

Buddhism and Consciousness

Mahasraddha's third talk in the current series, 'Buddhism, Science, Philosophy, and Consciousness'. This week it's Buddhism and Consciousness.

Given at the Manchester Buddhist Centre on Monday 16th April 2007.

Consciousness

- “Consciousness” derives from the Latin *conscientia* which primarily means moral conscience or, in the literal sense, shared knowledge
- Oxford Dictionary:
 1. Awareness of
 2. The totality of a person’s thoughts and feelings or a class of these

Summary

- The marvel that is the human brain: complexity and connectivity
- Theories: consciousness is not a “thing” but a process that is momentary in nature
- Consciousness is supported in the brain by complex interactions and communication loops between different parts of the brain which specialise in a specific function e.g. supporting emotions, cognition or basic life processes
 - Ideas of integration & differentiation
- Our attitudes to what is consciousness and what is not influences our attitudes towards other life forms and even our fellow human beings
- Empathy is based on part assumption

Centrality of the mind

- Skilful and unskilful mental states are preceded by mind, led by mind, made up of mind. If one speaks with an impure mind, suffering follows him even as the cartwheel follows the hoof of the ox.
- If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows him like his shadow and never leaves.

Centrality of the mind

- “All that we are is the result of what we have thought”
- “Our life is shaped by our mind: we become what we think”

Centrality of the mind

- “Just as a fletcher straightens his arrow, so the wise man straightens his trembling, unsteady mind which is difficult to guard and hard to restrain”
- “Hard it is to train the mind, which goes where it likes and does what it wants”

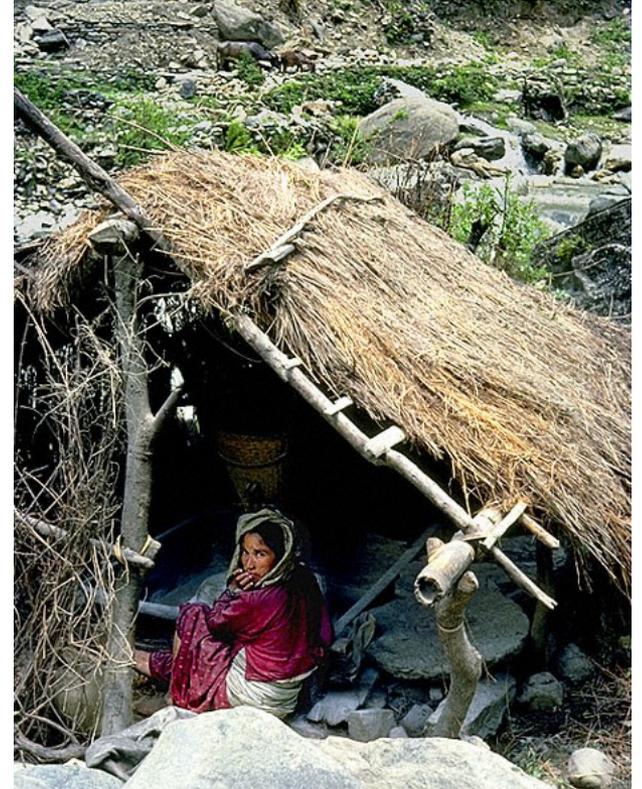
Centrality of the mind

“...a trained mind brings happiness. The wise guard their minds, which are subtle and elusive, wandering at will. A guarded mind brings happiness. More than those who hate, more than all your enemies, greater is the harm done to oneself by a wrongly directed mind. Neither mother, father nor relative can do you as much good as a well-directed mind”

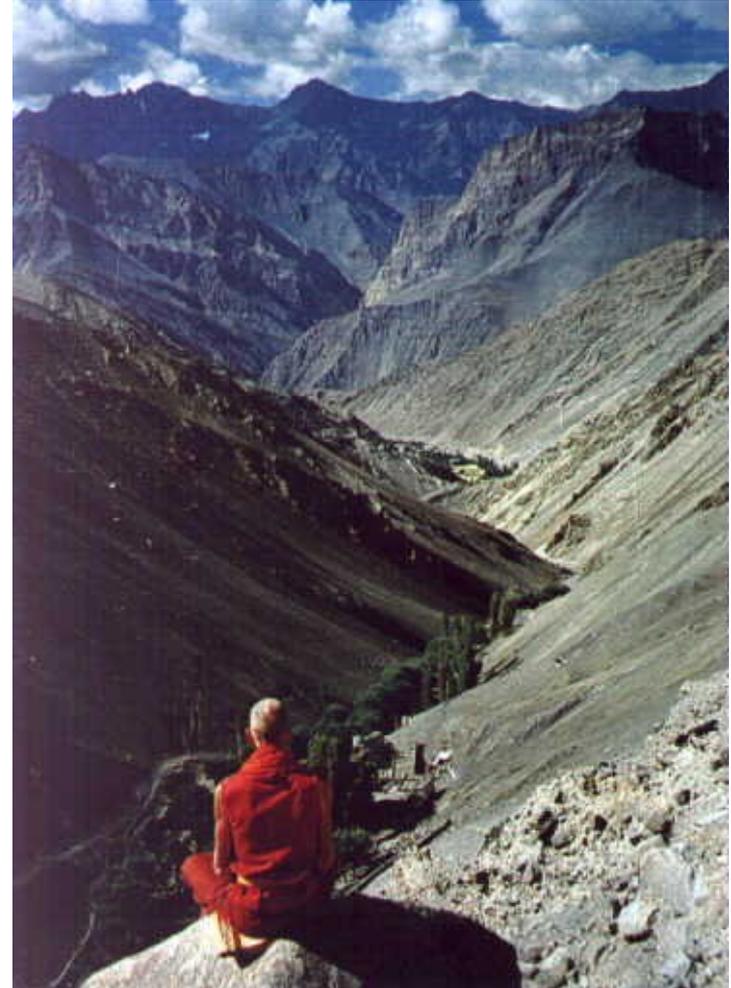
Centrality of the mind

“Though one should conquer in battle thousands upon thousands of men, yet he who conquers himself is truly the greatest victor. Conquer yourself and not others”

Milarepa



Milarepa



Milarepa's questions

In the house of the body, is there only one mind in the body or are there many? If many, how do they live together?

The Shepherd boy's responses

“Dear Lama, last night I tried to find out what my mind is and how it works. I observed it carefully and found that I only had one mind. Even when we want to we cannot kill this mind. However much we try to dismiss it, it won't go away. If we try to catch it, it cannot be grasped, nor can it be held by pressing it. If we want it to remain, it will not stay, if we want it to go, it will not go. If we try to gather it, it won't be picked up. If we try to see it, it cannot be seen. If we try to understand it, it cannot be known. If we think it is an existing entity, and cast it off, it will not leave us. If we think it is non-existent, we feel it running on. The mind is something illuminating, aware, wide-awake, yet incomprehensible. In short, it is hard to say what the mind is”

Milarepa's reply

“Listen to me, dear shepherd, the protector of sheep. By merely hearing about sugars taste, sweetness cannot be experienced. Though our mind may understand what sweetness is, what sweetness is the mind cannot experience directly. Only the tongue can know it. In the same way, we cannot see into the full nature of the mind....”

Milarepa's reply

“What is the colour of the mind? What is its shape? Is it oblong, round or what? Where does it dwell in the body?”

The Shepherd boy's responses

“It is limpid, moving, unpredictable and ungraspable; it has neither colour nor shape. When it associates with the eyes, it sees; when with the ear, it hears; when with the nose, it smells; when with the tongue, it tastes; and when with the feet, it walks. If the body is agitated, the mind too is stirred. Normally the mind directs the body; when the body is in good condition, the mind can command it at will, but when the body becomes old, decayed or bereft, the mind will leave it behind without a thought as one throws a stone away..... It is clear to me that all my sufferings are caused by the mind”

Milarepa's question

“Which takes refuge, the mind or the body?”

The shepherd boy's reply

“As to which takes refuge, the mind or the body, I found that it is neither of them. Does the body as a whole take refuge? No, because when the mind leaves the body, the latter disintegrates and no longer exists. Is it the mind that takes refuge? The refuge seeker cannot be the mind as the latter is only the mind and nothing else. If the present mind is the real mind and the succeeding one, the refuge seeker, there will be two minds. The mind of yesterday has gone, that of tomorrow has yet to come, and the present mind does not stay. When the act of refuge-seeking takes place, both the present and the succeeding minds have passed away.”

Milarepa's reply

“If we look into this consciousness no ego is seen; of it nothing can be seen. Clinging to the notion of an ego is the characteristic of consciousness. See how wrong are our fears, hopes and confusion and the self-deception of ones own mind.When you sought the “I” last night, you could not find it.”

Terms associated with consciousness

- Vijnana
- Citta
- Manas
- Manovijnana
- Alaya vijnana.

Vijnana

- “vi” means to divide
- “jna” means to perceive or to know

The momentary nature of consciousness

*“the moment before has gone and the
moment to come does not yet exist”*

Milarepa

“If we look into this consciousness no ego is seen; of it nothing can be seen. Clinging to the notion of an ego is the characteristic of consciousness. See how wrong are our fears, hopes and confusion and the self-deception of ones own mind.When you sought the “I” last night, you could not find it.”

Six consciousnesses

- “When the mind associates with the eyes, it sees; when with the ear, it hears; when with the nose it smells; when with the tongue it tastes”.
- Mind

The shepherd boy

“If we try to see it, it cannot be seen. If we try to understand it, it cannot be known. If we think it is an entity and cast it off, it will not leave us. If we think it is non-existent, we feel it running on. The mind is something illuminating, aware, wide-awake, yet incomprehensible. In short, it is hard to say what the mind is.”

Summary