

# The Nature of the Mind

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## Levels of Mind

There's the demarcation of sentient beings and non-sentient beings and, concerning sentient beings and mental activity in our daily lives, there are also different levels. When we are awake, when we dream and when we're in deep sleep and then when we are unconscious – at each stage, there's a deeper level of mind. Then also even at the time of death when the process of dissolution [of the mind] continues after the breathing stops – at that period, there's yet another [even deeper] level of mind. We have no experience of what happens at the time of death, but we do know what the experience of being awake and dreaming and being in deep sleep are like.

## The Difference between Primary Minds and Mental Factors

According to ancient Indian tradition, the main [spiritual] practices always deal with mind, for instance with *samadhi*, absorbed concentration, and with the cultivation of *vipashyana*, an exceptionally perceptive state of mind. Both of these deal with the mind and with the thinking aspect and using the mind; therefore, it's very crucial to identify what is the mind.

There are many explanations of what the mind is and of the different categories of mind. For example, there's a difference made in Buddhism between primary minds and mental factors. In fact, you have this in all ancient Indian traditions.

Within the Buddhist tradition, there are several different interpretations [of the difference between primary minds and mental factors.] There are two main ones: one makes a distinction according to differences in the object of the mind and the other makes a distinction according to the essential nature of the mind. Maitreya, for example, in *Differentiating the Middle from the Extremes*, takes the first position. This first way of distinguishing is according to a difference in the object of the mind: primary mind is focused on an object as a whole, whereas the secondary minds or mental factors focus on distinguishing factors within objects. The second way makes the difference from the point of view of the side of the mind. With primary minds, objects are experienced by the mind as a whole and, concerning mental factors or secondary minds, here objects are experienced by specific aspects of the mind or functions of the mind.

Now, within both of these, the primary minds and the mental factors, we can speak of two broad categories: there are those that require physical sensors and those that do not. The ones that require physical sensors are sensory minds and those that do not require a physical sensor are the mental minds. Now our discussion gets closer to what the scientists are talking about. So, we have sensorial consciousness versus mental consciousness, although sometimes mind is used just to refer to mental consciousness.

Now as for mental consciousness, there are two types: one is brought forth by sensory perception as its immediately preceding condition and the other lacks sensory perception as its immediately preceding condition. In our texts, we also speak about five ever-functioning mental factors that are there with all minds, including sensorial minds. So, for example, we have distinguishing, feeling a level of happiness, and so forth. As for distinguishing, which means “is it this or is it that,” the scientists say that this doesn’t occur on the basis of visual sensors, but only in the brain. We say sensory cognition itself doesn’t think “something is this” or “something is that,” but sensory perception does have [the mental factor of] distinguishing with it, for instance light from dark.

## **Further Distinctions**

Now, within Buddhist thoughts and schools there are of course different opinions on this and different opinions concerning how perception works. According to the Vaibhashika position, for example, there is no mental aspect that is taken as a medium for perceiving something; whereas the Sautrantikas say there is an aspect, a mental aspect, and that is what is actually experienced. That second opinion is closer to the scientific view.

So in the Buddhist schools there is a lot of debate concerning the model of, for instance, how perception works: for example, visual perception. There’s discussion between the Sautrantika and the Chittamatra Schools whether, when we look at an object that has many colors, is there are an equal number of multiple aspects of the object and multiple aspects of the visual perception? Or are there multiple aspects of the object all perceived by a single aspect of visual perception? Or is there a single aspect of the entire multi-colored object perceived by a single aspect of visual perception? The explanation that, regardless of a multiplicity of colors, the mind perceives all of them as a whole seems to be closer to the scientific point of view.

As for emotions, there is no real equivalency of terms with science. Current scientists – for instance, Paul Eckman – say that it’s difficult to distinguish between emotion, mood, and traits. Scientists don’t base themselves on scriptural quotations of ancient texts, but on investigation. So it can be fruitful to

do further joint research: there would be immense benefit to both scientists and Buddhists.

As for objects, there are those that have physical qualities; there are those that are ways of knowing things; and then there are those that are in neither of these two categories, but nevertheless change all the time, for instance time.

## **The Essential Nature of Mind**

Now, as for cognition or awareness, this is a phenomenon that is defined in terms of mental activity: the mental activity of knowing or being aware of something. Its defining characteristics are (1) clarity, which means appearance-making, (2) awareness, awareness of something or cognition of something, and (3) experiencing something. In experiencing something, there are different emotions, positive or negative; but, nevertheless, the nature of mental activity itself is neutral. Whether or not a mental activity is helpful or harmful depends on the type of mental factor that it actually is [and not on its essential nature as mental activity.]

For example, anger is not part of the essential nature of the mind; but, rather, anger depends on causes and conditions [in order to arise. The essential nature of something, on the other hand, is not intermittent and does not depend on causes and conditions in order to arise and be present.] Certain mental factors, then, [such as anger,] are produced based on causes and conditions and only then become dominant.

When anger is fully developed, then it's difficult to differentiate anger from the mind or mental activity itself. Through practice, however, we can have one point of our mind watching that anger when it develops, and we can observe it arising and ceasing. That act itself, of observing it, has the ability to decrease the force of anger. Thus, when a certain mental state or factor arises, it can be influenced.

That's a bit about the nature of the mind.

## **The Relation between Emotion and the Physical Body**

Another interesting thing that I would like to conduct more research about is the following. Due to a change of some elements of our physical body, some emotions can arise. Also the development of a mental attitude can effect some changes in the body. Take, for example, anger or hatred. When anger occurs, the blood circulation in a certain part of the brain is greater; whereas a different part of the brain becomes more active with compassion. So, on a subtle level, we need to investigate which comes first: a change in the brain bringing about an emotion, or an emotion bringing about a change in the brain. This needs further research.

For example, there are changes in the neurons. Now that's a bit subtle, but when we have an accumulation of changes on the subtle level, then we see grosser levels of change. When fear develops, for example, more blood goes to the legs so we run; when anger comes, more blood comes to the arms so we fight. So, we can see from those examples that the relationship between emotions and the grosser body changes. Blood flow, for example, is a grosser form in which the change manifests, but at what level is there this connection between the changes in the mental state and the changes in the body?

Buddhist and Hindu tantras speak of a subtle level of energy: the mind or mental activity moves on it. It is spoken of as an "inner wind" and that must mean something like energy that makes the connection between a grosser physical level and mental activity. This is something that is in common between the Hindu and Buddhist analyses. So, that's the real question for scientists to investigate: What is the medium or mechanism for connecting the mental and physical realms?

In ancient Indian traditions, both non-Buddhist and Buddhist, there was something called an "internal contacting awareness." [Buddhism defines it the mental factor that, in contacting a cognitive object, differentiates that this object is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and thus serves as the foundation for experiencing it with a feeling of happiness, unhappiness, or a neutral feeling.] Based on this inner contacting awareness taken as an obtaining condition, bodily cognition arises and that's the immediately preceding condition for the mental cognition of pain or pleasure.

Also, although other senses have a cognitive location at a specific organ – for instance, vision is located at the eye – yet tactile consciousness arises based on the body sensors and it pervades the entire body and all the other sensory organs. According to science, the sensory mechanisms of seeing and hearing, and so on – each has a cognitive location; but all of them are related to the brain. They all pervade the brain. So here, we have to examine the idea of some cognitive level that pervades all the other cognitive levels [since both Buddhism and science seem to suggest that there is such a level.]

When we examine the brain, the neurons, we must make a distinction between a grosser level of mind and a more subtle one. Now, we can identify the grosser level of mind [the level of sense perception] both in humans and in dogs. But due to brain differences between the two, there are differences in their minds and how they function on a grosser level. [So, for instance, dogs have a more highly developed sense of smell than humans do.] But there has to be a more subtle level [of mind or mental activity than the gross sensorial one.]

According to the degree to which the mind is dependent on the physical body,

there are different levels of subtlety of mind. The grosser level of sense perception [is the most dependent on the body.] The disturbing emotions, on the other hand, would be on a more subtle level of mind, one that is less dependent on the physical body. The same is in terms of the dream level: it's even less dependent on the body. So what is the difference between humans and animals [concerning these more subtle levels of emotions and dreaming?]

Now we have scientific equipment to investigate the death process. This type of research has been going on for the last fifteen years. But to test a dying person's mental state while electrodes are attached to the person's head – no one has actually died while doing that experiment. But now we need to be more serious about such an experiment. We need to ask somebody please to die while having electrodes on their head. But that's very difficult to ask; we have to wait for a proper opportunity.

Although there are no serious scientific tests being made to measure what is happening during the actual death process, the Indian texts speak about three levels of mental activity. The third level occurs only at the time of dying. [More specifically, it occurs when] the breathing and the heart functions have ceased, but nevertheless there's still some process of dissolution of mental activity occurring. This level seems to be even less dependent on the physical level [than any of the other levels of mind.] So the gross level is dependent on the brain and the neurons; but this more subtle level: this is still a question.

Also, I've wondered why our disturbing emotions are included [according to the Buddhist classification scheme] on a subtle level, not on the gross level. Why are they less dependent on the gross physical body? Once in a meeting with scientists I asked, "Without any physical process, is it possible that purely mental activity can bring about a bodily effect?" and the scientist said, "In theory yes; but in reality, it's not possible."

This is not a very scientific approach. There is a simple experiment that can be done. Crying or shedding tears is a physical reaction to a mental state, but it can occur either with joy or with sadness. There's a big difference on the mental level between those two, but the physical reaction is the same. If tears from joy came out of the right eye and tears from sadness came out of the left eye, then on the physical level we could differentiate them. But, that's not the case: the difference isn't on such a gross level. So to investigate the emotional level, we have to look deeper than this grossest physical level. But to investigate the mind by investigating [just the physical level of] the brain – we need to question if this still leaves something out, if it's still too general.

In Buddhist logic, we speak of different forms of inference. For instance, by observing similar qualities in similar things, we can generalize and infer a

category. Or if something is not observed with those qualities, we can infer that it falls into a different category. But these are too broad and inconclusive [forms of reasoning] for coming to a decision about this type of issue concerning the relationship between emotions and the body.