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БУДДИЙСКАЯ КОНЦЕПЦИЯ СОЗНАНИЯ И НАУЧНЫЕ ОТКРЫТИЯ В СОВРЕМЕННОЕ ВРЕМЯ

Сознание было в центре дебатов и дискуссий с древних времен. Например, в Индии существовало несколько школ мысли, исповедовавших различные идеи о сознании и его природе. Они варьировались от крайней формы материального монизма до крайней формы идеализма, ментального монизма. Каким-то образом дебаты в наше время также продолжаются: о статусе и природе сознания; имеет ли оно независимое существование, независимое от материи, или оно все еще является продолжением материи. С началом исследований сознания в XXI веке, и особенно с развитием квантовой физики, мучительный вопрос о сознании, его существовании, природе и роли вновь возник среди интеллектуалов, философов и ученых. Здесь нами представлен буддийский взгляд на сознание и то, как современные исследования сознания могут извлечь пользу из огромных знаний о сознании, накопленных буддистами за 2500 лет.

Ключевые слова: Индия, сознание, буддизм, «Ум и жизнь», квантовая физика.

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BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERIES IN THE MODERN TIMES

Consciousness has been at the center of debates and discussions from the ancient time. In India, for example, there were several schools of thoughts professing different ideas on consciousness and its nature. It ranged from an extreme form of material monism to the extreme form of idealism, mental monism. Somehow, the debate in the modern time too continues, about the status and the nature of consciousness; whether it has an independent existence, independent to the matter, or whether it is still an extension of matter. Since the beginning of consciousness studies in the 21st century, and particularly since the evolution of quantum physics, the gnawing question of consciousness, its existence, nature, and role has re-emerged fresh among intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists. Here, I will present the Buddhist view of consciousness and how modern studies on consciousness can

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benefit from the immense knowledge accumulated on consciousness since 2500 years ago by Buddhists.

Keywords: India, consciousness, Buddhism, «Mind and Life», quantum physics.

General Introduction

Different civilizations and cultures have talked about consciousness in various contexts since the dawn of civilizations in the earth. For the sake of clarity and convenience, we can broadly categorize such opinions into two categories: religious and scientific ideas on consciousness. Whether ancient Greek philosophers, Chinese, or Indians, we find some interesting discussions on consciousness on various guises among these philosophers, thinkers, and scientists (I am using this term here in a very broad way).

In general, religions often tend to take consciousness as a separate entity from matter, whereas science, particularly the hard science that evolved after the 17th and 18th centuries, regards consciousness as a part of matter. Whether it is God's consciousness or Christ's Consciousness, there are discussions on the «consciousness» among the philosophers and thinkers of Abrahamic religions. We also know that some of the Indian religions such as Vedanta based on ancient sets of texts called «Upanishads» considered a certain kind of «cosmic consciousness». They even conceived the philosophy of genesis either immanent to or the evolution of this cosmic consciousness. At the same time, some other Indian schools like Carvakas, often called materialists, presented their view of consciousness similar to the one presented by modern hard science, that it is just the outcome of the interplay of matter. However, apart from this one materialist Indian school, all other religions and traditions in India, including Buddhists, presented consciousness as something separate from the matter. They regard it as the ultimate life force and also the cause behind the rebirth, as this ‘consciousness’ would continue life after life in various guises. Buddhists too, like almost all other Indian traditions, believe that consciousness is a separate entity and it continues to flow from one life to another until it is properly understood and the mystery of the rebirth, the cause of suffering, is solved. I will elaborate on these points later on but here I would like to point out that my essay will cover only the view presented by the Buddha and the Buddhist tradition of mind training on consciousness that has continued unbroken since 2500 years.

As far as modern science is concerned, to simplify the situation, what we can say is that the concept of consciousness accepted by the modern hard science can be understood by two connected ideas, i.e., monistic materialism and reductionism. Monistic materialism presents the entire world made up of only matter and consciousness as its product. In short, consciousness is nothing but the extension of matter in a very sophisticated manner. In addition to that, the reductionist view localizes the matter within the structures and the components of the brain and its activities. This seems to be the most accepted scientific idea on consciousness until the present time when the Western scientific world started to ruminate further into the cause and the nature of consciousness. However, as the evidences show, it looks like it is getting harder for the scientific world to maintain the reductionist and material monistic position of consciousness for several reasons.

It is particularly interesting to note that «Consciousness Studies» was not as popular in the scientific world even in the 90s as it is now. The reason was obvious: the old model and the understanding of consciousness was not fitting to the new research findings and discoveries in this field. The scientific world was getting hard time to explain how certain combination of proteins and other chemicals, localized in the brain can actually produce something like «consciousness». This field experienced some more complications after the fresh new insights into the «quanta» level of reality through quantum physics; the so-called matter started to get mysterious at this level and there seemed to be some role of «consciousness» even for the so-called matter to exist. Since then, consciousness has become a mysterious field in the modern scientific world. Additionally, the mind and body duality introduced by Rene Descartes still haunts the scientific world. I will come back to this issue in a relevant section of this essay.

Even though «Consciousness Studies» was taboo at the beginning of 1990, it is no more these days, as it has evolved into a multi-disciplinary field of studies. This field combines psychology, philosophy, physics, sociology, religion, dynamic systems, mathematics, computer science, neuroscience, art, biology, cognitive science, anthropology, behaviorism, linguistics, etc., to understand consciousness and its function. Many universities and institutions offer courses in this regard, either in one of these topics or combining them together. I would like to particularly mention the works being done since last three decades by HH Dalai Lama through «Mind and Life» seminars, inviting top scien-

tists to discuss on various such issues in India. This is a huge step forward to understand «consciousness».

Consciousness and the Scientific World

Even though «Consciousness Studies» has taken grip in modern universities and laboratories, scientists, thinkers, and philosophers in this field, so far as I am informed, have not been able to fix a definite view in the Western world, and have not come up with a fixed definition of what this consciousness actually is. In such a situation, it is natural to have various views on «consciousness» among scientists. Additionally, another apparent issue with the studies of consciousness is that it can be studied only indirectly through various disciplines such as psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, linguistics, cognitivism, etc. This is partly due to the nature of consciousness, as it can be accessed only through first-hand experience, and partly due to the nature of present science, which works only through «third party observation». Some scientists believe that modern science will take about 300 years to bridge this gap and move from the «third party observation» to the «firsthand experience» to study and understand consciousness. That is to say, by the present knowledge and source of the hard science, including its methodology and premises, the hard science can access the consciousness directly only in the next 300 years.

Similarly, the scientific world has not been able to define how consciousness arises, either from the matter or in the brain. This is called Neuroreductionism, a dominant model in the early days of «consciousness studies». The neurons, the purported locus classicus of consciousness, are made up of proteins and other chemicals. One has to explain and define how something like «consciousness» arises from these things in the neurons or any other parts of the brain. The sophisticated scanners and machines in the world today have shown the activation of certain or several parts of the brain as per our thoughts and emotions but this still does not explain how and from what process these «sentient» activities occur within the structures of our brains. Here, sentient activities mean not only it has the ability to think but it is also conscious of its own activities. One still needs to explain how insentient proteins and other chemicals produce something sentient like consciousness in the brain. As it seems, consciousness as a part of material reductionism still lacks a valid and cogent explanation. The same goes with Cognitivism, another dominant model in the early days of «Consciousness Studies»; the brain as the hardware and the conscious process akin to the computation, as conceived in this model, simply

do not adequately explain the consciousness, its nature and its point of arising. Serious counterarguments were raised with the analogy of «Searle's Chinese Room» in which it is shown how one can question the «conscious» process happening within the computational model of Cognitivism in the brain. Similarly, even with the extraordinary endeavor through Neurobiology to map the brain, scientists still disagree on where the consciousness is located within the brain.

In a similar vein, while talking about consciousness and its various aspects, Scientists are left baffled by several other interesting observations in modern times. We know that the units and the calculations of the classical physics do not apply in the quantum level. Therefore, scientists have started to look and investigate at the level of quantum reality using different units and equations. However, they are still unable to explain some of the «mysterious» phenomena such as «quantum measurement problem», «non-locality», «wave/particle duality» etc., in this level of reality. In simple layman's words, they seem unable to explain why and how conscious observation determines the structure or pattern of the matter and how it changes from randomness to a certain pattern or form. Once these mysteries are solved, it might further redefine the way we look at the matter and the gnawing question of mind/matter duality. All these are still being investigated in the modern studies of «consciousness».

Similarly, scientists have to take seriously and explain the documented cases of «out of body experiences» (OBE) of patients in different medical facilities. These cases defy the monistic material and reductionist model of 'consciousness.' That is to say, the present models of consciousness, being an extension of matter and so forth, do not sufficiently explain phenomena such as «out of body experience» in which clinically dead patients or someone in a similar situation can have «awareness» and «cognition» of certain physical activities in the patient's room, etc. These documented cases of OBEs somehow support the mind and body dualism put forth by Rene Descarte, the famous Cartesian dualism that is so frowned upon in the present scientific and academic circle around the world.

In short, modern science still lacks several methodological, theoretical, and practical issues to fully investigate and understand the phenomenon of consciousness.

Buddhist View of Consciousness

It is a known fact that Buddha gives the foremost importance to the consciousness within his teachings. The first verse of the Dhammapada says that «the mind or consciousness is the forerunner among all the phenomena». This statement already shows the attitude of the Buddha towards «consciousness». In several teachings, the Buddha clearly classifies «consciousness» and separates it from matters such as earth, water, etc. In the Dhatuvibhanga Sutta, for example, he presents a six-fold taxonomy of phenomena, clearly separating «consciousness» from other matters. However, I would like to point out that Cartesian Dualism is rectified in Buddhism by showing how matter and mind depend on each other to arise and function in the world.

As per Buddhism, consciousness is the locus classicus of our personal experiences, suffering, or happiness. The Buddha taught in his teachings to rectify and change our subjective experience and perception of the world by understanding the consciousness and its function. His thesis was: We experience suffering due to certain cognitive distortions. Hence, for Buddhists for 2500 years, the entire mind training is about properly understanding this consciousness, its nature and function, and the distortions it can introduce while experiencing suffering or happiness in the world. In short, understanding consciousness, its nature, and function is the key for Buddhists to explain the sentience that determines various experiences.

Be that as it may, one apparent problem is that all these experiences and transformations are «subjective». We know that emotions and thoughts exist but as mentioned earlier, this sentience can be experienced only subjectively. This poses a problem in the world where the dominant model of investigation and observation is only «their party method» proposed by modern hard science.

However, it does not mean that Buddhists do not define consciousness in some objective manner. In fact, one can say that Buddhists define it, classify it, and also explain different types and functions of consciousness. Its literature contains the most elaborate explanations of consciousness, unprecedented in any other literature in the world.

Several Buddhist schools classify consciousness in several different ways. One simple and shared typology is that the mind, something separate from the aggregate of form or matter, is divided into four aggregates, such as sensation, ideation, co-produced factors and the consciousness. Buddhists define each of them in a very strict way and assign their functions. Similarly, most

Buddhist schools explain the mind from the point of view of 6 consciousness, corresponding to the six objects they take, viz. eye consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness and mind-consciousness. Furthermore, some Buddhist schools explain consciousness classifying them into 8 different consciousnesses. Two additional consciousnesses to the six-consciousness explained earlier are the afflictive and the store-house consciousness or foundational consciousness. Accepting the traditional six consciousnesses, Theravada proposes one more «Bhavanga» consciousness, a concept similar to the store-house consciousness but different in nature and function, not shared by any other Buddhist schools. Similarly, Buddhists use various words, such as Vigyana, citta, and Manas in Sanskrit (or Pali) to explain the nature and function of these various consciousnesses. These are some of the classifications and typologies of consciousness found among Buddhist schools. They are further divided and explained in detail in the literature such as Abhidharma. One can understand them from the point of view of cognitive states such as memory, awareness, and attention; or from the point of view of different affective states such as attachment, hatred, anger, jealousy, etc. In all cases, the idea behind such classifications is to understand them as closely as possible by defining their nature and function so that such understanding can be used for the soteriological purposes within the Buddhist culture of mind training. Discriminating phenomena in such a way and understanding them is called «wisdom» in Buddhism. It goes without saying that such wisdom plays a liberating role in the Buddhist world.

However diverse these consciousness be, Buddhists recognize and define consciousness as something «luminous and knowing». In simple term, it has the basic sentience to reveal or reflect the mental states and also to apprehend the «objects» etc. These qualities separate the Buddhist mind from the matter, as the latter do not possess these traits.

Here, while defining the quality of the mind or consciousness in contrast to the matter and presenting it as a separate entity, not just an extension of matter, one remembers the arguments put forth by the sixth-century Buddhist philosopher, master Dharmakirti. He said that for anything to appear or be born, one needs at least two causes: material/substantial cause and the supporting/contributing cause. For example, clay is the material/substantial cause of the clay pot whereas all other things such as skills, string, rotating wheel, etc., are the contributing cause. However, one type of material cause cannot give rise to

something completely different from its defining trait or property. Hence, following this logic he argued that only the mind can be the material cause for the future mind to arise. In this way, Buddhist argue that the continuum of consciousness continues, albeit being momentary, without being an extension of matter or without being the product of matter. In short, consciousness produces consciousness and matter produces matter. It is in this way that Buddhist put forth their arguments for rebirth or re-becoming: a consciousness can keep on flowing as a continuum and becoming the cause of re-becoming/rebirth unendingly unless one consciously removes the causes for rebirths/rebecoming. However, Buddhist do not deny that mind and matter could be contributing cause to each other to arise and function.

In recent years, scientists and psychologists such as the late Ian Stevenson and his successor, Jim B. Tucker have looked at the cases of rebirths and have documented several cases around the world academically. Hence, one needs to broaden the premises as proposed by modern hard science to further investigate the nature and function of consciousness.

Conclusion

In recent years, many thinkers, philosophers, and scientists have looked at these two domains of knowledge, Buddhism and Modern Science, and have tried to find a working model between them. One popular typology is the threefold model: conflict, identity, and complimentary. That is to say, some view Buddhism and modern science as having conflicting or identical ideas. While both these models are controversial, the most suitable model for collaboration for time beings seems to be «the model of complementarity». In this model, neither Buddhism nor hard science asserts its dominance but shares things to complement each in a respectful manner. The «Consciousness Studies» have shown consistently that modern science and Buddhism can come together to collaborate and complement each other. Buddhism can benefit from the immense knowledge modern science has accumulated through the fields of neurobiology, cognitive science, etc. as these domains map the consciousness by using modern technology and bring some accurate physical data in this field. Similarly, the scientific world can gain immensely from the 2500-year-old tradition of Buddhist mental culture and practices as explained above.

«Mind and Life» Institute founded under the aegis of HH Dalai Lama has shown remarkable possibilities for future collaboration in this direction. Many scientists have come to this platform and exchanged their frank views on

consciousness. I would like to particularly mention the name of the late biologist Fransisco Verala, the co-author of «The Embodied Mind (1991)» who drew many ideas from the Buddhist knowledge of consciousness in his research and combined the knowledge of neurobiology to propose new theories in this field.