

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.

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 of 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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The Pure Nature of Our Mind

Lama Yeshe

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 notice 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.

What is Meditation?

Ven. Robina Courtin

The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*, which translates as “to familiarize,” or “to habituate.” In this sense, meditation is a psychological process of familiarizing, habituating, oneself with two things: that which is positive or virtuous and that which is true or real. Right now, according to Buddha, our minds are thoroughly habituated with the exact opposite: that which is the negative or non-virtuous and that which is not true – all the nonsense made up by the ego, by attachment, anger, jealousy, pride and the rest, which causes us suffering, to experience life in a deluded, distorted, fearful way, and to harm others.

Our finding it hard to change from the negative to the positive shows what our minds are familiar with at the moment.

A person using Buddha’s methods is, essentially, attempting to develop their positive potential and lessen the negative. Buddha says this potential is innate; that love, wisdom, kindness, generosity, etc. are at the core of our being and, in fact, define us; and that negativity, although present in our minds and lives, does not define us, is not innate, and thus can be removed.

Given this, we need to train in two kinds of meditation, two ways of using our mind in meditation. Buddha’s expertise is the mind.

CONCENTRATION MEDITATION

The first is called **stabilization** or **concentration** meditation; the second is called **insight** meditation. It’s a practical, doable process.

Stabilization meditation is a method for concentrating the mind. The short-term benefits of even moderate success are enormous – we become calm, relaxed, clear, controlled, less neurotic. But the longterm goal is the point: the development of a very refined, focused level of awareness, bringing it to a degree of clarity and wisdom and joy that we can’t even imagine as possible

according to the prevalent materialist views of the mind. It’s a tried and tested method that has been around for thousands of years and is doable by anyone.

INSIGHT MEDITATION

Even though the benefits of single-pointed concentration are huge, it’s just the beginning. We can now begin the work of developing insight.

Insight into what? According to Buddha, because our mind is full of misconceptions about reality – that things are permanent, whereas they’re impermanent; that things happen to us without cause from our side, whereas they happen according to our past actions; that our own self and all other phenomena have an inherent nature, whereas they don’t; and so on – then we need to develop insight into how things actually are. Because these delusions, these misconceptions are so deep, so intuitive, we need to develop very refined concentration and thus a very refined level of mental ability to cut through them.

Essentially, this is a cognitive process. Having thoroughly studied and thought about the teachings, we take whatever topic we want to develop insight into – karma, emptiness, impermanence, whatever – and analyze it, deconstruct it, arguing with ego’s deluded view. Put simply, we think about it. But because the mind is more refined, more focused, it’s more capable. The analysis will trigger an insight, which we then hold with our concentration.

In this way we gradually familiarize ourselves – develop insight into – the way things actually are, ceasing our own suffering and, on the basis of developing compassion, benefiting others.

These same tools, of concentration and analysis, are also used in visualization meditation; instead of thinking, however, one visualizes the Buddha and then focuses on that internal image as a method for developing within ourselves the perfect qualities embodied by the Buddha, our own innate potential.

Preparing for Meditation

Sit comfortably in either the seven-point posture or some other recommended position. Spend a few minutes settling your body and mind. Finding a quiet place is probably difficult in prison; if not, make a firm decision to keep your mind as focused as you can, not to get distracted by the noise.

Decide which meditation you will do and for how long you will meditate, and determine not to do anything else for that period of time.

It is traditional to prostrate three times before sitting down to meditate. Prostration counteracts pride. It expresses our acceptance that we have work to do, problems to solve, and a long way to go in our inner development. It is not necessarily an act of submission to something external, but a recognition that the potential for wholeness and perfection lies within us. We are prostrating to our own true nature, which we want to awaken through meditation. If done with this understanding, prostration helps put the mind in the right state for meditation.

MOTIVATE

Check up on your thoughts. Why do you want to meditate? What do you hope to achieve? As with any activity, the clearer and more firmly we set our goal, the stronger is our motivation and the more likely we are to succeed.

A short-term goal of meditation is simply to calm down and relax. More far-reaching is the aim eventually to penetrate through to a *complete* understanding of the nature of reality as an antidote to unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

However, the most altruistic and thus the best aim of meditation is to achieve enlightenment in order to help others gain it, too. This is the most far-reaching objective – the Mahayana motivation – and inevitably the other goals will be reached on the way.

Whichever your motivation, think it through clearly before proceeding with your meditation. If you feel it would help your practice you can say the Refuge and Offering prayers on page 99. Some people find that reciting prayers, either mentally or verbally, induces a good frame of mind for meditation by reminding them of the wisdom and other qualities they want to achieve. If you do pray, reflect on the meaning of each prayer so that it flows naturally from your heart.

DEDICATE

Each time you meditate, even for just a few minutes, you create positive energy and develop some degree of insight. The effects of this energy and insight are determined by your thoughts and attitudes as you move from meditation to ordinary activity. If you finish the session in an unhappy frame of mind or rush off too quickly, much of the energy is likely to be lost.

Before you leave your meditation seat, take a few minutes to recall your reasons and motivation for doing the session and dedicate your energy and insight to the fulfillment of these objectives. Clear dedication in this way stabilizes the insight and ensures that results come.

And don't forget to bring the good experiences of the meditation into your daily activities. Instead of acting and reacting impulsively and following your thoughts and feelings here and there, watch your mind carefully, be aware, and try to deal skillfully with problems as they arise. If you can do this each day, your meditation has been successful.

If you are unable to sit on the floor in any of these positions, you can meditate in a chair or on a low, slanted bench. The important thing is to be comfortable.

POSTURE

Mind and body are interdependent. Because the state of one affects the state of the other, a correct sitting posture is emphasized for meditation. The seven-point posture, used by experienced meditators for centuries, is recommended as the best way to help gain a calm, clear state of mind.

However, if sitting cross-legged is not comfortable, it is fine to sit in a chair.

1. Legs If possible, sit with your legs crossed in the vajra, or full lotus, position where each foot is placed, sole upward, on the thigh of the opposite leg. This position is difficult to maintain but by practicing each day you will find that your body slowly adapts and you are able to sit this way for increasingly longer periods. The vajra posture gives the best support to the body, but is not essential.

An alternative position is the half-lotus where the left foot is on the floor under the right leg and the right foot on top of the left thigh. You can also sit in a simple cross-legged posture with both feet on the floor.

A firm cushion under the buttocks will enable you to keep your back straight and sit longer without getting pins-and-needles in your legs and feet.

2. Arms Hold your hands loosely on your lap, about two inches below the navel, right hand on top of the left, palms upward, with the fingers aligned. The two hands should be slightly cupped so that the tips of the thumbs meet to form a triangle. Shoulders and arms should be relaxed. Your arms should not be pressed against your body but held a few inches away to allow circulation of air: this helps to prevent sleepiness.

3. Back Your back is most important. It should be straight, held relaxed and lightly upright, as if the vertebrae were a pile of coins. It might be difficult in the beginning, but in time it will become natural and you will notice the benefits: your energy will flow more freely, you won't feel sluggish, and you will be able to sit comfortably in meditation for increasingly longer periods.

4. Eyes New meditators often find it easier to concentrate with their eyes fully closed. This is quite acceptable. However, it is recommended that you leave your eyes slightly open to admit a little light, and direct your gaze downwards. Closing your eyes may be an invitation to sluggishness, sleep or

dream-like images, all of which hinder meditation.

5. Jaw Your jaw should be relaxed and teeth slightly apart, not clenched. Your mouth should also be relaxed, with the lips together lightly.

6. Tongue The tip of your tongue should touch the palate just behind the upper teeth. This reduces the flow of saliva and thus the need to swallow, both of which are hindrances as your concentration increases and you sit in meditation for longer periods.

7. Head Your neck should be bent forward a little so that your gaze is directed naturally towards the floor in front of you. If your head is held too high you may have problems with mental wandering and agitation, and if dropped too low you could experience mental heaviness or sleepiness.

This seven-point posture is most conducive to clear, unobstructed contemplation. You might find it difficult in the beginning, but it is a good idea to go through each point at the start of your session and try to maintain the correct posture for a few minutes. With familiarity it will feel more natural and you will begin to notice its benefits.

The practice of hatha yoga or other physical disciplines can be a great help in loosening tight muscles and joints, which can make it easier to sit well.

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