

Mind According to Hindu Philosophical Systems

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

The Hindu view of life accords great importance to the mind since both *abhyudaya* (worldly prosperity) and *nishchreyasa* (spiritual progress) depend upon the condition of the mind. An impure mind binds the soul to transmigratory existence whereas a pure mind leads to *moksha* or liberation.¹

While recognizing the importance of the mind as a distinguishing unique feature of human beings, the Hindu scriptures and the various systems of Hindu philosophy have given different views about its content, nature and function. A study of the mind, therefore, will not only be interesting but also useful in one's personal life of spiritual evolution.

What the Mind Is

The *Chhandogya Upanishad*² declared that the mind is '*annamaya*', made up of the subtle essence of food. It also asserts that purity of food conduces to purity of mind.³

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*⁴ describes the mind as having been produced from Isvara or Hiranyagarbha (Creator). It also declares, though indirectly, that the soul or the Self (atman) knows the external world through the mind (vide 1.5.3).

The Sankhya and the Yoga systems consider the mind as a product evolved from the insentient *prakriti*, a direct product from *ahankara* (the ego-principle) and hence made up of the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It is also, therefore, *jada* or insentient but can reflect the consciousness of the *purusha* or the atman (the soul).

The Nyaya-Vaisheshika schools consider the *manas* or the mind as one of the *dravyas* (fundamental or basic realities) out of which the world is eventually created. It acts as a link between the soul and the sense-organs by which the external objects are known.

Certain cults of Shaivism and Shaktivism (Tantras) advocate the theory that mind is a limitation or a modification of pure consciousness.


As regards the size of the mind, some systems like Nyaya and Vaisheshika hold it as *anu* (atomic) while others (Advaita Vedanta) consider it as *Vibhu* (all-pervading).

Importance of the Mind

The ultimate purpose of human life is to attain *moksha* or liberation from transmigratory existence. This is possible only when *sadhana* or spiritual practice is undertaken as per the dictates of the scriptures. *Sadhana* consists mainly in purifying the mind through personal morality, social ethics and religious observances. When the mind becomes completely pure, the atman inside is automatically revealed.

Impurities of the mind are of three types: basic impurity due to its being a product of the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*); impurities carried over from the previous lives, technically called '*samskaras*'; impurities due to the sins and evils committed in this life.

The third one can be offset by the performance of expiatory rites prescribed in the holy books as also by experiencing the suffering brought about by them. The

 Swami Harshananda is the Head of the Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore. He has a number of books in English, Sanskrit and Kannada to his credit. He is preparing an Encyclopaedia of Hinduism. □

second type of impurities have to be counteracted by trying hard to cultivate the opposite, good tendencies. When these are carried out, along with *nididhyasana* or meditation on oneself as the pure atman (ultimately one with Brahman) or any aspect of God, the *rajasik* and the *tamasik* contents of the mind gradually get attenuated and the *sattvik* part gets predominance. When this process is completed, realization can come in a flash.

Mind and the Atman

Most of the Hindu philosophical systems consider the mind either as an *upadhi* (limiting adjunct) or as a quality of the *jivatman* (the individual soul). It is through the mind that the *jivatman* knows the external world or gets internal experiences.

Functions of the Mind

There are several ways of looking at the functions of the mind. Works on Vedanta generally define the mind as '*antahkarana*' (the inner organ) and state that it has four aspects: *manas* (general thinking and cognition); *buddhi* (discriminative faculty); *ahankara* (ego-sense); *citta* (mind-stuff, responsible for memory).

According to another view, it has three qualities or functions or modifications: *jnanatmaka* (cognitive); *avegatmaka* (emotional); *prayatnatmaka* (volitional).

Cognition, again, can produce either *prama* (true knowledge) or *bhrama* (false knowledge). The latter includes *samshaya* or doubt also.

Prama or true knowledge can be produced by six ways out of which *pratyaksha* (direct perception), *anumana* (inference) and *aptavakya* (verbal testimony of reliable persons) are universally accepted. *Shabda* or *Shruti* or *Agama* is an extension of the last, as applied to things beyond the ken of the senses.

The emotional functions of the mind can be listed as follows: *sukha* (pleasure or

happiness), *duhkha* (pain or unhappiness), *iccha* (desire) and *dvesha* (hatred).

Many other kinds of emotions are also recognised, such as *bhaya* (fear), *hasya* (laughter), *vismaya* (wonder) and so on.

Vedantic works often mention three states of consciousness with a view to proving that the atman (the soul) is the pure spirit beyond them. These three states—all of the mind—are *jagrat* (waking state), *swapna* (dream state) and *sushupti* (deep-sleep state).

Extra-sensory Perceptions

Besides these states of the mind normally experienced by all, there is another, the extra-ordinary or the extra-sensory perception. Highly evolved spiritual persons have attained these states like clairvoyance, clairaudience and so on, which have been described in the standard treatises of yoga like the *Yogasutras* of Patanjali⁵ (150 B.C.). However these have been considered as obstacles to the final emancipation since they tempt the *sadhaka* to misuse them.

Conclusion

The main purpose behind the study of the mind is to facilitate its ultimate purification leading to the realization of the atman or the Self. Though there are differences of opinion regarding its nature, the processes of purification are almost universally accepted.

References

1. *Amrtabindu Upanishad*, 2.
2. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.6.5.
3. *Ibid.* 7.26.2.
4. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.2.1.
5. *Yogasutras of Patanjali*, 3 16.55.



Unhealthy and selfish competition mars social life. Healthy and selfless competition promotes social welfare.
—MAHABHARATA