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THE NATURE OF MIND
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By contemplating our stream of consciousness in meditation we can be led naturally to the spacious experience of nonduality. As we observe our thoughts carefully we will notice that they arise, abide and disappear themselves. There is no need to expel thoughts from our minds forcefully; just as each thought arises from the clear nature of mind, so too does it naturally dissolve back into this clear nature. When thoughts eventually dissolve in this way, we should keep our mind concentrated on the resulting clarity as undistractedly as we can.

We should train ourselves not to become engrossed in any of the thoughts continuously arising in our mind. Our consciousness is like a vast ocean with plenty of space for thoughts and emotions to swim about in, and we should not allow our attention to be distracted by any of them. It does not matter if a certain ‘fish’ is particularly beautiful or repulsive: without being distracted one way or the other we should remain focussed on our mind’s basic clarity. Even if a magnificent vision arises the kind we have been waiting years to see we should not engage it in conversation. We should, of course, remain aware of what is going on; the point is not to become so dullminded that we do not noticed anything. However, while remaining aware of thoughts as they arise, we should not become entranced by any of them. Instead, we should remain mindful of the underlying clarity out of which these thoughts arose.

Why is it so important to contemplate the clarity of our consciousness in this way? Because, as we have seen again and again, the source of all our happiness and suffering, the root of both the pains of samsara and the bliss of nirvana, is the mind. And within the mind is our habitual wrong view – our ignorant, insecure ego-grasping – that holds onto the hallucination of concrete self-existence as if it were reality. The way to break the spell of this hallucination is to see the illusory nature of things and recognize that all phenomena are nothing but fleeting appearances arising in the clear space of mind. Thus the more we contemplate clarity of our own consciousness, the less we hold onto any appearance as being concrete and real - and the less we suffer.

By watching our thoughts come and go in this way, we move ever closer to the correct view of emptiness. Seemingly concrete appearances will arise, remain for awhile and then disappear back into the clear nature of mind. As each thought disappears in this way, we should train in this type of ‘not seeing,’ the more familiar we become with the clear spaciousness of mind. Then, even when extremely destructive thoughts and emotions such as anger and jealousy arise, we will remain in contact with the underlying purity of our consciousness. This purity is always with us and whatever delusions we may experience are only superficial obscurations that will eventually pass, leaving us with the essentially clear nature of our mind.

When you contemplate your own consciousness with intense awareness, leaving aside all thoughts of good and bad, you are automatically led to the experience of non-duality.
How is this possible? Think of it like this: the clean, clear blue sky is like consciousness, while the smoke and pollution pumped into the sky are like the unnatural, artificial concepts manufactured by ego-grasping ignorance. Now, even though we say the pollutants are contaminating the atmosphere, the sky never really becomes contaminated by the pollution. The sky and the pollution each retain their own characteristic nature. In other words, on a fundamental level the sky remains unaffected no matter how much toxic energy enters it. The proof of this is that when conditions change the sky can become clear once again.

In the same way, no matter how many problems may be created by artificial ego concepts, they never affect the clean, clear nature of our consciousness itself. From the relative point of view, our consciousness remains pure because its clear nature never becomes mixed with the nature of confusion.

From an ultimate point of view as well, our consciousness always remains clear and pure. The non-dual characteristic of the mind is never damaged by the dualistic concepts that arise in it. In this respect consciousness is pure, always was pure and will always remain pure.
2. What is the Mind?
His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Western scientists have little agreement about the nature and function of mind. Buddhism’s extensive explanations, however, stand firm after centuries.

Here His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains the Buddhist concept of mind to the participants of a Mind Science symposium at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1995.

I would like to explain briefly the basic Buddhist concept of mind and some of the techniques employed in Buddhism for training the mind. The primary aim of these techniques is the attainment of enlightenment, but it is possible to experience even mundane benefits, such as good health, by practicing them.

As a result of meeting with people from different religious and cultural backgrounds, including scientists and radical materialists, I discovered that there are some people who do not even accept the existence of mind. This led me to believe that Buddhism could serve as a bridge between radical materialism and religion, because Buddhism is accepted as belonging to neither camp. From the radical materialists’ viewpoint, Buddhism is an ideology that accepts the existence of mind, and is thus a faith-oriented system like other religions. However, since Buddhism does not accept the concept of a Creator God but emphasizes instead self-reliance and the individual’s own power and potential, other religions regard Buddhism as a kind of atheism. Since neither side accepts Buddhism as belonging to its own camp, this gives Buddhists the opportunity to build a bridge between the two.

First of all, I would like to give a brief account of the general approach of Buddhist thought and practice common to both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism.

One very obvious feature in Buddhism is the element of faith and devotion. This is particularly apparent in the practice known as taking refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. To understand the role that faith and devotion play in this practice, emphasis is placed on clearly understanding the nature of the path in which one is taking refuge, called Dharma or the Way by the Buddha.

The emphasis on first understanding the nature of the path, or Dharma, can be appreciated by considering how we normally relate to someone whom we take to be a great authority on a particular subject. We do not regard a person as an authority simply on the basis of their fame, position, power, good looks, wealth and so on, but rather because we find what they say on issues related to their particular field of expertise convincing and reliable. In brief, we do not generally take a person to be an authority on a subject simply out of respect and admiration for them as a person.

Similarly, in Buddhism, when we take the Buddha as an authority, as a reliable teacher, we do so on the basis of having investigated and examined his principal teaching, the Four Noble Truths. It is only after having investigated the validity and reliability of this doctrine that we accept the Buddha, who propounded it, as a reliable guide.

In order to understand the profound aspects of the Four Noble Truths, the principal doctrine of Buddhism, it is crucial to understand what are known as
the two truths. The two truths refer to the fundamental Buddhist philosophical view that there are two levels of reality. One level is the empirical, phenomenal and relative level that appears to us, where functions such as causes and conditions, names and labels, and so on can be validly understood. The other is a deeper level of existence beyond that, which Buddhist philosophers describe as the fundamental, or ultimate, nature of reality, and which is often technically referred to as emptiness.

When investigating the ultimate nature of reality, Buddhist thinkers take the Buddha’s words not so much as an ultimate authority, but rather as a key to assist their own insight; for the ultimate authority must always rest with the individual’s own reason and critical analysis. This is why we find various conceptions of reality in Buddhist literature. Each is based on a different level of understanding of the ultimate nature.

In the sutras, the collected original teachings of the Buddha, the Buddha himself states that his words are not to be accepted as valid simply out of respect and reverence for him, but rather should be examined just as a goldsmith would test the purity and quality of gold that he wished to purchase by subjecting it to various types of examination. Similarly, we should examine the words of the Buddha, and if we find them to be reliable and convincing through our own reasoning and understanding, we should accept them as valid.

Another area in which we find the element of faith and devotion playing an obvious and crucial role is in the practice of Buddhist tantra. But even here, careful examination will show that the entire system of tantric practice is based upon an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality. Without this, one cannot even begin a genuine practice of tantra. So, in essence, reason and understanding are fundamental to the Buddhist approach on both the theoretical and the practical levels.

One of the fundamental views in Buddhism is the principle of dependent arising. This states that all phenomena, both subjective experiences and external objects, come into existence in dependence upon causes and conditions; nothing comes into existence uncaused. Given this principle, it becomes crucial to understand what causality is and what types of cause there are. In Buddhist literature, two main categories of causation are mentioned: (i) external causes in the form of physical objects and events, and (ii) internal causes such as cognitive and mental events.

The reason for an understanding of causality being so important in Buddhist thought and practice is that it relates directly to sentient beings’ feelings of pain and pleasure and the other experiences that dominate their lives, which arise not only from internal mechanisms but also from external causes and conditions. Therefore it is crucial to understand not only the internal workings of mental and cognitive causation but also their relationship to the external material world.

The fact that our inner experiences of pleasure and pain are in the nature of subjective mental and cognitive states is very obvious to us. But how those inner subjective events relate to external circumstances and the material world poses a critical problem. The question of whether there is an external physical reality independent of sentient beings’ consciousness and mind has been extensively discussed by Buddhist
thinkers. Naturally, there are divergent views on this issue among the various philosophical schools of thought. One such school [Cittamatra] asserts that there is no external reality, not even external objects, and that the material world we perceive is in essence merely a projection of our minds. From many points of view, this conclusion is rather extreme. Philosophically, and for that matter conceptually, it seems more coherent to maintain a position that accepts the reality not only of the subjective world of the mind but also of the external objects of the physical world.

Now, if we examine the origins of our inner experiences and of external matter, we find that there is a fundamental uniformity in the nature of their existence in that both are governed by the principle of causality. Just as in the inner world of mental and cognitive events every moment of experience comes from its preceding continuum and so on ad infinitum, similarly in the physical world every object and event must have a preceding continuum that serves as its cause, from which the present moment of external matter comes into existence.

In some Buddhist literature, we find that in terms of the origin of its continuum, the macroscopic world of our physical reality can be traced back finally to an original state in which all material particles are condensed into what are known as space particles. If all the physical matter of our macroscopic universe can be traced to such an original state, the question then arises as to how these particles later interact with each other and evolve into a macroscopic world that can have direct bearing on sentient beings’ inner experiences of pleasure and pain. To answer this, Buddhists turn to the doctrine of karma, the invisible workings of actions and their effects, which provides an explanation as to how these inanimate space particles evolve into various manifestations.

The invisible workings of actions, or karmic force (karma means action), are intimately linked to the motivation in the human mind that gives rise to these actions. Therefore an understanding of the nature of mind and its role is crucial to an understanding of human experience and the relationship between mind and matter. We can see from our own experience that our state of mind plays a major role in our day-to-day experience and physical and mental well-being. If a person has a calm and stable mind, this influences his or her attitude and behavior in relation to others. In other words, if someone remains in a state of mind that is calm, tranquil and peaceful, external surroundings or conditions can cause them only a limited disturbance. But it is extremely difficult for someone whose mental state is restless to be calm or joyful even when they are surrounded by the best facilities and the best of friends. This indicates that our mental attitude is a critical factor in determining our experience of joy and happiness, and thus also our good health.

To sum up, there are two reasons why it is important to understand the nature of mind. One is because there is an intimate connection between mind and karma. The other is that our state of mind plays a crucial role in our experience of happiness and suffering. If understanding the mind is very important, what then is mind, and what is its nature?

Buddhist literature, both sutra and tantra, contains extensive discussions on mind and its nature. Tantra, in particular, discusses the various levels of subtlety of
mind and consciousness. The sutras do not talk much about the relationship between the various states of mind and their corresponding physiological states. Tantric literature, on the other hand, is replete with references to the various subtleties of the levels of consciousness and their relationship to such physiological states as the vital energy centers within the body, the energy channels, the energies that flow within these and so on. The tantras also explain how, by manipulating the various physiological factors through specific meditative yogic practices, one can effect various states of consciousness.

According to tantra, the ultimate nature of mind is essentially pure. This pristine nature is technically called clear light. The various afflictive emotions such as desire, hatred and jealousy are products of conditioning. They are not intrinsic qualities of the mind because the mind can be cleansed of them. When this clear light nature of mind is veiled or inhibited from expressing its true essence by the conditioning of the afflictive emotions and thoughts, the person is said to be caught in the cycle of existence, samsara. But when, by applying appropriate meditative techniques and practices, the individual is able to fully experience this clear light nature of mind free from the influence and conditioning of the afflictive states, he or she is on the way to true liberation and full enlightenment.

Hence, from the Buddhist point of view, both bondage and true freedom depend on the varying states of this clear light mind, and the resultant state that meditators try to attain through the application of various meditative techniques is one in which this ultimate nature of mind fully manifests all its positive potential, enlightenment, or Buddhahood. An understanding of the clear light mind therefore becomes crucial in the context of spiritual endeavor.

In our own day-to-day experiences we can observe that, especially on the gross level, our mind is interrelated with and dependent upon the physiological states off the body. Just as our state of mind, be it depressed or joyful, affects our physical health, so too does our physical state affect our mind. As I mentioned earlier, Buddhist tantric literature mentions specific energy centers within the body that may, I think, have some connection with what some neurobiologists call the second brain, the immune system. These energy centers play a crucial role in increasing or decreasing the various emotional states within our mind. It is because of the intimate relationship between mind and body and the existence of these special physiological centers within our body that physical yoga exercises and the application of special meditative techniques aimed at training the mind can have positive effects on health. It has been shown, for example, that by applying appropriate meditative techniques, we can control our respiration and increase or decrease our body temperature.

Furthermore, just as we can apply various meditative techniques during the waking state, so too, on the basis of understanding the subtle relationship between mind and body, can we practice various meditations while we are in dream states. The implication of the potential of such practices is that at a certain level it is possible to separate the gross levels of consciousness from gross physical states and arrive at a subtler level of mind and body. In other words, you can separate your mind from your coarse physical body. You could, for
example, separate your mind from your body during sleep and do some extra work that you cannot do in your ordinary body. However, you might not get paid for it!

So you can see here the clear indication of a close link between body and mind: they can be complementary. In light of this, I am very glad to see that some scientists are undertaking significant research in the mind/body relationship and its implications for our understanding of the nature of mental and physical well-being. My old friend Dr Benson [Herbert Benson, MD, Associate Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School], for example, has been carrying out experiments on Tibetan Buddhist meditators for some years now. Similar research work is also being undertaken in Czechoslovakia. Judging by our findings so far, I feel confident that there is still a great deal to be done in the future.

As the insights we gain from such research grow, there is no doubt that our understanding of mind and body, and also of physical and mental health, will be greatly enriched. Some modern scholars describe Buddhism not as a religion but as a science of mind, and there seem to be some grounds for this claim.

In general, the mind can be defined as an entity that has the nature of mere experience, that is, clarity and knowing. It is the knowing nature, or agency, that is called mind, and this is non-material. But within the category of mind there are also gross levels, such as our sensory perceptions, which cannot function or even come into being without depending on physical organs like our senses. And within the category of the sixth consciousness, the mental consciousness, there are various divisions, or types of mental consciousness that are heavily dependent upon the physiological basis, our brain, for their arising. These types of mind cannot be understood in isolation from their physiological bases.

Now a crucial question arises: How is it that these various types of cognitive events - the sensory perceptions, mental states and so forth - can exist and possess this nature of knowing, luminosity and clarity? According to the Buddhist science of mind, these cognitive events possess the nature of knowing because of the fundamental nature of clarity that underlies all cognitive events. This is what I described earlier as the mind’s fundamental nature, the clear light nature of mind. Therefore, when various mental states are described in Buddhist literature, you will find discussions of the different types of conditions that give rise to cognitive events. For example, in the case of sensory perceptions, external objects serve as the objective, or causal condition; the immediately preceding moment of consciousness is the immediate condition; and the sense organ is the physiological or dominant condition. It is on the basis of the aggregation of these three conditions – causal, immediate and physiological – that experiences such as sensory perceptions occur.

Another distinctive feature of mind is that it has the capacity to observe itself. The issue of mind’s ability to observe and examine itself has long been an important philosophical question. In general, there are different ways in which mind can observe itself. For instance, in the case of examining a past experience, such as things that happened yesterday you recall that experience and examine your memory of it, so the problem does not arise. But we also have experiences during which the observing mind
become aware of itself while still engaged in its observed experience. Here, because both observing mind and observed mental states are present at the same time, we cannot explain the phenomenon of the mind becoming self-aware, being subject and object simultaneously, through appealing to the factor of time lapse.

Thus it is important to understand that when we talk about mind, we are talking about a highly intricate network of different mental events and state. Through the introspective properties of mind we can observe, for example, what specific thoughts are in our mind at a given moment, what objects our minds are holding, what kinds of intentions we have and so on. In a meditative state, for example, when you are meditating and cultivating a single-pointedness of mind, you constantly apply the introspective faculty to analyze whether or not your mental attention is single-pointedly focused on the object, whether there is any laxity involved, whether you are distracted and so forth. In this situation you are applying various mental factors and it is not as if a single mind were examining itself. Rather, you are applying various different types of mental factor to examine your mind.

As to the question of whether or not a single mental state can observe and examine itself, this has been a very important and difficult question in the Buddhist science of mind. Some Buddhist thinkers have maintained that there is a faculty of mind called "self-consciousness," or "self-awareness." It could be said that this is an apperceptive faculty of mind, one that can observe itself. But this contention has been disputed. Those who maintain that such an apperceptive faculty exists distinguish two aspects within the mental, or cognitive, event. One of these is external and object-oriented in the sense that there is a duality of subject and object, while the other is introspective in nature and it is this that enables the mind to observe itself. The existence of this apperceptive self-cognizing faculty of mind has been disputed, especially by the later Buddhist philosophical school of thought the Prasangika.

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3. Know Your Mind
Lama Yeshe

When I talk about mind, I’m not just talking about my mind, my trip. I’m talking about the mind of each and every universal living being.

The way we live, the way we think – everything is dedicated to material pleasure. We consider sense objects to be of utmost importance and materialistically devote ourselves to whatever makes us happy, famous or popular. Even though all this comes from our mind, we are so totally preoccupied by external objects that we never look within, we never question why we find them so interesting.

As long as we exist, our mind is an inseparable part of us. As a result, we are always up and down. It is not our body that goes up and down, it’s our mind – this mind whose way of functioning we do not understand. Therefore, sometimes we have to examine ourselves – not just our body, but our mind. After all, it is our mind that is always telling us what to do. We have to know our own psychology, or, in religious terminology, perhaps, our inner nature. Anyway, no matter what we call it, we have to know our own mind.

Don’t think that examining and knowing the nature of your mind is just an Eastern trip. That’s a wrong conception. It’s your trip. How can you separate your body, or your self-image, from your mind? It’s impossible. You think you are an independent person, free to travel the world, enjoying everything. Despite what you think, you are not free. I’m not saying that you are under the control of someone else. It’s your own uncontrolled mind, your own attachment, that oppresses you. If you discover how you oppress yourself, your uncontrolled mind will disappear. Knowing your own mind is the solution to all your problems.

One day the world looks so beautiful; the next day it looks terrible. How can you say that? Scientifically, it’s impossible that the world can change so radically. It’s your mind that causes these appearances. This is not religious dogma; your up and down is not religious dogma. I’m not talking about religion; I’m talking about the way you lead your daily life, which is what sends you up and down. Other people and your environment don’t change radically; it’s your mind. I hope you understand that.

Similarly, one person thinks that the world is beautiful and people are wonderful and kind, while another thinks that everything and everyone are horrible. Who is right? How do you explain that scientifically? It’s just their individual mind’s projection of the sense world. You think, “Today is like this, tomorrow is like that; this man is like this; that woman is like that.” But where is that absolutely fixed, forever-beautiful woman? Who is that absolutely forever-handsome man? They are non-existent – they are simply creations of your own mind.

Do not expect material objects to satisfy you or to make your life perfect; it’s impossible. How can you be satisfied by even vast amounts of material objects? How will sleeping with hundreds of different people satisfy you? It will never happen. Satisfaction comes from the mind.

If you don’t know your own psychology, you might ignore what’s going on in your mind until it breaks down and you go completely crazy. People go mad through lack of inner
wisdom, through their inability to examine their own mind. They cannot explain themselves to themselves; they don’t know how to talk to themselves. Thus they are constantly preoccupied with all these external objects, while within, their mind is running down until it finally cracks. They are ignorant of their internal world, and their minds are totally unified with ignorance instead of being awake and engaged in self-analysis. Examine your own mental attitudes. Become your own therapist.

You are intelligent; you know that material objects alone cannot bring you satisfaction, but you don’t have to embark on some emotional, religious trip to examine your own mind. Some people think that they do; that this kind of self-analysis is something spiritual or religious. It’s not necessary to classify yourself as a follower of this or that religion or philosophy, to put yourself into some religious category. But if you want to be happy, you have to check the way you lead your life. Your mind is your religion.

When you check your mind, do not rationalize or push. Relax. Do not be upset when problems arise. Just be aware of them and where they come from; know their root. Introduce the problem to yourself: “Here is this kind of problem. How has it become a problem? What kind of mind has made it a problem? What kind of mind feels that it’s a problem?” When you check thoroughly, the problem will automatically disappear. That’s so simple, isn’t it? You don’t have to believe in something. Don’t believe anything! All the same, you can’t say, “I don’t believe I have a mind.” You can’t reject your mind. You can say, “I reject Eastern things” – I agree. But can you reject yourself? Can you deny your head, your nose? You cannot deny your mind. Therefore, treat yourself wisely and try to discover the true source of satisfaction.

When you were a child you loved and craved ice-cream, chocolate and cake, and thought, “When I grow up, I’ll have all the ice-cream, chocolate and cake I want; then I’ll be happy” Now you have as much ice-cream, chocolate and cake as you want, but you’re bored. You decide that since this doesn’t make you happy you’ll get a car, a house, television, a husband or wife – then you’ll be happy. Now you have everything, but your car is a problem, your house is a problem, your husband or wife is a problem, your children are a problem. You realize, “Oh, this is not satisfaction.”

What, then, is satisfaction? Go through all this mentally and check; it’s very important. Examine your life from childhood to the present. This is analytical meditation: “At that time my mind was like that; now my mind is like this. It has changed this way, that way.”

Your mind has changed so many times but have you reached any conclusion as to what really makes you happy? My interpretation is that you are lost. You know your way around the city, how to get home, where to buy chocolate, but still you are lost – you can’t find your goal. Check honestly – isn’t this so?

Lord Buddha says that all you have to know is what you are, how you exist. You don’t have to believe in anything. Just understand your mind: how it works, how attachment and desire arise, how ignorance arises, and where emotions come from. It is sufficient to know the nature of all that; that alone can bring you happiness and peace. Thus, your life can change completely; everything turns upside down. What you once interpreted as horrible can become beautiful.
If I told you that all you were living for was chocolate and ice-cream, you’d think I was crazy. “No! no!” your arrogant mind would say. But look deeper into your life’s purpose. Why are you here? To be well liked? To become famous? To accumulate possessions? To be attractive to others? I’m not exaggerating—check for yourself, then you’ll see. Through thorough examination you can realize that dedicating your entire life to seeking happiness through chocolate and ice-cream completely nullifies the significance of your having been born human. Birds and dogs have similar aims. Shouldn’t your goals in life be higher than those of dogs and chickens?

I’m not trying to decide your life for you, but you check up. It’s better to have an integrated life than to live in mental disorder. An disorderly life is not worthwhile, beneficial to neither yourself nor others. What are you living for – chocolate? Steak? Perhaps you think, “Of course I don’t live for food. I’m an educated person.” But education also comes from the mind. Without the mind, what is education, what is philosophy? Philosophy is just the creation of someone’s mind, a few thoughts strung together in a certain way. Without the mind there’s no philosophy, no doctrine, no university subjects. All these things are mind-made.

How do you check your mind? Just watch how it perceives or interprets any object that it encounters. Observe what feelings –comfortable or uncomfortable – arise. Then check, “When I perceive this kind of view, this feeling arises, that emotion comes; I discriminate in such a way. Why?” This is how to check your mind; that’s all. It’s very simple.

When you check your own mind properly, you stop blaming others for your problems. You recognize that your mistaken actions come from your own defiled, deluded mind. When you are preoccupied with external, material objects, you blame them and other people for your problems. Projecting that deluded view onto external phenomena makes you miserable. When you begin to realize your wrong-conception view, you begin to realize the nature of your own mind and to put an end to your problems forever.

Is all this very new for you? It’s not. Whenever you are going to do anything, you first check it out and then make your decision. You already do this; I’m not suggesting anything new. The difference is that you don’t do it enough. You have to do more checking. This doesn’t mean sitting alone in some corner contemplating your navel – you can be checking your mind all the time, even while talking or working with other people. Do you think that examining the mind is only for those who are on an Eastern trip? Don’t think that way.

Realize that the nature of your mind is different from that of the flesh and bone of your physical body. Your mind is like a mirror, reflecting everything without discrimination. If you have understanding-wisdom, you can control the kind of reflection that you allow into the mirror of your mind. If you totally ignore what is happening in your mind, it will reflect whatever garbage it encounters – things that make you psychologically sick. Your checking-wisdom should distinguish between reflections that are beneficial and those that bring psychological problems. Eventually, when you realize the true nature of subject and object, all your problems will vanish.
4. The Workshop Is In the Mind
Robina Courtin

For the Buddha, mind is where things happen. The mind is where the workshop is, as Lama Zopa Rinpoche puts it. The mind is where the source of suffering is, the mind is where the source of happiness is. And the mind has the potential to achieve perfection, to become enlightened: free of suffering and full of happiness.

If the mind is the point, if the mind is where the workshop is, and we can perfect it, we’d better know what it is. First, when we say the word “mind” we point to the brain, don’t we? We assume it’s something physical. We assume it comes from Mummy and Daddy. Buddha doesn’t argue that your parents gave you a brain; but his point is your brain isn’t your mind. It plays a role; there are a lot of indicators in the brain of what goes on in our mind, but it’s not the mind itself – that’s the crucial thing. It works interdependently and very nicely with the brain – you need a decent, working brain; a decent, working body; a decent, working nervous system. But the mind itself is not the brain. The mind is something not physical.

Secondly, mind is virtually synonymous with the word “consciousness” and it refers to all of your thoughts and feelings and emotions, your unconscious, subconscious – whatever goes on inside you that isn’t your blood and bones, that’s your mind.

The third point, and this is shocking to us – we have to keep remembering this – it doesn’t come from anyone else. And this is fundamental to all of Buddha’s philosophical presentation of the universe. It doesn’t come from anyone else. Our mind is not given to us. And Buddha doesn’t talk about a soul. In other words, we’re not created by somebody. Our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions do not come from someone else. Our mind is our own.

So, the question is, “If I’m not created by somebody else, where do I come from?” Well, in a simple sense, this boring answer is you come from previous moments of yourself. Think of your mind as a river of mental moments – your thoughts and feelings of now, in the simplest linear sense of cause and effect, come from the previous moment of your thoughts and feelings. And your thoughts and feelings of the previous moment come from – guess what? – the previous moment of your thoughts and feelings. You track it back to ten years ago, twenty years ago, then when you popped out your mother’s womb, and then back in the womb. “Well, maybe I began a month before conception.” Well, no. If my mind existed then, it must have come from a previous moment of my mind. Then clearly you get back to the first moment of conception, when we all assume we began. If you’re Christian, God put a soul there, in the egg and sperm; and if you’re a materialist, you are only the egg and sperm.

Well, the Buddha has this third option. Your egg and sperm are there. Yep, Mummy and Daddy worked really hard to get them to stay together and not go down the toilet with the rest. But what causes them to stay together is the entry of consciousness, your consciousness. So you can track your consciousness in this continuity of mental moments going right back to that first moment of conception. “Well, I must have begun then.”
Well, yes, relatively speaking, this package called “Robina” began then, but where did the body come from? Mummy and Daddy. Where did your mind come from? A previous moment of that very continuity of mental moments. So your mind is its own continuity of mental moments. It’s a very simple concept, actually. Not difficult for us to intellectualize, to theorize about. Your mind is its own continuity. And obviously, to assume this, you have to assume it’s not physical. Because, clearly, if you think your mind is your brain, then you did come from your parents, which is the materialist view, that your Mummy and Daddy “made” you, you know? And so the experiential implication of this is the point – that your mind is yours.

YOUR MIND IS YOURS
And that means the contents of it are yours. And so what are the contents of your mind? All the love and the kindness and compassion and wisdom and contentment and anger and jealousy and fear and paranoia and rage – all of this is your mind. So all of these, being contents of your mind, come from previous moments of that particular quality in your mind.

But we’re so familiar with the view that I come from mother and father and my anger comes from mother and father and my jealousy and my depression and my all the rest come from the DNA and the egg and the sperm and all the rest, you know. These physical components play a role, no argument. But they’re not the main thing. For the Buddha, the main things are your mind, your thoughts, your feelings, your emotions, your unconscious. Your tendencies, your feelings. All of this. This is yours. This is yours.

Basically, then, we come fully programmed from the first second of conception with all of our tendencies, with all of our characteristics. It’s very simple, you know. But it’s a big surprise to us. I mean, we accept we come fully programmed, but we think the programming comes from mother and father. It doesn’t. Tendencies in the mind are mental and mind is not physical and it comes from previous moments of itself, not from the external condition which is called the brain.

So this fundamental point of Buddhism is that your mind is yours. And whatever’s in it is simply from you having put it there in the past. Hardly surprising concept – cause and effect.

SENSORY AND MENTAL
We can divide mind in different ways. One way of describing how the mind functions is in terms of the sensory and the mental. Sensory consciousness is that part of our mind that functions through the medium of our five senses. So: eye consciousness is a part of your mind – which, remember, isn’t physical – that functions through the medium of the eyeball. You know, the eyelid being open and the various nerves all working nicely. Ear consciousness, same. Tongue consciousness. Touch consciousness. Like that. That’s consciousness functioning through the medium of the body. And the senses are very limited, they’re like dumb animals. We give a lot of power to them – “We make the body the boss,” as Lama Yeshe says. Very limited in its capacity for cognition.

POSITIVE, NEGATIVE AND NEUTRAL STATES OF MIND
Now, mental consciousness. As I said before, this is where the workshop is. This is where your thoughts, feelings,
emotions – all this business – is. Your depression, love, anger, your jealousy, your compassion. This is your mental consciousness. This is what we have to learn to know. Because for the Buddha, this is the source of happiness and suffering.

This mental consciousness of ours has three categories of contents: not only the positive and negative, but also so-called neutral states of mind. These are technical terms, not moralistic ones. Buddha says that the positive ones are the cause of our happiness, and thus the cause of our ability to benefit others; and the negative ones are the cause of suffering and why we harm others. Neutral states of mind are neither – although they do play a crucial role in our lives. Concentration or mindfulness, for example, could be called neutral insofar as they in their nature are neither positive or negative. “Thieves need mindless,” as Lama Zopa Rinpoche likes to remind us.

Love and compassion are examples of positive states of mind. Buddha says they’re at the core of our being. Attachment and anger are examples of negative ones, and for the Buddha they are adventitious: they are not integral to our being, which means they can be removed utterly from our mindstream.

This is a shocking, radical point. This underlies all Buddhist practice and Buddha’s assertion of our natural potential to achieve perfection.

WHAT ARE NEGATIVE STATES OF MIND?
If they can be removed from our mind, if this is the job of being a Buddhist practitioner, then we’d better understand how they function.

We know that depression is terrible. But we can’t quite work out how can we change it, because we think of it as an emotion and that it’s physically-based. But if we look into the Buddhist view of the mind, we get right to the bare bones of these emotions, and finally they are thoughts. When we can understand this point – which takes listening to, which takes time – we can understand how it causes our suffering, and finally, we can understand how we can change it.

Emotions: we think, “How can I change them?” It seems overwhelming, when you’re in the throes of depression or anger or jealousy – it seems like a joke, doesn’t it, to say that they come down to being conceptual thought. But finally, this is the point. This is what they are. This is the Buddhist view.

So when we utilize these marvelous psychological techniques called meditation, in particular the type of meditation that trains us to concentrate the mind, we can begin to see beneath the emotional packaging; we can get down deep into the elaborate thought processes, all the assumptions that are there in the bones of our being.

We can learn to be your own therapist, as Lama Yeshe puts it. You’ve got to go beneath those emotions, right into the mind itself, to listen to, to recognize, to locate the fundamental conceptual constructs. In other words: stories, viewpoints, opinions. They’re all that. Attachment is an opinion about something. Depression is an opinion about something. Anger is an opinion. They are all viewpoints and opinions. To get right down beneath the emotional component, beneath what feels like the physical component of them, that’s where we can learn to see it. And once we can learn to see this, then we can learn to reconstruct our thoughts. Buddha’s your best cognitive therapist, I tell you! Not joking. That’s what being a
Buddhist is, actually. That’s what you’re doing as a Buddhist. You’re changing the way you think until eventually your mind is in sync with a Buddha’s mind, quite literally.

**NEGATIVITY IS NOT INNATE**

To give ourselves the confidence to even start, we need to think about how the negative states of mind are not at the core of our being, they do not define us, they are not innate, and thus can be removed. This flies in the face of our deeply held assumption – one that’s reinforced by all contemporary models of the mind – that the positive and negative have equal status; that they’re natural; they just are who we are. If you ask your therapist for methods to get rid of all anger, jealousy, attachment and the rest, they’ll think you’re insane!

We can be forgiven for thinking the negative, neurotic, unhappy emotions are at the core of our being: they certainly feel like it! We identify totally with them, follow them perfectly, truly believing this is who I really am. This is the irony of ego.

**NEGATIVE STATES OF MIND ARE DISTURBING AND DELUSIONAL**

So, if the negative, neurotic emotions are the source of our pain and the positive ones the cause of our happiness, then we’d better learn to distinguish them. This is the very essence of the job our being our own therapist.

What are negative states of mind? They have two main characteristics (which the positive ones necessarily lack) and these are indicated by two commonly used synonyms: “disturbing emotions” and “delusions”.

**Disturbing** Even though we can see that anger is disturbing to oneself – just look at an angry person: they’re out of their mind! – we fiercely live in denial of it; or we deflect it, so determined are we to believe that the external catalyst is the main problem. My friends on death row in Kentucky told me that they receive visits from an old Catholic man who, after thirty years of grief and rage after his daughter was murdered, finally realized that the main reason for his suffering wasn’t his daughter’s murder but his rage, his anger.

**Delusional** The other characteristic that these unhappy states of mind possess is that they’re delusional. We’d be offended if someone accused of that, but that’s exactly what Buddha is saying. The extent to which our minds are caught up in attachment, anger and the rest is the extent to which we are not in touch with reality. He’s saying that we’re all delusional, it’s just a question of degree.

In other words, anger, attachment and the rest are concepts, wrong concepts. It seems like a joke to say that these powerful emotions are based in thoughts, but that’s because we only notice them when they roar up to the surface as emotion.

Perhaps we can see the disturbing aspect of them, but rarely the delusional. They are distorted assessments of the person or the event that we are attached to or angry with; they’re elaborations, exaggerated stories, lies, misconceptions, fantasies, conceptual constructions, superstitions. As Rinpoche puts it, they decorate on top of what is already there layers upon layers of characteristics that are simply not there. Bad enough that we see things this way; the worst part is that we believe that these stories are true. This is what keeps us locked inside our own personal insane asylum.

Understanding this is the key to understanding our negative states of
mind and, therefore, how to get rid of them.

**EGO-GRASPING: THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM**

At the root of this, as Buddha calls it, is ignorance: *marigpa* in Tibetan: unawareness: a fundamental unawareness of how we actually exist. The function of this “ego-grasping,” as it’s appropriately called, is to isolate and concretize this universe-big sense of self, a deluded sense of I, a totally fabricated sense of I, whose nature is fear: paranoid, dark, cut off, separate, alienated, and overwhelming.

This instinctive, pervasive sense of an independent, self-existent, real, solid, definite me-ness, totally pervades everything – there is not an instant when it is not there. It’s at the deepest level of assumption, beneath everything. It is always there, informing everything we think and feel and say and do and experience – and the root even of existing in samsara in the first place.

**THE MAIN VOICE OF THE I IS ATTACHMENT**

Ego-grasping is the root but the delusion that runs our lives is attachment. The irony of ego is we actually feel empty, bereft, and that neediness, that bottomless pit of yearning, that hunger: that’s attachment. And it’s the main voice of ego. From eons of practice we come into this life with a profound sense of dissatisfaction, neediness; a primordial sense that something is missing, of being bereft, lonely, cut off. It’s just there, *all the time*, in the bones of our being.

This attachment, this desire, being a misconception, makes the mistake of believing, a million percent, that that delicious person, that gorgeous taste, that lovely smell, that nice feeling, that idea – that when I get *that*, when I have it inside me, then I’ll feel full, then I’ll be content. That is what desire thinks.

This is so hard to see how desire is deluded. And it is not meant to be a moralistic issue. As soon as we hear these words we feel a bit resentful, “What do you mean – I’m not allowed to have pleasure?” That’s how we feel. But as Lama Yeshe has pointed out: we’re either completely hedonistic, and grasping and shoving everything in, or we’re completely puritanical. And the irony is that they are both coming from a misunderstanding of desire; they both come from ego-grasping.

Buddha is not being moralistic. He is not saying we should not have pleasure – the reality is he is saying we *should* have masses of pleasure, joy, happiness, but naturally and appropriately and, incredibly, without relying upon anything external. This is our natural state when we’ve depolluted our minds of the neruoses, in fact.

Right now, because of the misconception that desire has, and because of the ignorance that drives it, we have got the wrong end of the stick. They think that the delicious chocolate cake, that gorgeous thing is out there, vibrating deliciousness, demanding that I eat it – nothing coming from my side at all. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche points out, we don’t think our mind plays any role at all. We think that it’s all happening from the cake’s side, all the energy is coming from the cake.

**OUR MIND MAKES IT UP**

And the thing is that we don’t see this process! The fact is we are making up the cake – attachment has written a huge story about cake and what it will do for us. It is a complex conceptual
construction, an invention, an elaborate view, an interpretation, an opinion.

We’re like a child, as one lama said, who draws a lion – and then becomes afraid of it. We invent everything in our reality, and then we have all the fears and the paranoia and the depression and the grasping. We’re too much!

But we make up that cake, we make up the enemy – we made them up ourselves. This sounds pretty cosmic, but it is literally true. This doesn’t mean there is no cake there – there is. And it doesn’t mean that Fred didn’t punch you – he did. We need to distinguish between the facts and the fiction: that’s the tricky part.

It is hard to see this, but this is the way delusions function. And basically they are liars. What attachment and ignorance are seeing is simply not true. What they’re seeing simply does not exist.

There is a cake there, but what we think is cake and what cake actually is are hugely different. This is interesting. And because this is hard to understand indicates how ancient it is within us.

What we’re seeing or experiencing, what we are grasping at – delicious cake from its own side that will make me happy – is a total lie. It doesn’t exist like that at all. There is a cake there, it is brown, it is square: that’s valid. And this is what’s hard to distinguish – the facts and the fiction. What is actually there and what is not there. That is the job we need to do in knowing the way delusions work and therefore how to get rid of them and, finally, to see emptiness.
5. The Mental Factors
Alexander Berzin

THE FIVE ALWAYS-PRESENT MENTAL FACTORS
The five ever-functioning subsidiary awarenesses accompany every moment of cognition.

(1) Feeling a level of happiness (tshor-ba, feeling) is how we experience the ripenings of our karma.

A level of happiness is what we experience as the ripening of constructive karma, and a level of unhappiness is what we experience as the ripening of destructive karma. Happiness, neutral, and unhappiness form an unbroken spectrum. Each may be either physical or mental.

Happiness is that feeling which, when it stops, we wish to meet with it again. Unhappiness or suffering is that feeling which, when it arises, we want to be parted from it. A neutral feeling is one that is neither of the former two.

(2) Distinguishing (’du-shes, recognition) takes an uncommon characteristic feature (mtshan-nyid) of the appearing object (snang-yul) of a nonconceptual cognition or an outstanding feature (bkra-ba) of the appearing object of a conceptual cognition, and ascribes a conventional significance (tha-snyad ’dogs-pa) to it. It does not, however, necessarily ascribe a name or mental label to its object, nor does it compare it with previously cognized objects. The mental labeling of words and names is an extremely complex conceptual process. Thus, distinguishing differs greatly from “recognition.”

(3) Intention (urge) (sems-pa) causes the mental activity to face an object or to go in its direction. In general, it moves a mental continuum to cognitively take an object. A mental continuum (sems-rgyud, mind-stream) is an individual everlasting sequence of moments of mental activity.

Mental karma (yid-kyi las) is equivalent to a intention (mental urge). According to the Sautrantika, Chittamatra, Svatantrika-Madhyamaka, and the non-Gelug Prasangika-Madhyamaka schools, physical and verbal karmas are also mental urges.

(4) Contacting awareness (reg-pa) differentiates (yongs-su gcod-pa) that the object of a cognition is pleasant (yid-du ’ong-ba), unpleasant, or neutral, and thus serves as the foundation for experiencing it with a feeling of happiness, unhappiness, or a neutral feeling.

(5) Paying attention or taking to mind (yid-la byed-pa) engages (’jug-pa) the mental activity with the object. The cognitive engagement may be merely to pay some level of attention to the object, from very little attention to very much. It may also be to focus on the object in a certain way. For example, attention may focus on an object painstakingly, in a resetting manner, uninterruptedly, or effortlessly.

All five ever-functioning subsidiary awarenesses are necessarily present in each moment of cognition of anything. Otherwise, our using the object (longs-su sphyod-pa) as an object of cognition would be incomplete.

THE FIVE ASCERTAINING MENTAL FACTORS
Vasubandhu defined the following five in a general manner and asserted that they also accompany every moment of cognition. Asanga called them ascertaining subsidiary awarenesses and
gave them definitions that are more specialized. For Asanga, they accompany only constructive cognitions that apprehend (rtogs-pa, understand) their objects and thus they are subcategories of what Vasubandhu defined. They enable mental activity to ascertain (nges-pa) its object, which means to take it with certainty.

(1) **Positive intention** ('dun-pa) is not merely the motivation (kun-long) to obtain any object, to achieve any goal, or to do something with the object or goal once obtained or achieved. It is the wish to have a desired constructive object, to do something with it, or to achieve a desired constructive goal. The intention may be the wish to meet with a constructive object previously cognized, the wish not to be parted from a constructive object presently cognized, or keen interest (don-gnyer) in a constructive object to be attained in the future.

Positive intention leads to joyful perseverance (brtson-grus) in obtaining the desired object or attaining the desired goal.

(2) **Firm conviction** (mos-pa) focuses on a fact that we have validly ascertained to be like this and not like that. Its function is to make our belief that a fact is true (dad-pa) so firm that others’ arguments or opinions will not dissuade us. For Vasubandhu, this subsidiary awareness means regard. It merely takes its object to have some level of good qualities – on the spectrum from no good qualities to all good qualities – and may be either accurate or distorted.

(3) **Recollecting mindfulness** (dran-pa) is not merely holding on to any cognized object without losing it as an object of focus. Here, it prevents mental activity from forgetting or losing a constructive object with which it is familiar.

Thus, mindfulness is equivalent to a type of “mental glue” (‘dzin-cha) that holds on to the object of focus without letting go. Its strength spans the spectrum from weak to strong.

(4) **Mentally fixating** (ting-nge-‘dzin, concentration) is not merely keeping fixed on any object of cognition taken by any type of cognition, including sensory cognition. Here, it makes the mental activity stay single-pointedly engaged, with continuity, focused on a labeled constructive object (btags-pa’i dngos-po). In other words, the object of fixation needs to be something specified by Buddha as constructive. Additionally, the object needs to be taken with mental consciousness. This is because mental labeling is a function restricted to conceptual cognition, which is exclusively mental. Fixation is the mental abiding (gnas-cha) on an object and may vary in strength from weak to strong. It serves as a basis for discriminating awareness.

(5) **Discriminating awareness** (shes-rab, “wisdom”) focuses on an object for analysis and differentiates its strong points from its weaknesses or its good qualities from its faults. It differentiates these on the basis of the four axioms (rigs-pa bzhi): dependency, functionality, establishment by reason, and the nature of things. Thus, as with the other ascertaining subsidiary awarenesses, discriminating awareness understands (rtogs-pa) its object – for instance, whether it is constructive, destructive, or unspecified by Buddha to be either. It functions to turn away indecisive wavering about it.

Vasubandhu called this subsidiary awareness **intelligent awareness** (blo-gros) and defined it as the subsidiary awareness that decisively discriminates that something is correct or incorrect,
constructive or destructive, and so on. It adds some level of decisiveness to distinguishing an object of cognition—even if that level is extremely weak—and may be either accurate or inaccurate. Thus, intelligent awareness does not necessarily understand its object correctly.

THE SIX ROOT DELUSIONS
A disturbing emotion or attitude (nyon-mongs, Skt. klesha, “afflictive emotion”) is one that when it arises, causes us to lose our peace of mind (rab-tu mi-zhi-ba) and incapacitates us so that we lose self-control. There are six root ones, which act as the roots of the auxiliary disturbing emotions and attitudes.

(1) Longing desire (’dod-chags) aims at any external or internal tainted object (associated with confusion)–either animate or inanimate—and wishes to acquire it based on regarding the object as attractive by its very nature. It functions to bring us suffering. Although longing desire or greed may occur with either sensory or mental cognition, it is based on a conceptual interpolation beforehand. Note that sensory cognition is always nonconceptual, while mental cognition may be either nonconceptual or conceptual. The preceding interpolation either exaggerates the good qualities of the desired object or adds good qualities that it lacks. Thus, the conceptual interpolation pays attention to the desired object in a discordant manner (incorrect consideration)–for example, considering something dirty (a body filled with excrement) as clean.

From a Western perspective, we may add that when longing desire is aimed at another person or group, it may take the form of wishing to possess the person or group as belonging to us or for us to belong to the person or group. It also would seem that longing desire is often additionally supported by a conceptual repudiation or denial beforehand of the negative qualities of its object.

Vasubandhu defined this root disturbing emotion as attachment or possessiveness. It is wishing not to let go of either any of the five types of desirable sensory objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or physical sensations) (’dod-pa’i ’dod-chags) or of our own compulsive existence (srid-pa’i ’dod-chags). It is also based on an exaggeration or a discordant way of paying attention to a tainted object. Attachment to desirable sensory objects is attachment to objects of the plane of desirable sensory objects (’dod-khams, desire realm). Attachment to compulsive existence is attachment to the objects of the plane of ethereal forms (gzugs-khams, form realm) or the plane of formless beings (gzugs-med khams, formless realm). This means attachment to the deep states of meditative trance attained in those realms.

(2) Anger (khong-khro) aims at another limited being, our own suffering, or situations entailing suffering that may arise from either of the two or which may simply be the situations in which the suffering occurs. It is impatient with them (mi-bzod-pa) and wishes to get rid of them such as by damaging or hurting them (gnod-sens) or by striking out against them (kun-nas mnar-sens). It is based on regarding its object as unattractive or repulsive by its very nature and it functions to bring us suffering. Hostility (zhe-sdang) is a subcategory of anger and is directly primarily, although not exclusively, at limited beings.

As with longing desire, although anger may occur with either sensory or mental cognition, it is based on a conceptual interpolation beforehand. The
interpolation either exaggerates the negative qualities of the object or adds negative qualities that it lacks. Thus, the conceptual interpolation pays attention to the object in a discordant manner— for example, incorrectly considering something not at fault to be at fault.

From a Western perspective, we may add that when anger or hostility is aimed at another person or group, it may take the form of rejecting the person or group. Alternatively, because of fear of being rejected by the person or group, we may redirect the anger at ourselves. It would also seem that anger is often additionally supported by a conceptual repudiation or denial beforehand of the good qualities of its object.

(3) Arrogance (nga-rgyal, pride) is a puffed-up mind (khengs-pa) based on a deluded outlook toward a transitory network (’jig-lta). As explained below, this deluded outlook focuses on some aspect or network of aspects from among our five aggregates and identifies it as an unaffected, monolithic “me” separate from the aggregates and lording over them. From among the various forms and levels of a deluded outlook toward a transitory network, it is based specifically on automatically arising grasping for “me” (ngar-'dzin lhan-skyes). It functions to make us not appreciate others or respect the good qualities of others (mi-gus-pa) and to prevent us from learning anything.

(4) Unawareness (ma-rig-pa, ignorance), according to both Asanga and Vasubandhu, is the murky-mindedness (rmongs-pa) of not knowing (mi-shes-pa) behavioral cause and effect or the true nature of reality (de-kho-na-nyid). Murky-mindedness is a heaviness of mind and body. Unawareness, then, as a disturbing state of mind that causes and perpetuates uncontrollably recurring rebirth (samsara), does not include not knowing someone’s name. Unawareness produces distorted certainty (log-par nges-pa), indecisive wavering, and complete befuddlement (kun-nas nyon-mongs-pa). In other words, unawareness makes us stubborn in our certainty about something incorrect, insecure and unsure of ourselves, and stressed.

(5) Indecisive wavering (the-tshoms, doubt) is entertaining two minds about what is true—in other words, wavering between accepting or rejecting what is true. What is true refers to such facts as the four noble truths and behavioral cause and effect. Moreover, the wavering may tend more to the side of what is true, more to the side of what is false, or be evenly divided between the two. Indecisive wavering functions as a basis for not engaging with what is constructive.

Asanga pointed out that the main cause of problems here is disturbing, deluded indecisive wavering (the-tshoms nyon-mongs-can). It refers to the wavering that tends more toward an incorrect decision about what is true. It is the troublemaker because, if the wavering tends toward what is correct or is even divided, it could lead to engaging in what is constructive.

(6) Deluded outlooks view their objects in a certain way. They seek and regard their objects as things to latch on to (yul-‘tshol-ba), without they themselves scrutinizing, analyzing, or investigating them. In other words, they merely have an attitude toward their objects. They occur only during conceptual cognition and are accompanied by either an interpolation or a repudiation. As subsidiary awarenesses, however, they themselves do not interpolate or repudiate anything.