

The Primacy of The Mind: An Analytical Study of Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract

The primacy of the mind (citta) occupies an ultimate position in the philosophical and ethical teachings of Theravāda Buddhism. The Buddha's teachings highlight that human experience, conduct, and the quality of life are profoundly shaped by mental processes. Theravāda Buddhism strongly emphasizes the mind (citta). The Buddha constantly emphasized that the mind is the source of all human experiences, behaviors, and moral outcomes. According to the Dhammapada's well-known opening words, the mind precedes, governs, and generates all things. This paper analyses a few texts from the Pāli Canon to investigate the Theravāda view of the mind as the precursor to the world. The study explores the connection between emancipation, ethical behavior, kamma, and the mind. The quality of mental states determines the nature of societal and individual experience. Additionally, the study indicates that the Noble Eightfold Path's cultivation of wholesome mental characteristics leads to mental purification and, eventually, Nibbāna. The results show that the Buddhist concept of mental primacy is still very applicable to concerns of psychology, ethics, and human welfare today.

Keywords: Theravāda, Buddhism, Mind, Primacy, Dhammapada, Nibbāna.

Introduction

The mind is that which thinks, perceives, feels, remembers, imagines, and wills. It is named citta because, according to the Aṭṭhasālinī, it cognises (cinteti) an object (ārammaṇa); that is, it knows (vijānāti) the object. Alternatively, every wholesome, unwholesome, or functional worldly consciousness maintains its own continuity through the javana process because the term "citta" refers to all forms of consciousness. Hence, it is called citta because it "collects" or "accumulates" (cinoti) the continuity of mental processes. It covers the entirety of mental phenomena, including both conscious processes, through which an individual is aware of external and internal situations, and unconscious processes, which can influence an individual without intention or awareness. The mind plays a central role in most aspects of human life, yet its exact nature is contested. Some characterisations focus on internal features, suggesting that the mind modifies information and is not readily accessible to outside observers. Others emphasise its relevance to outer conduct, interpreting mental processes as dispositions to engage in observable behaviour. The difficulty of elucidating the relationship between matter and thought is known as the mind-body problem. In the past, it was common to think of mind and matter as separate things that could exist apart. Physicalism, which maintains that everything is material and that minds are specific characteristics of some material objects, has been the predominant philosophical stance since the 20th century. The development of nerve systems, which resulted in the formation of brains, is linked to the evolutionary history of the mind. The quantity and capacity of mental functions increased as brains grew more complex, with certain brain regions devoted to particular mental functions. As people age and learn from their experiences, their minds also change over time as they go through different psychological phases. Some people suffer from mental disorders, which cause specific mental abilities to malfunction. Psychology, neurology, cognitive science, and philosophy of mind are the primary disciplines that investigate the mind. They frequently concentrate on many facets of the mind and use a variety of research techniques, from conceptual analysis and thought experiments to empirical observation and neuroimaging. Numerous other disciplines, such as anthropology, education, theology, and epistemology, are related to the mind.

The Concept of Ātman in Philosophy

The concept of the Ātman suggests that man's inner self is the primary source of all principles. However, it is not as easy to reach a person's inner essence as their external nature. Our understanding of our inner nature is extremely constrained and biased, whereas the exterior body, with all its organs and functions, is available to inspection, and both its external shape and the internal workings of its bones, joints, sinews, muscles, and nerves are open to inquiry from every angle. Unlike from the outside, we do not immediately perceive the entirety of the body's organs and functions from the inside. Instead, our inner selves resemble a large home with numerous floors, passageways, and chambers, only one of which is illuminated by a lamp burning in an upper story, leaving the rest in complete darkness. Despite this, our inner selves are nonetheless real and exist.

When one first enters a house like this, it is easy to assume that the illuminated area is its centre and that the house only extends as far as the light's rays can reach, with anything beyond being invisible and possibly being thought of as non-existent. The philosophical spirit of humanity in India, Greece, and modern times has remarkably unanimously fallen into an error that is best described as intellectualism because of this misconception. This is the conviction that what we perceive "behind man's pale forehead" as consciousness, mind, or spirit bears some resemblance, analogy, or even is identical with the innermost essence of man and the universe, whether referred to as Brahman, the First Principle, or God. The idea that the nature of the soul, and thus the nature of God, should be understood as something analogous or related to human thought, reason, spirit, or intelligence has dominated the entire development of philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to the present day, with very few exceptions.¹

The Concept of Anattā in Theravāda Buddhism

The study of the mind has been greatly impacted by developments in neuroscience, psychology, and cognitive science in the modern world. Many contemporary scholars view the mind as a dynamic process that arises from the functioning of the brain and the interaction of cognitive and bodily processes, rather than as an eternal Ātman (Self).

This process-oriented approach shares some similarities with the Buddhist idea of Dependent Origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda) from the perspective of Theravāda Buddhism. Theravāda holds that Viññāṇa (mind) is a conditioned reality that develops and ceases based on causes and conditions rather than an eternal self or soul.² As a result, the mind should not be thought of as a personal identity or a permanent thing. However, Theravāda Buddhism does not reduce thought to brain activity alone, which sets it apart from rigid materialism theories. Rather, it uses the interconnectedness of kamma, nāma-rūpa (mind and matter), and other conditioned phenomena to describe mind.

The idea of Ātman as the eternal Self is still upheld in many religious systems today, particularly those influenced by the Upanishads. On the other hand, the majority of modern scientific methods do not acknowledge the idea of an immortal soul and instead study consciousness as an observable and quantifiable cognitive activity. As a result, rather than being a proven scientific finding, the idea of Ātman continues to be a topic of philosophical and religious discussion. Theravāda Buddhism holds that realising via insight meditation (Vipassanā) that the mind, like all conditioned phenomena, is transitory (anicca), unsatisfying (dukkha), and non-self (anattā) is the practical objective, rather than only defining consciousness academically. This insight results in the end of attachment and, eventually, Nibbāna.

The Primacy of the Mind

The mind is in charge of the world; the mind is what activates the world. The mind is the only entity with complete control. The Abhidhamma texts, early Buddhist texts, and post-canonical commentary exegesis serve as the main sources of inspiration for the material given here. The mind leads the world; the mind activates the world. This passage illustrates how Buddhism highlights the mind's primacy and centrality as the essential fact of human existence—the constantly shifting series of ideas, emotions, and experiences that make up our conscious experience. However, what is highlighted is not just an understanding of the nature of the mind in servitude but, more crucially, the enormous potential that the mind holds to realise greater cognitive capacities and raise itself to the maximum level of freedom. Freedom is the ability to govern one's own thoughts, whereas bondage is the state of being subservient to one's own thoughts. The mind is the universal seat of both freedom and bondage. The development of the mind is a prerequisite for releasing the mind from servitude, and the development of the mind requires knowledge of the mind. This explains why Buddhism is so interested in psychology and why psychology is important to Buddhism as a religion.³ In early Buddhist lectures and the Abhidhamma treatises, the term "mind" is referred to by three different terms. These are viññāṇa, mano, and

¹ Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, trans. A. S. Geden (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), pp.132-133.

² Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p.351.

³ Y. Karunadasa, *The Buddhist Analysis of Mind* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2025), p.1.

citta. They are frequently used as complements, overlapping, and near-synonyms. As a result, we have “this is citta,” “this is mano,” and “this is viññāṇa,” in addition to what is referred to as citta, mano, and viññāṇa. We can only comprehend their subtle differences by looking at how they are used in context.⁴

Three types of Minds

Viññāṇa appears to refer to basic awareness in an elementary meaning. The phrase “visual consciousness” appears to refer to “mere seeing” in the statement “depending on the eye and the visible, arises visual consciousness.” When viññāṇa appears as “consciousness-element” in a list alongside five other elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space—it also conveys this meaning.⁵ According to an exegetical gloss that describes it as “the basic data of individual existence,” this list appears to have been meant to allude to the most fundamental elements of the realm of experience. Unlike citta and mano, viññāṇa is never ethically classified as wholesome or unwholesome due to its use in this basic sense. Furthermore, there is no evidence that viññāṇa should be produced and cultivated, unlike citta and mano. Additionally, viññāṇa serves as one of the four nutriments that preserve the empiric individuality in its saṃsāra wayfaring. Both death-awareness and rebirth-linking consciousness are referred to as citta in the commentarial exegesis (cuti-citta, paṭisandhi-citta).

When it serves as a sense-faculty, the word “mano” is frequently used to refer to mind. Mano is referred to as either mind-base (manāyatana) or mind element (mano-dhātu) when it refers to a sense-faculty. The sixth internal base is referred to as mind-base (manāyatana) when the empiric individuality is divided into six internal and six external bases (āyatana). The “mind-element” (mano-dhātu) depicts the mind as a sense faculty when the individual is broken down into eighteen elements.

Citta is frequently used to refer to consciousness in general. It can also refer to awareness and its accompanying mental components. Citta also appears in the treatises of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka in this dual connotation. The term is used in the singular when it is used in the first sense. The term is either singular or plural when it is used in the second sense. Because awareness in the second sense can take many different forms depending on the mental elements it combines with. This explains why the term citta appears in both singular and plural forms in both Buddhist discourses and Abhidhamma treatises. Unlike citta, viññāṇa and mano do not appear in the plural form in Buddhist discourses, according to the PTS vocabulary. Citta is a term that is frequently used in relation to mental culture. Citta is what needs to be grown, nurtured, and brought to the pinnacle of perfection. Three fundamental principles are recognised by the Buddhist understanding of mind as it appears in the early Buddhist discourses.

The Function of Consciousness

The famous phrase “apart from conditions, there is no arising of consciousness” refers to the “dependent arising” of consciousness. Consciousness is not a potentiality that exists in the heart and manifests itself at different times. Additionally, it is not a static thing that never changes. A duality is always the source of consciousness: For instance, in the case of eye-consciousness, visible objects are ephemeral, changing, and becoming-other, as is the eye, the visual organ. This is the fleeting, transitory duality of (eye-cum visible things), which is changing, becoming-other, and impermanent. Additionally, eye-consciousness is transient. Because how could eye-consciousness that developed as a result of relying on transient circumstances be permanent? Sensory contact is the term for the coincidence, concurrence, and confluence of the three elements: the eye, the eye-object, and the eye-consciousness, as well as the numerous mental processes that follow.⁶ Consciousness arises via the interaction of sense organs with sense objects, much as fire is created by the friction of two sticks. It is named according to whether it arises in relation to the ear, the sight, or any other sense organ. Therefore, from a Buddhist point of view, consciousness is the awareness of an object. It is undeniably true that a variety of conditions must be met for consciousness to emerge. However, importance is attributed to the thing. Thus, consciousness was characterised as “that which grasps its object” (ārammaṇika) in post-canonical Buddhist exegesis. The purpose of this definition is to disprove the notion that consciousness can emerge in the absence

⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 595.

⁵ U Thittila, *The Book of Analysis (Vibhaṅga): The Second Book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (London: Published for the Pali Text Society by Luzac, 1969), p. 107.

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 1172.

of an object (nirāmbanavāda). The idea that consciousness does not exist in total isolation is another fundamental tenet of the Buddhist understanding of the mind. It always coexists alongside the other four aggregates that are used to analyse an individual.⁷

“Apart from corporeality, apart from feeling, apart from perception, apart from volitional formations, I will make known the coming and going of consciousness, its passing away and rebirth, its growth, increase, and expansion. That is impossible,” the Buddha declares to monks.⁸

It is possible to distinguish consciousness from the other four aggregates, even if they cannot be separated. It is for this reason that consciousness and the other four aggregates can be defined and described. The reciprocal relationship between awareness and mentality-materiality (nāma-rūpa) is the third fundamental tenet in the Buddhist theory of mind. In “mentality-materiality,” “mentality” refers to five mental elements: sensation (vedanā), perception (saññā), volition (cetanā), sensory contact (phassa), and attention (manasikāra).⁹ These are the five fundamental non-rational mental elements that inevitably coexist with all forms of consciousness. These elements are found in the aggregates of perception, feeling, and mental formations. This classification is based on the theory that consciousness cannot emerge as a single state since it is the knowing or awareness of an object. At least five mental elements that engage in more specialised cognitive functions must coexist with it. In the compound “mentality-materiality,” “materiality” refers to the four major components of matter (mahābhūta) and the matter that depends on them (upāda-rūpa). It refers to the organic materials that makes up a living being, such as the five physical sense-faculties. The idea of a mental substance is eliminated by the three fundamental tenets of Buddhist psychology that we have already covered. There is nothing in and of itself underneath or behind the mental phenomena into which the mental continuum is examined in the absence of these three principles. Strictly speaking, awareness is merely the process of cognising an object; it is neither the cognising agent nor the cognition-causing instrument. Consciousness is an event that happens as a result of favourable circumstances rather than an entity that exists. It is an action, but it lacks an actor. The emphasis is on the fact that awareness is not a conscious subject. Consciousness is neither a self nor an extension of a self-substance. Thus, the Buddha declares:

Monks, it would be better for the uneducated worldling to identify with this body made up of the four major constituents of matter instead of the mind. Why is this body made up of the four major parts observed standing for a year, two years, three, four, five, or ten years, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years, a hundred years, or even more? However, what is referred to as “mind,” “mentality,” and “consciousness” begins as one thing and ends as another during the day and at night.

That which is referred to as “mind,” “mentality,” and “consciousness” originates as one thing and ceases as another by day and night, just like a monkey wandering through a forest grabs hold of one branch, lets it go, and then grabs another.¹⁰ Twelve Mind and the tripartite division of individual life into bases (āyatana), aggregates (khandha), and elements (dhātu): The Buddhist division of individual existence into bases, aggregates, and elements provides more information about the nature of mind. Corporeality (rūpa), sentiments (vedanā), perceptions (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa) are the five aggregates. In the Abhidhamma, feelings, sensations, and mental formations are referred to as cetasika, which are concomitants of consciousness, whereas consciousness itself is called citta, which means bare awareness. It is not an Abhidhamma invention to divide people into citta and cetasika. According to the Cūḷavedalla-sutta, emotions and perceptions are mental elements (cetasikā dhammā) and are linked to consciousness (citta-paṭibaddhā).¹¹ This demonstrates that awareness of an object, or consciousness as knowing, can never emerge in its actual

⁷ Y. Karunadasa, *The Buddhist Analysis of Mind* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2025), p.3.

⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), (SN 22.53, Upayasutta), p.890.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 534-5.

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p.595.

¹¹ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p.399.

distinct state. It always occurs in close proximity to mental elements like emotion that carry out more specialised functions during the cognitive process.

The Five Aggregates (Khandhas)

Khandha literally translates to “group” or “aggregate.” When certain circumstances are met, the phenomena that are categorised as khandhas cease to exist. According to the Abhidhamma, the three ultimate realities (paramattha dhammas), which are rūpa (material phenomena), cetasika (mental elements), and citta (consciousness), are not distinct from the five aggregates. Instead, they are a different way to categorise these fundamental truths. The five aggregates (pañcakkhandha) consist of Rūpakkhandha (the Material Aggregate), Vedanākkhandha (the Aggregate of Feeling), Saññākkhandha (the Aggregate of Perception), Saṅkhārakkhandha (the Aggregate of Mental Formations), and Viññāṇakkhandha (the Aggregate of Consciousness).

The Aggregate of Matter is the first of the five aggregates. The Four Great Elements (cattāri mahābhūtāni): earth (solidity), water (cohesion or fluidity), fire (heat), and air (motion), as well as all material phenomena produced from them (upādāya-rūpa), are included. The five physical sense faculties the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body and their associated external objects visible forms, sounds, tastes, scents, and tactile objects are examples of these derived forms. It also incorporates some ideas that fall under the category of mind-objects (dhammāyatana). The entire area of material existence, both internal and external, is therefore included in the Aggregate of Matter.¹²

The emotive component of our psychological experience is represented by the aggregate of feelings. Since sensory contact denotes the instantaneous descending of awareness upon an object, it has sensory contact as its immediate condition. A cognitive act can't be unaffected by the object of thought. Depending on the reaction to the cognitive item, the affective tone of emotion could be either pleasant, painful, or neutral. The boundary that separates the emotional quality into pleasant and painful is indicated by the third species of sensation. This affective neutrality is not the same as balance of mind, or equanimity (tatramajjhataṭṭhā). The latter does not represent a range of emotions. It is a more advanced intellectual state that is a part of all mental formations. Additionally, feeling is a faculty (indriya), meaning that it is a reality that exerts influence over its related occurrences. The three emotions—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—become fivefold when examined as a faculty. Here, the threefold division's pleasant sensation is divided into two categories: joy (somanassa) and pleasure (sukha). While the second is mental, the first is physical. In a similar vein, the unpleasant sensation of the threefold division is divided into two categories here: dissatisfaction (domanassa) and pain (dukkha). They are both mental and physical. The ability to feel neither pain nor pleasure is known as neutrality (upekkhā).¹³

Third is the sum of all perceptions. The phrase “what one feels that one perceives” shows that it has something to do with feeling. Perception is the recognition of an object that shows up through any of the sense doors or the mind door. It knows that blue things are blue, yellow things are yellow, and so on. Perception is the process of connecting current sensory inputs to things we've experienced before, which lets us understand the sensory data. It should be mentioned that the Pāli term for saññā also implies sign, symbol, or mark in addition to perception. According to Nyanaponika Thera, perception's function demonstrates the crucial role it plays in memory formation. Neither the Buddhist discourses nor the Abhidhamma treatises mention memory as a mental element. This may be due to the fact that memory is a complicated process that cannot be attributed to a single mental component. Connecting with the past is the process of remembering, which is a general cognitive activity. However, perception (saññā) is the first of several mental components that go into a cognitive act. Thus, perception (saññā) is both cognition and recognition.¹⁴

As the fourth aggregate, mental formations or volitional constructions (saṅkhārā) come next. Volitional constructs represent something more complicated than the preceding two aggregates, sensation and perception. Saṅkhārā appears in several different contexts, implying a wide range of meanings. Here, we will restrict ourselves to its meaning as the fourth aggregate of personal existence. The human personality's most dynamic and productive aspect is represented by volitional creations. The standard definition of it is as follows:

¹² Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p.20.

¹³ Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2018), p.68.

¹⁴ Y. Karunadasa, *The Buddhist Analysis of Mind* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2025), p.6.

Constructed material form is what they create. They provide a manufactured sense of emotion. They create the perception of created perception. They build created volitional building in the same way as volitional construction. They create consciousness that is manufactured. They build what has been built. As a result, they are known as volitional constructs. Despite being one of the five aggregates, volitional constructions create both themselves and other aggregates, as the definition above demonstrates. This statement makes it very evident that, from a Buddhist standpoint, what we refer to as individual life is a process of production that is founded on the tripartite appropriation: this is mine, this I am, and this is my self. For this reason, nibbāna is defined as deconstruction (visaṅkhāra), a deconstruction brought about by the dissolution of desire, aversion, and delusion.

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Bare awareness is consciousness, the fifth aggregate. Without concurrent mental elements, bare consciousness cannot emerge in its genuine independent state. At least five mental components—feeling, perception, volition, sensory contact, and attention—occur immediately alongside it. Both aggregates of feeling and perception are represented by the first two mental factors when associated with the five aggregates, but the aggregate of mental constructions is represented by the final three. Any cognitive act requires the presence of volition, contact, and attention. As the conative or motivating component of cognition, volition is the most active mental component. Depending on the emotion or affective mode in which the object is experienced, its character and intensity can change. The decision to own an object will be made if it makes one feel happy. The choice to avoid an unpleasant object will be made if the emotion is one of disgust. There will be some kind of indecision if the feeling is caused by the presence of a neutral object, which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The Nature of the Mind and Body Relationship

The Buddha's statement regarding the inseparable relationship between mind (viññāṇa) and mentality-materiality (nāmarūpa) illustrates the nature of the mind-body relationship: "Mentality-materiality is conditioned by the mind (viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ); in turn, the mind is conditioned by mentality-materiality (nāmarūpapaccayā viññāṇaṃ)." ¹⁶

The interaction between mind (viññāṇa) and mentality-materiality (nāmarūpa), two of the twelve components of dependent origination, is reciprocal rather than one-way. The mind or comprehension of an object, is referred to as mind (viññāṇa). Five mental variables make up the mental component (nāma) of the compound term nāmarūpa: sensation (vedanā), perception (saññā), volition (cetanā), contact (phassa), and attention (manasikāra).

Every conscious moment is always accompanied by these five mental elements. The four great material elements (mahābhūta)—earth (solidity and extension), water (cohesion and fluidity), fire (heat and temperature), and air (motion and pressure)—as well as the material phenomena derived from and dependent upon these four primary elements are referred to as materiality (rūpa) in the compound term nāmarūpa. However, in this case, rūpa refers specifically to the living physical body that makes up an organism rather than to matter in general. From the standpoint of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandha), materialism is equivalent to the aggregate of form (rūpakkhanda), whereas the aggregates of sensation (vedanākkhandha), perception (saññākkhandha), and volitional formations (saṅkhārakkhandha) make up mentality (nāma). Despite being separate from nāma, mind (viññāṇa) and nāmarūpa are mutually dependent. The Buddha uses the analogy of two bundles of reeds leaning on one another to show this reciprocal relationship: Mentality-materiality depends on mind, and mind depends on mentality-materiality, just as two bundles of reeds stand leaning on each other, buddy. The other bundle of reeds would also fall if one of the two were removed. Name-and-form emerges as a condition of viññāṇa (cognitive awareness). The whole mass of misery emerges as a result.

Imagine, Bhikkhus, that there was a massive tree with roots that reached out in all directions and deep into the earth. Sap would continuously climb via these roots, supporting and nourishing the tree for a very long time. In a similar vein, viññāṇa is established when one lingers on the satisfaction of occurrences that lead to bondage. Name-and-form emerges from the establishment of viññāṇa. As a result, the whole mass of sorrow is created. However, viññāṇa is not established when one lingers on the danger of things that result in bondage. Name-and-form ceases when viññāṇa is no longer established. As a result, the entire mass of pain ends. Imagine, bhikkhus, that a guy with a basket and a shovel approached that massive tree. He would cut it down at the base,

¹⁵ Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2018), pp.69-70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

hack it into bits, break it apart, burn it to ashes, and then toss the ashes into the quick stream of a river or scatter them in a strong wind. In this manner, the tree would be severed at the base, reduced to the state of a palm stump, and eliminated to the point where it would not be able to grow again. Similarly, *viññāṇa* is not established when one lingers on the peril of phenomena that lead to bondage. Name-and-form ceases to exist when *viññāṇa* is no longer established. As a result, the entire mass of pain ends.¹⁷

The Nature of Contact Mind

The term “*phassa*” describes the mental contact or bond that exists between the mind and its object. Even though the mind itself is immaterial, *phassa* indicates the meeting of the mind with its *ārammaṇa* (object), in contrast to physical contact, such as touching with the hand or body, or the collision of two material objects. Its distinctive purpose is to establish the cognitive connection required for experience by bringing the mind into contact with the object. The act of touching, contacting, or establishing a connection between the mind and its object can therefore be interpreted as *phassa*. Despite being a mental phenomenon, its presence and effects can often be just as clear as those of physical contact.¹⁸ It is sometimes more precisely described as “the coincidence, concurrence, and confluence” of the three elements. Eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, and mind-contact are the six categories of sensory contact when it comes to the three factors that are correlated with it. They are further separated into two categories: designation contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*) and resistive contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*).¹⁹ The five physical sense organs are referred to be “resistant” since they, in a sense, clash with their physical objects. The fivefold bodily sensory apparatus serves as the foundation for resistant contact, hence its name. Another term for mind-contact is “designation-contact.” The commentarial exegesis does not provide an adequate explanation for why it is called “designation-contact.”

The phrase can be satisfactorily explained if we follow the Sanskrit Buddhist interpretation. Here, it is said that designation (*adhivacana*) is another way of expressing name: discourse is based on names and clarifies their meaning. Thus, designation equates to name. The ideal object of touch related to mind-consciousness is the name. It is believed that although one “knows blue” through visual consciousness, one is unaware that “it is blue.” One “knows blue” and “it is blue” via mental consciousness. Another comparable interpretation holds that only mental consciousness is applied to its objects or is activated in relation to them through speech or expression. Thus, mental awareness is referred to as “designation-contact.” The close relationship between language and mental consciousness is demonstrated by both explanations. If blue is recognised by mental consciousness as “this is blue,” this activity entails some sort of judgement as well as language participation, verbalisation at a very delicate level in the act of object recognition. According to both interpretations, language has no bearing on the five types of physical sense-organ-based contact. Attention (*manasikāra*) is the final component of mentality. “Attention” in this context refers to awareness of the object. No cognitive act can occur without this mental component. Any act of cognition requires three prerequisites. The first is that the sense-faculty—that is, the ability to see or hear, depending on the situation—must remain unimpaired. The second is that it needs to be able to reach outside objects. Lastly, the thing needs to get the proper act of attention. There won’t be any subsequent cognition if any one of these conditions isn’t met.

The Forerunner of the Mind

The Dhammapada asserts that the mind is the forerunner to all occurrences (*dhammā*), acting as both their source and ruling principle. The Dhammapada *Aṭṭhakathā* defines *dhammā* in a number of ways. In the current context, it refers to phenomena devoid of a being or life-principle (*nissatta-nūjjīva-dhamma*), yet it may also relate to the phenomenon of scriptural learning (*pariyatti-dhamma*). The aggregate of emotion (*vedanākkhandha*), the aggregate of perception (*saññākkhandha*), and the aggregate of volitional formations

¹⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p.592.

¹⁸ *Janakābhivamsa*, Ashin. *Abhidhamma in Daily Life*. Translated by U Ko Lay. Amarapura, Myanmar:

Mahagandayon Monastery, 1999, p.77.

¹⁹ Y. Karunadasa, *The Buddhist Analysis of Mind* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2025), p.38.

(saṅkhārakkhandha) are the three immaterial aggregates (arūpa-khandhas) that are specifically referred to. Because the mind serves as their precursor, these phenomena are referred to be “preceded by mind.” Furthermore, just as the wheel of a cart comes the hoof of the ox that pulls it, pain (dukkha) necessarily follows when someone talks or acts under the influence of an impure or corrupted mind. This stanza emphasises that the ethical character of one’s mental states dictates the consequences of one’s conduct, presenting the mind (mano) as the primary basis of all purposeful speech and action.²⁰ In Theravāda Buddhist doctrine, suffering emerges not just from external conditions but from unwholesome mind states that motivate bodily, verbal, and mental activities. The Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā states that the mind may become contaminated by adventitious impurities (āgantuka kilesā), such as covetousness (abhijjhā), ill intent (byāpāda), and other mental defilements. The commentarial tradition identifies the life-continuum consciousness (bhavaṅga-citta), which is thought to be free from active defilements, as the mind in its natural state. However, accidental defilements obscure the mind in the same way that clean water gets momentarily discoloured when combined with foreign elements like blue dye. It is neither a completely new mind nor merely the original pure life-continuum consciousness, despite the appearance of alteration. Because of this, the Buddha says, “This mind is bright, monks, yet it is tainted by unintentional impurities.”²¹

Therefore, verbal conduct manifests as the four types of unwholesome verbal action and physical conduct as the three types of unwholesome bodily activity when a person talks or acts under the influence of such a polluted mind. The three types of unwholesome mental conduct arise from a mind that is controlled by covetousness and other defilements, even in the absence of speech or physical action. As a result, the ten unhealthy paths of action (dasa akusala-kammāpathā) are completed. This explanation confirms the essential role of the mind in establishing moral responsibility and the karmic repercussions of purposeful action by highlighting the Theravāda theory that unwholesome bodily, verbal, and mental activities start in polluted states of mind. Therefore, the basis of moral discipline, psychological health, and the road to emancipation is the development and purification of the mind.

The First Life-continuum Mind in a Lifetime

Life-continuum (bhavaṅga): Bhava (existence or becoming) and aṅga (factor or constituent) make up the Pāli word bhavaṅga. It refers to the essential mental condition that is necessary for preserving the continuation of a person’s existence.²² Life cannot exist without citta (mind), even in the absence of sensory experience and cognitive thought. Bhavaṅga-citta, or the life-continuum mind, is the term used to describe the citta that emerges and ends during these periods. Bhavaṅga literally translates to “factor of life” and describes the underlying stream of consciousness that sustains a person’s existence throughout the course of a lifetime. The bhavaṅga-citta fulfils the vital role of maintaining the continuous process of life that we often define as a living person by maintaining this continuity from one moment to the next.

How often do bhavaṅga-cittas occur? The Abhidhamma states that they occur countless times in the absence of sensory awareness, active thought, and wholesome or unwholesome consciousness. Dreams might entail either wholesome or unwholesome cittas throughout sleep, yet consciousness does not vanish during deep, dreamless sleep. Rather, bhavaṅga-cittas keep coming and going, preserving life’s continuity. Numerous bhavaṅga-cittas take place between successive cognitive processes even when we are awake. For example, hearing and sight seem to happen practically instantly, but they are essentially distinct cognitive processes, and many bhavaṅga-cittas emerge in the spaces between them. The rebirth-linking consciousness is the life-continuum consciousness that emerges right after the first conscious moment in a new existence. The first life-continuum consciousness, which becomes the second moment of consciousness in that lifetime, arises when the rebirth-linking consciousness stops. The life-continuum consciousness, like the rebirth-linking consciousness, is a consequent awareness that emerges from the same kamma (intentional action) that led to rebirth. Numerous life-continuum consciousnesses emerge over the course of a lifetime, even though there is only one rebirth-linking

²⁰ Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero, *Treasury of Truth: Illustrated Dhammapada* (Taipei: Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993), p.60.

²¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012), p.97.

²² Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed. and trans., *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma: The Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, rev. ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007), p.122.

consciousness at the start of each existence. The same kamma that produced the rebirth-linking consciousness is responsible for all life-continuum consciousnesses, from the earliest to the last.

The rebirth-linking mind and the life-continuum mind are always the same kind. Nineteen varieties of life-continuum mind correlate to the nineteen types of rebirth-linking mind. Every life-continuum mind that emerges during a person's lifetime is shaped by the nature of the rebirth-linking mind. For instance, every life-continuum thought during that lifetime will also be the result of unwholesome kamma if the rebirth-linking mind is the outcome of unwholesome kamma, as in rebirth in an unhappy world. Every life-continuum mind during that life will have the same character if the rebirth-linking mind is a rootless, healthy outcome that results in birth with congenital physical or mental limitations. Similarly, every life-continuum thought would have the same wholesome roots if the rebirth-linking mind emerges with them.

Every life-continuum mind that develops during a person's lifespan has the same origins and is accompanied by the same mental elements as the rebirth-linking mind. A person who lacks knowledge and is born with only the two healthy roots of non-attachment and non-aversion will only have life-continuum mental moments connected to those two roots. Full enlightenment cannot be reached in that lifetime, even though such a person can progressively develop wisdom. On the other hand, a person who is born with all three wholesome roots—wisdom, non-attachment, and non-aversion—will experience life-continuum thought moments that are accompanied by all three attributes. By practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, one can achieve enlightenment in this life by strengthening the foundation for wisdom development. Additionally, every life-continuum mind during that lifetime will likewise arise with the same joyous emotion if the rebirth-linking mind is accompanied by it.²³

The First Mind in a New Life

The first consciousness of a new life is known as Paṭisandhi Citta, literally meaning “relinking consciousness.” It is the first moment of consciousness that arises at the beginning of a new life, occurring at the moment of conception. The arising of this rebirth-linking consciousness is conditioned by the final kammically active consciousness (kammic citta) of the previous existence. The mind that emerges at the beginning of a new life serves a particular purpose. This poses a crucial query: what is it that is born, and what does birth really mean? From a Buddhist perspective, birth does not refer to the emergence of a permanent self, even though we frequently discuss a person's birth. Instead, it is the emergence of both the body and the mind. For this reason, birth is a customary term. The body and the intellect constantly come and go throughout life. Examining the circumstances that give rise to the initial mental and physical occurrences is essential to comprehending the start of a new existence. The body and the mind develop together in mutual reliance from the very beginning of life, and the mind cannot exist without a suitable physical foundation.

The beginning of existence is governed by the same laws that govern every instant of life. Mental and physical events emerge simultaneously at the beginning of a new existence and are inextricably linked. That new life begins with the first moment of consciousness. It depends on the right circumstances rather than emerging on its own, just like every other moment of consciousness. Its causes must come from the past rather than the present since it is the beginning of a new existence. The vast disparities in people's personalities, skills, and dispositions are hard to explain by genetics or environment alone, even though some may doubt the reality of past lives. People have unique mental inclinations and abilities from birth that are not entirely explained by parental influence. Every moment of consciousness conditions the one that comes after it since it begins and ends in an unbroken sequence. In this sense, the last aware moment of one existence gives rise to the first conscious moment of the subsequent one. Because of this, habits, dispositions, and cumulative tendencies that were formed in the past persist from one life to the next and from one moment to the next. As a result, every person has distinct tendencies and traits from birth that are influenced by a variety of past events and circumstances.

The various ways that humans and animals exist are a reflection of the diversity of life on Earth. According to Buddhism, these variations are the outcome of past deeds and the ensuing repercussions. Animal life is thought to be a less fortunate kind of reincarnation than human life since it is linked to more suffering and fewer chances for moral and spiritual growth. In contrast, human rebirth is regarded as a positive outcome of good deeds, regardless of a person's experiences with poverty, illness, or other adversity throughout life. However, not every

²³ Nina van Gorkom, *Abhidhamma in Daily Life*, 4th ed. (London: Zolag, 2010), pp.79-80.

human birth is the same since each person has a varied quality of good deeds acquired in the past, which leads to different conditions at birth.²⁴

The physical body and mind emerge together at the beginning of a new existence as a result of previous deeds. Both the initial state of consciousness and an individual's physical attributes are determined by their prior deeds. Therefore, it is believed that variations in physical characteristics, strength, health, and congenital defects result from distinct causative situations established in past lifetimes. In this sense, the physical and mental facets of life are portrayed as the inevitable outcomes of cumulative actions. The final moment of consciousness connected to death occurs when a person's last moments of either wholesome or unwholesome consciousness have ended. The start of a new life is immediately followed by the first conscious moment of a new existence. The cycle of rebirth will continue as long as the force of deliberate action continues to yield outcomes.

The Final Consciousness of a Life (cuti-citta)

The final citta (mind) to emerge in a person's existence, the death consciousness (cuti-citta), signifies the end of a certain life. It belongs to the same type (jāti) as the life-continuum awareness (bhavaṅga-citta) and the rebirth-linking consciousness (paṭisandhi-citta). It is a part of the process-free (vīthi-mutta) mode of consciousness, which is similar to these two consciousnesses and represents the passive stream of awareness that happens apart from active cognitive activity. However, its particular function (kicca) sets it apart from the rebirth-linking and life-continuum consciousnesses. Its unique role is that of dying (cuti-kicca), which denotes the end of this life.²⁵

The same object (ārammaṇa) that was taken by the rebirth-linking consciousness and the life-continuum awareness of the life that is about to end is apprehended by the death consciousness, the last consciousness of a specific existence. But in the future life-continuum consciousness and rebirth-linking consciousness, the object of the final javana cognitive process in one existence becomes the object of the subsequent life-continuum consciousness. At the end of the next life, the identical thing becomes the object of the death consciousness. Whether the stream of consciousness is wholesome or unwholesome, it is conditioned by the kamma that has matured for rebirth (janaka-kamma) and proceeds unbroken toward the domain of rebirth determined by that kamma. Therefore, the way of being that corresponds to the operating kamma is the natural inclination of consciousness.

Alternatively, the rebirth-producing kamma may manifest itself as (abhinavakaraṇavasena) as if newly occurring through a sense door or the thought door. In this phase, the kamma appears to the mind as if it were being performed right then and there, rather than just as a memory of an earlier deed. This vivid portrayal could happen right before death. When a person is about to die, either at the end of a cognitive process (vīthi) or at the end of the life-continuum, the death consciousness emerges as the last consciousness of the current existence and instantly ends, signifying the end of that life. The rebirth-linking consciousness emerges in the subsequent life immediately after the death consciousness ceases, using the item so offered as its object. It arises either with a physical base (hadaya-vatthu) or without one, depending on the level of rebirth. This rebirth-linking consciousness is produced by volitional formations (saṅkhāra), which are anchored in latent craving (taṇhānusaya) and conditioned by latent ignorance (avijjānusaya).²⁶

In summary, according to the principle of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), suffering ends when its causes do as well. Every succeeding link of dependent origination ends with the eradication of ignorance (avijjā), which finally puts a stop to birth, ageing, death, and all types of suffering. The realisation of Nibbāna, the complete cessation of suffering, results from the total elimination of ignorance, as this reversal sequence demonstrates.²⁷

Conclusion

The non-physical part of an individual that comprises consciousness, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories, intentions, and reasoning is called the mind. The collection of mental and cognitive processes is commonly

²⁴ Nina van Gorkom, *Abhidhamma in Daily Life*, 4th ed. (London: Zolag, 2010), pp.65-66.

²⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed. and trans., *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma: The Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, rev. ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007), p.124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.221-2.

²⁷ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p.351.

referred to as the mind in psychology and philosophy. Buddhism, on the other hand, analyses the mind (Pāli: citta, mano, and viññāṇa) not as a permanent thing but as a stream of mental occurrences. Despite frequent confusion, the mind and the brain are not the same. Both their nature and their purposes are different. The brain is a bodily organ. It is made up of billions of nerve cells (neurons) and supporting cells and is a component of the central nervous system. The brain provides the biological foundation for thinking, memory, emotion, and consciousness in addition to receiving sensory data, regulating movement, and controlling physiological processes. On the other hand, the non-physical processes of awareness, cognition, emotion, and volition that emerge depending on different circumstances are referred to as the mind.

Numerous Citta that cognise an object through one of the sense doors or the mind-door emerge in uninterrupted sequence throughout our daily lives. Certain Citta carry out tasks like seeing or hearing, whereas others develop as a result of attachment or other mental reactions to the objects encountered. These several cittas don't happen at the same time; instead, they arise based on their individual circumstances. For instance, seeing-awareness and the consciousness that is accompanied by attachment to a visible object are two separate mental processes that occur at different times and serve different purposes. Examining the order in which these mental processes occur and the distinct functions that each fulfils can lead to a fuller comprehension of citta. According to the Abhidhamma, each citta has a distinct function (kicca), and there is a total of fourteen functions of citta.²⁸

Through the operation of consciousness, the mind is made up of awareness and knowledge of objects. The five aggregates together are referred to as nāma-rūpa, which literally translates to "name-and-form" or "mind-and-body." In this sense, rūpa refers to material form, while nāma consists of the immaterial and invisible mental constituents—feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. The term "nāma" literally means "name," but it does not suggest the existence of an eternal soul or self; rather, it refers to the mental experiences that emerge depending on circumstances. As a result, the idea of a permanent soul or self (attā) is rejected in the Buddhist understanding of the individual. The three aspects of existence (tilakkhaṇa)—impermanence (anicca), pain (dukkha), and non-self (anattā)—affect the five aggregates throughout life. These aggregates show their conditioned, transient, and insubstantial nature by disintegrating at death.²⁹

The nature of suffering (dukkha), its cause, its end, and the Noble Eightfold Path, which results in the end of suffering, are all explained by the Four Noble Truths. As human rebirth offers the chance to develop insight (vipassanā) and realise the Four Noble Truths, it is considered particularly valuable. When one reaches Sotāpatti (Stream-entry), the first level of enlightenment, the first three fetters are eliminated and the Four Noble Truths are immediately realised. Because they are destined to be reborn no more than seven times before achieving Nibbāna, the total end of suffering, Sotāpannas are guaranteed ultimate liberation. The most basic component of human existence is the mind. Buddhist philosophy holds that it is the ruling principle that guides and moulds the human experience. Since the mind is the source of all thoughts, speech, and physical acts, the state of the mind ultimately determines the state of the world as well as the quality of human behaviour. Because of this, a major aspect of Buddhist practice is the development and mastery of the mind. A person can achieve increasingly higher levels of well-being if they are successful in training and directing their mind. These levels start with human happiness, advance to the happiness of the celestial realms, and conclude with Nibbāna, the ultimate release from all suffering.

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²⁹ G. F. Allen, *The Buddha's Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), pp.41-42.

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