create ideas, imagination, and memories are done by the mind.

Cognition through five sense doors

It is important to understand how mind functions and what are the factors that activates it. Cognition through five sense doors help to understand it better. There are five senses eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. Anything that is being experienced by a sense will be recognized and that is the arising moment of consciousness, it is the moment of vibrating the subconscious state of mind, which is similar to waking someone up. Once awoken they will start to toss and turn, which consciousness will turn to a sense object (*avajjana*), from sleep mode to awaken and adverting to the object.

Awareness of object becomes clear with the appropriate sense consciousness that works as the bridge. Initially there is a moment of reception and investigation of the visual object. Once the object has been investigated it will be cognized, that is known as determining consciousness. The cognized consciousness is defined as arising of active consciousness that supports for the performing of further activities. Any action that is being carried through physical body, verbal speech or mental thought out that are often based on personal perception or memory of the cognized object. Such as when the eye door comes into contact with a visual object, visual consciousness arises. Eye is a material form that does not have ability to feel or to know so does the visible object. It is only possible when consciousness is there to bridge between object and consciousness.

It is essential to recognized that the subconsciousness is regarded as a state of mind which is static and vacant. It is a passive state of mind like a water current in the river. It is a state which is non-responsive to any object, (like a sleeping person). It is also presented as a primary form of mind, which is flowing since the conception to the death except when interrupted by a stimulus through any one of a sense door. It is a mind-state that has all necessary features of consciousness but otherwise is blank that occurs in between all other mind-state and unconscious mind-state. Therefore, as soon as this passive state of mind is interrupted or disturbed by an object through one of the senses, it wakes a consciousness up and becomes conscious of the object, eventually either accepting or rejecting it. The process of



acceptance and rejection follows until there is active consciousness, *javana citta*. The active consciousness determines the performance of action through the physical body, verbal speech, or thinking. It is not black and white as per say but there are occasions when this active consciousness may remain indifferent to the object. Reaction to any object is driven by greed, hatred, and ignorance of the true nature of the object and the consciousness or the opposite. *Javana citta*, a technical term means running swiftly over the different objects in the act of apprehending it, which is the most important moment to define ethical standpoint. According to the Buddhism therefore, in the earlier phases the mind becomes aware of an object, the moment of subconsciousness wakes up, and in the active consciousness phase it actually reacting to the object.

Nature of mind

Buddhist philosophy explains that there is no single cause for any single events. Relatedly, conditioned created objects are subject to the nature of change. Mind is not exceptional to this natural process, that every action has series of process from the arising of the mind until it becomes an act. Hence, mind, in the Buddhist perception, appears and disappears every fraction of a split of a second rather than permanent existence or stationed substance.

The nature of mind is a continuous process of creating its activities, incessantly substituting the previous. This is similar to the creation of light. The continuous supply and substitution of electric current flow produces light. Electric current flow does not only produce light but can be heated and generate fire. Similarly, just as electric power can be used for different purposes, mind has similar natural characteristics and the capacity of mind can also be used for different objectives: wholesome, unwholesome, or indifferent states.

The concept of Mind is therefore a stream of consciousness that forms a thought process, (Jayatilleke, 2010. 54) like electricity, has enormous power, which is pure, clear, luminous, and bright (Darren Ashby, 2012. 1). The nature of mind is also delicate, gentle and can easily be defiled like a water polluted by mud and different colors, which is the main reason Buddhism emphasizes mindfulness meditation as a tool to understand, realize and keep mind safe as well as cultivate skillful ways to attain pristine purity, state of voidness.

Mindfulness meditation, therefore, essential part of the Buddha's teaching that incorporates entire teaching of the Buddha. It is the practice of mindfulness meditation that assist one to have a proper understanding regarding the existence of



the mind and how it functions. Further, mindfulness practice will help one to prevent from any negative resultant activities and uproots previously existed unconstructive behaviours as well as it does not only encourage one to cultivate positive resultant activities but also enforces to maintain, cultivate and development to its paramount, non-substantial state.

Classification of mind

Buddhist concept of mind does not stop at the creation and functions of it. Mind is further divided into two different classifications in Buddhism: mundane, and supra-mundane. Mundane mind is divided into three planes of experiences: The Sensuous sphere, The Form sphere, and The Formless sphere whereas supra-mundane is the complete freedom from continuation.

Furthermore, Buddhism explains further detail on different states of each mind that arises until the continue creation of the mind through action. There are three mind-states:

1. *Cittavithi*: once stimulus enters through senses, consciousness of the stimuli's and becomes active, launching into a through process.
2. *Cittakkhana*: this is a complete thought process, occurring through the physical senses, eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, which is made up of many thought moments.
3. *Kamma*: Once the object has been determined and cognized at the active consciousness it follows actions, which is the most important stage from the ethical standpoint and result of that action.

Buddhist scripture clearly explains that relying on active consciousness, one naturally performs either moral or immoral action. Moral action is driven by non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. Immoral action is driven by greed, hate and delusion/ignorance. Consequently, active consciousness influences the formation and existence of dependent arising in the cycle of becoming or liberation. Although moral or immoral are cause of becoming, moral actions if it is carried properly could lead to finding the right path and right practice, which guide one to the attainment of freedom. As a result of that positive outcome, thus we are encouraged to cultivate good wholesome deeds and avoid immoral activities that also assists to attain liberation, the state that ends process and existence of a mind.



Stream of the mind

The Buddha once described the nature of mind as a stream of continuity in the Numbered Discourses, the Chapter on a Spike that;

‘Mendicants, I do not see a single thing that’s as quick to change as the mind. So much so that it’s not easy to give a simile for how quickly the mind changes (Sujato, 2018.14).

Due to the rapidly changing process of the arising and falling of mental states, the mind is constantly changing. The nature of change occurs so quick that an untrained person would never perceive or be able to comprehend the changes. In the snap of a finger, it is believed that one trillion units of consciousness can arise and cease. In a simple sentence, it arises and perishes like a water flow in the river. Moment by moment it changes like a stream of water. Even Rene Descartes says, referring to his ‘*Cartesian*’ conception of mind and consciousness that ‘no one can jump in a same water twice’.

As Descartes approach, Abhidhamma scripture on conditionality to understand the actual process there are two conditions in the *Patthana* which illustrate how mental states are related and change: Proximity condition, and Contiguity Condition.

Proximity condition (*Anantara Paccayo*) explains the moment by moment arising and ceasing of mental states. The Buddha uses the simile of a prince being born, supplanting the king on the throne, then perishing. In a similar way, mental states and their concomitants are too. The proximity condition elucidates that a mind (*citta*) is predominantly sits on the throne. As soon as the first mind passes away into abeyance new one succeeds the place. The passing to succeeding mind is not forceful but voluntarily goes into abeyance and gives way to the new mind to succeed the throne, this condition is known as contiguity condition, a combining and association of different mental states. Together proximity and contiguity condition actually create the flow of consciousness, which is in a constant state of flux like electric power or current of water in the river.

If electric power is being used unwisely, it can bring disaster and could cause the ending of life. Likewise, Buddha explains that an untrained mind could bring such a disastrous result to individuals, making one miserable in this life and in following existences as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox. It is therefore essential to tame, train and cultivate the mind for beneficial results to arise that follows like a shadow. Furthermore, no one could do more harm than ill-directed mind and neither parents nor any relatives can do a greater good than one’s mind is well-directed (Buddharakkhita, 2003.31.). Therefore, it is a mind that defines better or



worse life that we have in this cycle of birth and death as well as liberation, empty of mind.

Discussion

Western and Buddhist correspond the idea that a mind is a compound and conditioned state, but its location and continuity claim different. Continuation of mind in the Western thought appeared to be will of spirit or the God that Buddhism disagrees and explains as a conditioned by many factors that it arises and ends as the factor's dissolves. It is a non-substantial object that only exist with the conditions.

Location of mind therefore would be hard to define or could be irrelevant to investigate effort to describe its location. Although there are growing interests over its location in western thought. Its location contradicted towards the permanent existence whereas it seems there is clear explanation about it in Buddhism. Buddhism clearly defines mind is formless, colourless yet lives in a cave and finally dissolves to nonexistence, unconditioned state. Cave defines a compound element of four main elements, and the heart element.

Despite its formless and colourless there are some Buddhist scholars who have attempted to locate mind at the heart, *hadaya*, which seems not plausible, heart element does not mean heart in a physiological form. On the conception moment, along with other factors; compound element of physical body and element of existence this heart element arises as a result of previous *kamma*. Mind simply exist with the conception of other factors but do not have a specific location that lies or stands.

Conclusion

A mind arises at the moment of senses coming to contact and able to be conscious of that object. In this context mind is not located on each sense nor at the consciousness but combination of these two and able to be conscious of it. In a nutshell the moment we recognise an object there arises a mind. Once it is realised that the mind is a continuation of process conditioned created and insubstantial object disenchantment and liberation achieved, the state of non-existence of the mind through mental development.



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