

MIND: A SOCIOLOGICAL VERSUS A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE



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ABSTRACT

In the course of time a topic broadly studied and discussed is “mind.” In this article two perspectives in relation to mind are explored; Peirce’s semiotic analysis applied in sociology and the higher doctrine (Pāli: *Abhidhamma*) in Theravāda Buddhism. Based on Peirce’s semiosis, some sociologists like Eugene Halton remark that mind is made out of meanings derived through sign-activities. It is that which matters meanings into being, thus intrinsically social. Viewing mind in general as sign-process or in particular as an indexical sign and a symbolic sign may be acceptable by Buddhists. But insisting that mind is intrinsically social is definitely controversial. According to the higher doctrine, each mind is like a point-instant at which three components are interlocking in contact and various mental activities are articulated as a flow of consciousness. In the conventional sense mind points to sign-process, but in the ontological (or the ultimate) sense it is a basis upon which mind-process makes possible sign-process. Supported by the teaching of Kamma in which choice and self-responsibility are of great significance, mind will be the topic pertaining to individual deliberation rather than social determination.

Key words: Buddhism, mind, sign-process, sociology, Abhidhamma

Mind is a controversial term. It has been used in a variety of meanings. If the aspect of biology is in concern, mind will be explained as something consisting of genetic and chemical process. By so saying, it can be measured through and as a quantitative object, or observed empirically with some scientific tools in the modern laboratory. The existence of mind in this sense is real. It exists and moves like a bio-machine. If the aspect of neuroscience is added, mind will be none but something bound with human brain and neurons.

Differently, if the aspect of sociology is in concern, mind will be the activity of thinking unable to be developed outside social and symbolic process. Mind, according to Kando, is an emergent activity always subject to change. What is called human mind is a mental construct in a constant state of flux.¹ In other words, mind becomes that which is subjectively defined rather than objectively given. It is best defined as a symbolic action toward the self which represents the reflexive experience. It involves with active communication toward the self through the manipulation of symbols.

Mind in this sense is the product of learning which cannot be said to be genetic. If it exists, this type of existence will be merely conventional, not at all absolute. It seems that there is no need to put mind and mind stuffs into an ontological category. Mind is a conventional term grounded on social and cultural experience.

To be fair to both sides, it is hard to accept either that mind is a bio-machine or a conventional term. If mind is nothing but a machine in which its function can be pre-determined by the brain's structure discovered in the scientific lab, how can we explain human freedom which is reflected in a sudden and unpredictable moment of life? Are we creatures with free will or mere outputs of those determinable inputs? What do choice and liberation mean in the evolution of man? Kando thus argues by quoting Mead's theory of social psychology:

The Meadian perspective can be termed *humanistic*, in that it focuses on man's uniqueness rather than on our similarities with other species. Our ability to symbolize frees us from our environment and from our past. While much of human behavior is habitual, there always remains an element of unpredictability and freedom, which

¹Tom Kando, "What is the Mind? Don't Study Brain Cells to Understand It," **International Journal on World Peace**, vol 25, no. 2 (June 2008), pp. 83-105.

Mead conceptualized as the “I” phase of the self. The lesson which Mead teaches us is that in the end, no social theorist will ever be able to fully predict human behavior, be he a Behaviorist, a Structural-Functionalist, a Marxist or a neuro-psychologist.²

Consonant with Peter Berger who remarks that freedom always remains a possibility that cannot be demonstrated scientifically. By following many sociologists, brain is believed to be a biological phenomenon studied within the area of natural science. It can therefore discover only some empirical regularities and probabilities in human’s normal conducts. It cannot explain all of human thoughts and behaviors because the process of thought and behavior refers to some extent to freedom. And the expression of freedom, or free will, is mind’s exertion. Mind is therefore not the brain. It is never and will not be.

Nevertheless, it is also hard to argue for its validity by saying that mind is only a mental construct derived from social and cultural experience. If mind represents that which is merely a symbolic action of what is called the reflexive self, what will be the basis of this experiential fact – mind, self, language or signs? Do we need a ground for our judgment? If there is no basement for anyone’s judgment, how can we ascertain that this argument is universally true?

In other words, if there is no ground for human consciousness, there will not be a reality in the ontological sense. If there is no such reality, all things will derive from various types of interactive experience or involve with social conventions made through language in which only agreement is acceptable. Every possibility will become only an idea. Again, the same question may be raised. What do choice and liberation mean for human being? Can we be free from concepts and our own conceptualization? Or the highest goal each human being can attain is only the most intelligent conceptual being conversant with language!

In realization of this contextual limitation, an advanced theory of sociology in relation to the study of sign-activities, namely *semiosis*, has been developed and declared. The theory is based on the assumption that the capacity for spontaneous life and intelligence, bubbling into being, is more than a mere function of evolutionary imperative and cultural conditioning. Despite it is fully rational to believe that human body-mind is biological and cultural, it is remarkable that biology and culture are also literally or

² *ibid.*, p. 103.

symbolically interactive. Influenced by Peirce's semiotic analysis, Halton states that the dichotomy of biological and cultural reductionism is a consequence of philosophical and cultural *nominalism* which remains false.³

Semiosis is the study of inferential process of every sign occurring in time. Every sign has its own reality in the self-correcting process of interpretation, entails its futurity and conceivable consequences, and thus is pragmatic. Semiosis studies signs in terms of sign-activities with a belief that every sign has its being in its power of serving as intermediary between mind and the object in analogy to a plant's power of growth. Human conducts are viewed as sign-habits. All signs are inferences which do not point merely to things or thinking substances, but also to spatiotemporal activities. By so saying, it implies that reality can always be traced in conventions, but that reality is intrinsically social. It represents a psychophysical universe alive with signs in which human body-mind finds itself.

According to Peirce, mind in general, not simply human mind, is an emergent evolutionary capacity capable of progressive embodiment in the nature of things. Mind is in a semiotic and communicative process; every of its function, thought for instance, is in signs. Mind bodies forth and becomes embodied in conceivable consequences of signs. The meanings of thoughts and other signs are found in conceivable consequences they engender and become real in the pragmatic sense. Mind thus matters meanings into being. It is neither the product of brain, nor is it a mere cultural convention.

Within the semiotic context, mind is viewed as a sign-process, or a transaction which is a triad of self-object-interpretation. It is not limited to any of corporeal organism, but is in transaction with its environment through its own awareness. Signs can be real through its communicative intelligibility because they produce the real conceivable consequences whether or not actually interpreted. Brain is an organ of mind in the meanwhile each of neuronal activities is a bodily medium for sign-activities. All of human

³Nominalism is the view that things denominated by the same term share nothing except the fact that they are called such and such. What all chairs have in common is that they are called "chairs." The doctrine is usually associated with the thought that everything that exists is a particular individual, and therefore there are no such things as universals. Reality can be found only in knowledge of particulars, that general laws are fictions or conventions, and that conventions are simply names for particulars, hence nominal. Eugene Halton, "Mind Matters," **Symbolic Interaction**, vol 31, No. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 119-141.

communications are through signs. In the process of sign-activities, man therefore lives in and through signs as signs live through man.

Being a human means being an organic sign-complex in transaction with a universe suffused with signs. In other words, a human being is mattered out of the evolving ecological mind. Mind is not only the product of determinate evolutionary process, but vitally the producer of emergent possibilities, actualities, and generalities, not reducible to determinate process, conventions, contingencies, or physical sensations.

The stress on social dimension leads to the validity of sign-activities. Even though the physical bodies of individual interpreters die, those embodied signs of their lives may persist in successive interpretation. The meaning of a sign appears in the consequence it generates. And such meaning becomes the stuff of which human mind is made. Mind is that which matters itself, or specifically speaking – the meaning of itself, into emergent being. Mind in this understanding is not in the existential and invisible dimension. It cannot be said to exist ultimately because it is illogical to hold something incognizable to be a basis for cognition. Obviously, human beings can understand only what is constructed.⁴ Mind as a constructed is real by its own function.

Based on Peircean semiotic outlook, the dichotomy of mind and matter is rejected because it is mind that matters sign-activities into being. The theories that mind is reducible to matter and that mind is utterly ethereal like a ghost in the machine are both shown to be illusions rooted in nominalism. Mind in this context sounds interesting to Buddhists because in Buddhism the dichotomy of mind and matter is also rejected. But Buddhists are reluctant to say that the reality of mind is intrinsically social.

According to the Buddha's teaching, mind is something ultimately exists. But it is true that we know what it is through sign-activities. Without thought and language mind is unintelligible. Even so, underneath thought and language there are a group of ultimate realities interconnecting in flux or in process. They are the basis of all knowledge and judgment everyone makes.

For Buddhists to see "mind" is not like to say "mind" despite mind cannot be known as mind I am writing without a linguistic expression. The term "mind" (Pāli: *citta*) is designated to refer to a flaring flow of consciousness. It is seen as that which is

⁴Fritz Wallner, **Constructive Realism: Aspects of a New Epistemological Movement**, (Wien: Wilhelm Braumuller, 1994), p. 13.

conscious of an object. Though ultimate, it is always conditioned by a group of factors named mental concomitants (Pāli: *cetasika*). The main function of mind is to experience, know or be conscious of an object. The main function of each mental concomitant found in group is to mark, differentiate or feel that object. We perceive an object because mind is experiencing. But what makes our perception unique is a particular group of mental concomitants accompanied mind at a particular moment.

Mind is to be seen rather than to be said if the aim for liberation is in focus. Nothing can be clung to when mind is rightly seen. Following Buddhist higher doctrine, there is a mind at a time. Each mind arises to experience an object and then dissolves. Activated by the dispositional force (or *kammic* energy) of the previous mind, a new mind shortly arises, experiences, and dissolves. The process of rising and falling continues incessantly insofar as the dispositional force is running its course. Impermanence and non-substantiality are thereby mind's nature. In other words, mind exists but its existence is impermanent, unbearable and non-substantial.⁵ The Buddha says thus about mind:

Like a fish that is drawn from its watery abode and thrown upon land, even so does the mind flutter...The mind is hard to check, swift, flits wherever it listeth, the control of which is good; a controlled mind is conducive to happiness. The mind is very hard to perceive, extremely subtle, flits wherever it listeth; let the wise person guard it; a guarded mind is conducive to happiness. Faring far, wandering alone, bodiless, lying in the cave is the mind; those who subdue it are freed from the bond of Māra.⁶

Though claimed to be seen, nevertheless, no one has ever seen mind with his or her crude eyes. By normal perception, mind is not something cognizable. And because of its incognizable nature, it is argued by the opponents to be illogical to hold it as a basis for cognition. Buddhist minds are claimed to be seen by a limit of competent mental

⁵Buddhist higher doctrine is known as Abhidhamma. It is the third part of Pāli canon composed during the reign of Asoka emperor. Three natural characteristics of mind are also three common characteristics appeared to everything found on earth. They are grouped under the title of "the Three Common Characteristics" and become a basic teaching of Buddhism.

⁶Thera Nārada (tr.), **The Dhammapada**, (Cittavagga), (London: John Murray, 1959), pp. 22-3. I explore this version in comparison with the version of Thanissaro Bhikkhu (tr.), **Dhammapada A Translation**, (Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana Publications, 1998), pp. 10-1.

practitioners, but this type of seeing is intuitional than logical. How can we accept this intuitional seeing universally true? If truth implies propositionally true, mind will become a meaningless topic beyond reason. Can Buddhists find a solution to this contest?

According to Buddhist explanation, mind as a term signifies what is an ultimate but conditioned reality. This reality is not intrinsically social, but rather ontological. It represents a flow of consciousness. It is the horizon at which sense-consciousness (*viññāṇa*) functions in one of six ways. Also, it is the meeting point where an external object impinges upon a sense-organ, and then that impingement immediately arouses mind to be conscious of that object. Contact is called to the interlocking of three components; an external but unknown object, a sense-organ and a mind-set⁷ when functions in harmony as sense-consciousness. Mind is thus like a point-instant whereupon contact, birth and the wheel of life take place.

Incidentally at a moment mind is conscious of an object in one of six ways. It can be said that it is conscious of an object through one of six sense-organs; eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind-door. If mind is conscious of an object through eyes, it is called eye-consciousness. If through ears, it is called ear-consciousness. If through nose, it is called nose-consciousness. If through tongue, it is called tongue-consciousness. If through body, it is called body-consciousness. If through mind-door, it is called mind-consciousness. Sense-consciousness is thus called to the current conscious mind-set when interacts with other two components; an external object and a sense-organ, in contact.⁸

When there is an impingement of an external object and a sense-organ, a particular mind-set will be suddenly and spontaneously motivated to arise and experience that object in terms of sense-consciousness. Mind as eye-consciousness will read that object and decode it into form. Mind as ear-consciousness will decode an object into sound. Mind as nose-consciousness will decode an object into odor. Mind as tongue-consciousness will decode an object into taste. Mind as body-consciousness will decode an object into touch. And mind as mind-consciousness will decode an object into idea. Each of these consciousnesses is not substantial. It will be present insofar as there is an impingement.

⁷Mind-set is called to a particular mind arising with a group of mental concomitants. Mind cannot exist in isolation from a group of mental concomitants.

⁸Contact is constituted by the conjunction of an external object, a sense-organ and sense-consciousness. — Mrs. Rhys Davids (tr.), **The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saṃyuttanikāya)**, Part II, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1994), pp. 101-2.

If the impingement vanishes, that sense-consciousness extinguishes. Thus, every mind-set or each sense-consciousness is causally conditioned.⁹

At the first time an external object is unknown to mind. But through mind's acts or functions, it is read and changed into sense-data. The interlocking process motivates mind to arise as (a type of) sense-consciousness and experience the object together with a group of mental concomitants. After experiencing, that particular mind dissolves, leaving its dispositional force to motivate a new mind to arise and experience. As long as the impingement continues, mind after mind will be invoked to arise and experience. The existence of mind is incognizable, but we cannot reject mind in the ontological level because it is inferred via its cognizable activities. An endeavor to reject mind as a basis will wipe out the root condition of one's own consciousness and abolish the whole process of one's cognition.

Although we are not able to see mind directly by common experience, it is always presupposed in our perception of form, sound, odor, taste, touch and thought. Without mind and its function, an external object can never be interpreted and known. In other words, the existence of an external object is unintelligible without mind's reading process. Yet, seeing an object at a mind-moment¹⁰ may require some forthcoming mind-moments in reading it. Mind in general is hence called to a flow of consciousness rather than something solitary and real-in-itself. Within this term, there is always an implication of mind in collaboration with mental concomitants, of mind in conjunction with an unknown object and a sense-organ, or even of an inseparable group of conditioned realities. Mind is not a single term pointing to the sole reality. Rather, it is a term of grouping activities pointing to the process of perception and then cognition.

If the semiotic context is brought into consideration, sign-activities will be referred to mind's acts or functions other than mind as the ultimate basis. Even in Buddhism mind is the term of grouping conjunctions. We cannot grasp mind, but we infer it through its various acts. In the meanwhile Peirce's semiosis analyses life as a sequence of inferences derived from sign-functions or sign-actions as consisting of an irreducibly triadic relation of object, sign and interpretant, Buddhists understand life as the totality of mind's

⁹George Grimm, **The Doctrine of the Buddha**, tr. by Bhikkhu Sīlācāra, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), pp. 70-2. Also in Sumalee Mahanarongchai, **Being-there and Becoming: the Original Way of Human Beings**, (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2014), pp. 111-4.

¹⁰A mind-moment signifies a mind arising, presenting and dissolving in an infinitesimal second.

correlating activities. Functioning in terms of sense-consciousness, mind always interlocks with an object and a sense-organ in contact. The interlocking of three components leads to perception, interpretation and the whole process of cognition.

According to Peirce, perception is the possibility of acquiring information and of meaning. Man can think only by means of words or symbols. Therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other.¹¹ If Buddhist terminology is applied, it will be the interlocking of three aforementioned components that puts forth perception. In perceptual process, there is always an interpretative action performed by mind in derivation of meaning. Form, sound, odor, taste, touch and thought are outcomes of such interpretative action. Hence, perception in Buddhism is also a process involved with interpretation and meaning.

Nevertheless, it is remarkable to note that a mind-moment of seeing is not a mind-moment of reading. To be clear, a mind-moment of reading always arises after a mind-moment of seeing ceases. A moment of knowing something follows a moment of seeing it. At the first moment we may see an object, but it takes some forthcoming moments to know that object is a glass for instance. It is like what Bakker explained that our “lived reality” in everyday life is understood by us in retrospect through the use of signs, but “the immediate moment of awareness is presignifactory awareness. We are aware before we can articulate that awareness.”¹² A representation of an object is produced by mind’s spontaneous activities. In other words, we know an object by inference through its representative idea. This process may be known by sociologists as sign-activities, but it is understood by Buddhists as mind’s functions or acts.

By saying that we know an object by inference through its representative idea it does not mean we are following any theory of representationalism. Representationalism is a doctrine that mind works on representations of things and features of things that we perceive or think about. The fundamental attack to this doctrine is that mind is supposing its ideas to represent something else, but it has no access to this something else except by forming another idea. Questions of how mind ever escapes from the world of representations and how representations manage to acquire genuine content pointing beyond themselves are often raised by the opponents.

¹¹ I quote Peirce’s writings in Milton Singer, “Signs of the Self: An Exploration in Semiotic Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist New Series*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Sep. 1980), pp. 485-507.

¹² J. I. Bakker, “The Self as an Internal Dialogue: Mead, Blumer, Peirce, and Wiley,” *The American Sociologist*, vol 36, no. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 75-84.

Even so, a representation of the object by mind's activities in Buddhism may be free from this opposition because subject-object dichotomy or the dualism between a reality and its representation is rejected from the beginning. The world of representations is always the projected world. It is not a simulated or perceivable image of the real outside world. In Buddhism a theory on two parallel sets of dual realities like the external reality and its duplication is not accepted due to its core teaching of interdependence. The existence of an external object can neither be affirmed nor denied because it is always unknown. But that unknown object is perceived in contact and becomes intelligible through interpretation undertaken by mind functioning in terms of sense-consciousness. Therefore, the world we perceive is projected rather than duplicated.

For Buddhists mind is in signs in a sense, but in another sense it exists ontologically. It is not at all against Buddhist understanding in asserting mind in terms of sign-process, but it may be too blunt to conclude that mind is intrinsically social. Mind can be viewed as an indexical sign because it is a name appended in contiguity with its object. It can also be viewed as a symbolic sign because it is interpreted by convention and described in language.¹³ However, underlying sign-process there must be a basis on which sign-activities are running their processes. This basis insinuates mind-process. It is the non-substantial ground, point, or horizon, upon which each of such activities is inaugurated and articulated.¹⁴

Mind in Buddhist's ontological sense does not represent Cartesian mental substance with the power of introspection, intuition, and doubt, being the unity of that "I think." Conditioned by mental concomitants, mind is neither a self-subsisting entity nor capable of independent existence. Though ultimate, it is ephemeral and all the time conditioned. Mind is never a dualistic pair of body because body is a compound of what is already projected in the meanwhile mind is a transient projector operating in collaboration with mental concomitants.

¹³ Apart from indexical signs and symbolic signs, iconic signs also belong in the trichotomy of Peirce's analysis of three kinds of relations that a sign may have to its objects; resemblance, contiguity, and association by convention. But it is difficult to postulate mind in Buddhism as an iconic sign because I cannot see a resemblance of this sign to its object.

¹⁴ Sujin Boriarnwanaket, **A Survey of Paramattha Dhammas**, tr. by Nina Van Gorkom, (Bangkok: Dhamma Study and Support Foundation, 2005), p. 59.

It may sound strange to say in Buddhism that mind matters meanings into being, but the process of life is virtually engendered and meaningfully exerted by various acts of mind. Identical as these two perspectives seem to be, both traditions reject Cartesian dualism. However, it is insufficient to conclude that Peirce's semiotic analysis is fully compatible with Buddhist insight. Mind in Buddhist explanation is not like mind in Peircean theory because it represents sign-process in the first-ordered activity and mind-process in the second-ordered activity. Mind in Buddhism pertains socially to sign-activities inasmuch as to mind-activities ontologically. It is thus not intrinsically social.

If mind exists socially as sign-process and ontologically as mind-process, we cannot escape from the fact that born to be human beings we are fully deliberate in our own actions performed with intention. Mind is not intrinsically social because if it was, free will and self-responsibility would be undermined. Mind as a sign comes from language. It is thus clearly bound with culture and society. In this stage there is no room for choice and free will. But mind as a basis arises and perceives the world uniquely because it is accompanied by a distinctive group of mental concomitants. Which group of mental concomitants will accompany each arising mind is determined by kammic force accrued from one's own past intentional deeds. Mind as the ontological basis of ordinary perception is essentially the topic directly related to one's own action (Pāli: *kamma*) driven by one's intention (Pāli: *cetanā*) as the Buddha says thus, "Bhikkhus, we call intention (*cetanā*) kamma. People have intentions and then perform physical, verbal, or mental kamma accordingly."¹⁵ In the second-ordered stage, mind-process is intrinsically bound with individual deliberation to which choice and free will are of great significance.

In the ontological level mind engages with personal intention rather than social determination. But in the conventional level mind is designated by culture and included in sign-activities. Ontologically speaking, every action when performed with intention will yield a forceful fruit at a time. According to the teaching of kamma, even though we are partly determined by kammic force of past deeds, still autonomous and self-responsible we are in determining our own present and future. The Buddha recommends each of us to be a refuge unto oneself because there is no external source of power intervening in our actions except our own minds' will. This means that mind is ultimately ontological but

¹⁵ I quote the Buddha's saying apparent in *Aṅguttaranikāya*, vol. III, referred in P.A. Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, tr. by Grant A. Olson, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 153.

conventionally cultural or social. In Buddhism mind is not intrinsically social because man cannot elude from his own intention, action and responsibility in every of sign-activities mattered into his being.

According to Peirce, “a man denotes whatever is the object of his attention at the moment. He also connotes whatever he knows or feels of this object. His interpretant is the future memory of this cognition and becomes his future self.”¹⁶ Despite Peirce’s semiosis verifies the validity of sign-activities by their conceivable consequences produced in one’s experience, we have not yet found any of ontological ground clearly stated in his explanation except the implication of what is called “the ecological mind.” By contrast, Buddhist higher doctrine explicitly emphasizes the significance of each arising mind as the ontological ground underlying the whole process of cognition. But this ground is non-substantial. Each mind is an impermanent basis in which sign-process find the arena for self-verification and utterances. And because of its ephemeral and non-substantial nature, this ontological ground is free from conceptual attacks made by those opponents with regard to dualism, nominalism and representationalism.

To sum up, Peirce’s semiotic analysis mentioned in a multitude of sociological theories has some interesting points in analogy to Buddhist’s understanding of mind-process. Both may agree that the process of mind matters meanings into being. Mind in a sense is derived from sign-activities, but it is in another sense a basis whereupon sign-activities are articulated. No mind-matter or mind-body dichotomy is accepted in both traditions. Even so, to equate mind only with sign-activities or put it under the category of merely sign-process seems to be inadequate. For the purpose of communication and knowledge, mind is made of in the process of sign-activities. But for the purpose of choice and liberation, mind represents grouping conjunctions of the ultimate but conditioned realities on which the whole process of cognition is running.

¹⁶Peirce’s summary of “the True Analogy” between man and word is quoted in Milton Singer, “Signs of the Self: An Exploration in Semiotic Anthropology,” p. 488.

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