



**THE CONCEPT AND NATURE OF MIND (CITTA) IN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY:
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The theory of mind in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism also has profound philosophical, ethical, and meditative implications. These traditions elaborate on the basic tenets of early Buddhist teachings concerning citta or mind and cetasikas or mental factors while presenting particular interpretations that are unique to them and which emphasize the ultimate nature of the mind, the interdependence of phenomena, and the possibility of enlightenment. Mahāyāna perspective emphasizes śūnyatā, the emptiness of mind, while those of Vajrayāna emphasize its luminous and intrinsic purity.



In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the mind is empty of inherent existence, and the teachings of Nāgārjuna are central. Nāgārjuna's central claim in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is that all phenomena, including mind, are simultaneously developed (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and, therefore have no independent reality. "Mind arises in dependence on mental factors and objects; its nature is interdependent." This recognition refocuses our view from a static, intrinsic mind to a fluid and relational one.

KEYWORDS: Citta, mind, consciousness, Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy, Dependent Origination.

1.0 Theory of Mind in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Traditions:

The *Heart Sūtra*, *Prajñāpāramitā Hridaya*, teaches that "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form," which attests to a mutually interdependent mind and matter. The recognition of this non-existence is liberative and not nihilistic because it frees practitioners from attractions or repulsions based on a dualistic consciousness. Wisdom and compassion are given equal importance and are seen as one. Similar integration can be seen in the *Bodhisattva* ideal so that the experience of emptiness inspires altruistic action.

Also, a passage from Shantideva's "*The Bodhicaryāvatāra*" points out that "The awakened mind or *Bodhicitta* is motivated by boundless compassion and sustained by the wisdom of emptiness." Compassion shifts the mind from narrow self-interest and reactivity to broad, altruistic concern, which supports the actualization of our fundamental interconnectedness. According to *Vajrayāna* Buddhism, the ultimate nature of the mind is luminous and pure. The *Guhyasamāja Tantra* calls this luminosity the mind's innate clarity, untainted by defilements." Where *Mahāyāna* cautions against intrinsic existence,

Vajrayāna celebrates the clarity and bliss of mind as enlightenment's very ground. The *Mahāmudrā* and other Dzogchen traditions go deeper into the luminous mind by emphasizing experiential realization over theorizing about it.

In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche illustrates, "The mind's nature is like a sky, vast and boundless, and thoughts are like clouds, temporary and passing." *Vajrayāna* meditation practices center on identifying and resting in this radiant nature beyond conceptual elaboration. Deity yoga, *devatā-yoga*, is one of the unique practices of *Vajrayāna* to transform an ordinary person into a Buddha by transforming how one perceives the mind. Practitioners imagine themselves as enlightened deities embodying the qualities of wisdom and compassion. As the *Hevajra Tantra* states, "From the view of seeing the deity, one realizes the inseparability of appearance and emptiness, and there causes the enlightenment of bliss and wisdom."

Both *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* agree on the mind's potential for enlightenment but differ in emphasis and method. *Mahāyāna* heavily emphasizes the mind as emptiness, the absolute truth and it stresses that this is known through intellectual analysis and meditative insight to transcend the dualistic view. *Vajrayāna* approaches this by emphasizing the mind's innate clarity, using utilitarian practices to touch its luminous aspects. In *Mahāyānism*, liberation is a gradual journey that is walked through the six perfections or *pāramitās*. At the same time, in *Vajrayāna*, it can happen quickly in individuals through secret practices. By practicing the skillful means or *upāya* of the relative and ultimate realities in post-meditative experience, the *Vajrayāna* practitioners achieve the fruition of enlightenment.

Modern contemplative practices and psychological research have been influenced by theories of mind offered by *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna*. Research on mindfulness and compassion-based interventions borrowed heavily from *Mahāyāna* notions of interdependence and altruism. Research by Richard Davidson, in *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, illustrates that the cultivation of compassion rewires neural pathways to build emotional resilience.

Vajrayāna's focus on visualization and the luminous mind has been a model for therapeutic techniques for trauma recovery. Clinical psychologist John Welwood discusses in *Toward Psychology of Awakening*, that such practices help develop a rich sense of inner freedom and clarity. This is a reflection on the mind according to the various theories in *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* contexts mythological explanation of spiritual belief, *Nyingma*, *Sakya*, *Gelug*, and other Tibetan schools that provide key insight into the structure of enlightenment and the three doors for liberation. These traditions deeply enrich mind transformation from the perspectives of emptiness, luminosity and compassion. These aphorisms also have relevance beyond their religious context, informing modern psychology and contemplative practices and offering timeless guidance for how to cultivate wisdom and compassion.

1.1 Theory of Mind in *Theravāda* Buddhism:

The theory of consciousness is central to *Theravāda* Buddhist philosophy and the mental ground of sensations, perceptions, and mental formations. All these together are regarded as mental aggregates called mind. While the Western view frequently sees mind as a separate thing of being, in Buddhism, *citta* or mind is recognized as a dynamic, impermanent, and interdependent condition. Its analysis is closely connected to early Buddhist teachings on causality, ethics and liberation.

The term *citta* is frequently translated as mind or consciousness, which is the awareness of the object, the primary factor in the process of cognition. But it includes both cognitive and affective aspects. The part or function of mental life allows us to process and interpret sensory experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The term *citta* is not static, it is ever-flowing like a stream or *santāna*, indicating its impermanent nature.

A core aspect of *citta* is that it is impermanent, *anicca*. Every moment of awareness arises, remains, dissolves, and is succeeded by the next. Of this impermanence, the *Dhammapada* states: "All

phenomena, even the mind, are impermanent.” This impermanence contradicts the idea of an unchanging or permanent self, which is where the Buddhist teaching of non-self resonates. Everything is conditioned and interdependent, and *citta* arises in dependence on conditions; this is explained in the doctrine of Dependent Origination. In this causality, the workings of the mind are conditioned by *kamma*, phenomena sensed through the senses and *cetasikas*. The *Abhidhamma* details fifty-two mental factors that arise with consciousness, some wholesome mindfulness and some unwholesome greed. The ethical quality of consciousness is a central focus in Buddhist philosophy. One is wholesome, the other unwholesome, and there also is a neutral. According to Damien Keown, ethical cultivation starts with a purified mind, for actions are ultimately based on the moral quality of intention.

In Buddhist philosophy, the term *citta* also refers to various levels of mental refinement. Ordinary consciousness is the level of everyday experience tainted by *kilesā*, defilements, like craving and aversion. The ordinary *citta* is reactive and constrained by habitual patterns. At the second level, the mind of concentration can be calmed and focused through meditation, free of distractions, and is a fertile ground for insight or *vipassanā* to develop. The *Visuddhimagga* reminds us that “One rightly sees things as they are with a concentrated mind.” At the highest level, *citta* is completely free from defilements, realizing liberation. The state is framed differently in *Udāna*, calling it “the unconditioned.”

2.0 Ethical and Philosophical Dimensions of Mind:

The implications of this functional theory of mind are ethical to the core. By revealing the conditionality of mental factors and physical actions, Buddhism highlights the crucial role of ethical behaviour or *sīla* and mental cultivation. Ethical conduct comes from transforming unwholesome states of mind, creating good karmic feedback both for the individuals who change those states of mind and for the society in which they live.

In fact, psychologically, the Buddhist perspective is that of a non-dualistic structure, where mind and matter co-emerge and condition each other, dismantling the dualistic formulation at the heart of Western thinking. Though the last part has a specific audience and in-depth interest, the whole approach indicates a broad vision that relates to modern integrative methods and theories in psychology and neuroscience and encourages collaboration between the two fields.

The Buddhist functional theory of mind interprets how mental factors mix with matter to create our experience as humans. It does so by stressing the interdependence of *citta*, *cetasikas*, and *rūpa*, which opens up practical resources for ethical and psychological transformation. Moreover, contemporary scientific discoveries on the principles of neuroplasticity and the mind-body connection serve to validate these ancient insights and bring them to light in current contexts. It is yet a continuing dance of mind and matter that encourages both philosophical investigation and pragmatic approaches toward greater wellness.

2.1 Practical Implications of *Citta* in Buddhist Practice:

Citta is central to Buddhist practice precisely because of its transformative potential. The point of mindfulness, *sati*, and meditation is to bring about wholesome states of mind, and to eliminate unwholesome states. *Satipatthana Sutta* stresses the need to observe the mind: “One contemplates the mind as the mind, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful.” Mindfulness as a practice, emerging from these very teachings, emphasizes awareness as a tool for breaking habitual patterns and sharpening mental clarity. Jon Kabat-Zinn notes, “Mindfulness is the practice of being entirely aware of the present moment every moment, and it allows us to see the operations of the mind.”

2.2 Buddhist Theoretical Implications of Mind:

The implications of the Buddhist concept of *citta* for modern psychology and neuroscience are far-reaching. Research on neuroplasticity affirms the Buddhist view of mind: that it is malleable and can be transformed with correct training. For example, Richard Davidson explains that meditation rewires

the brain changing the paths and junctions of neurons to help us find emotional and cognitive clarity. Additionally, the moral implications of *citta* echo contemporary conversations regarding moral psychology. This teaching resonates with Buddhist emphasis on the role of intention as the origin of moral action, which corresponds with theories in virtue ethics and behavioral psychology, favouring inner drive over results.

Buddhist philosophy about *citta* is a holistic view of the mind's dynamic and transformative potential. With practical and theoretical insights about how to work with this mind, Buddhism speaks to impermanence, interdependence, and ethical cultivation. These ancient teachings have been echoed by modern psychological research, which continues to affirm their relevance in understanding contemporary struggles with mental health and ethical living.

3.0 Theory of Mind in Philosophy:

Theory of mind is the concept in philosophy that studies consciousness, mental states, and the ability to ascribe thoughts and emotions to oneself and others. But these are not necessarily distinct explanations; Eastern and Western traditions bring insights into dimensions such as individuality, interdependence, and the metaphysical nature of consciousness that align with their insights into the theory of mind. While the mind is often looked at from a dualistic and analytical perspective in Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy offers more holistic and experiential outlook on it.

3.1 Mind and Rationality in Western Philosophy:

In Western philosophy, the mind-body theory has been directly associated with dualist frameworks and the exploration of self-awareness. René Descartes famously posited the distinction between mind and body in his "*cogito*" argument that "I think, therefore I am." This dualism established the basis for considering the mind as an independent, non-physical substance, the seat of thought and reason.

Immanuel Kant developed a similar theory of mind but more specifically argued that mind structures experience. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposed that the mind synthesizes sensory data with categories of understanding, e.g., space and time, that it imposes on it. That indicates that the mind plays a formative role in reality; it is an active and creative endeavour that contributes to shaping the world around us.

The theory of mind in Western philosophy in modern times is now an attempt to include or complement empirical and scientific approaches before it. In *Consciousness Explained*, Daniel Dennett critiques Cartesian dualism, suggesting an alternate view in which consciousness arises from neural processes and serves as a user illusion of being. Likewise, in Thomas Nagel's essay "*What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*", the mind's experiences are inherently perspectival and cannot be fully explained by physical explanation.

3.2 Mind and Interdependence in Eastern Philosophy:

The theory of mind in Eastern philosophy focuses on impermanence, and interdependence, by the influence of Buddhism, and the disintegration of the self in accordance with different schools. In Buddhist thought, *citta* or mind is recognized as an active, conditioned process rather than something static. The *Dhammapada* states, "All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts." This highlights the role of the mind in shaping reality while acknowledging its impermanent and conditioned nature.

Advaita Vedanta, the great Indian philosophy school, studies the theory of mind through non-duality (*advaita*). From his perspective, mind is an instrument of perception and cognition but ultimately illusory when considered separate from ultimate reality, Brahman realization of the oneness of the individual manifestation and the universal absolute gives rise to liberation. Daoist philosophy, as articulated by Laozi in the *Tao Te Ching*, presents the mind as part of the natural flow of the Dao. Laozi

emphasizes simplicity and non-attachment, saying that the mind of the sage is empty; it is the mirror of the universe. This perspective encourages aligning the mind with the natural order rather than over-identifying with individual thoughts.

This Western way represents the mind as a rational, individual machine, but the Eastern way is so intertwined with interdependence, impermanence and transcendence that it makes it difficult to separate the two. Western philosophers tend to scrutinize the structure and mechanisms of the mind, while Eastern traditions place their stock in experiential insight and ethical transformation. However, both traditions converge in their recognition of the complexity of consciousness and its centrality in human experience. Contemplative practices from Eastern traditions are increasingly informing empirical studies within modern cognitive science.

As per Buddhist teachings, human existence is an amalgamation of psycho-physical phenomena where the mind and body are interrelating and multi-dimensionally. It underscores the way something in the head influences something in the body and the inverse relationship. An angry mind may lead to harmful actions or speech, creating and reinforcing the vicious karmic cycles. The interpretation of Dependent Origination gives even more depth to the interdependent nature of karmic motivation. The chain of cause and effect identifies craving and clinging as the key links to our continued cycle of birth and death. Awareness of and disruption of these connections with mindfulness and insight lead the practitioner to weaken unwholesome motivations and cultivate the wholesome, changing the course of *kamma*.

CONCLUSION

The Buddhist theory of mind sees karmic force as a dynamic motivation that is shaped by the intentions and mental states of the mind. The mind, much like a king, is the king of all integral factors constituting psycho-physical phenomena and has the great capability in generating and altering *kamma*. Practitioners can renature their motivations through mindfulness, ethical conduct, and meditative insight, leading to liberation from suffering and the blossoming of wholesome states. The delicate interactions between mind and *kamma* in relation to the soteriological journey still opens great witness to the potential for transformation in the human condition.

The comprehending the nature of mind is essential to figuring out the systems that control moral behavior and emotional control. According to Buddhist philosophy, mental states and environmental factors impact the mind, which is a dynamic and fluid process. Its nature is intricately linked to the principles of moral behavior, motivation, intention, and awareness. Understanding that the mind is conditioned and transient allows people to cultivate emotional control and mindfulness, two qualities that are critical for moral decision-making. The relationship between ideas, feelings, and conduct emphasizes how important mental clarity and self-awareness encourage wholesome activities and reduce unwholesome tendencies. Furthermore, this approach is consistent with contemporary moral behavior psychology by highlighting the mental and affective mechanisms that underlie moral behavior.

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