

# THE CONCEPT OF MIND (CITTA) IN EARLY BUDDHISM



Jointu Chakma

## ABSTRACT

This paper is about the concept of Mind in Early Buddhism. Early Buddhism refers mainly to *sutta* (discourse) and *vinaya* (discipline) *pitaka* (basket) of entire textual collections. There is very limited explanation of Mind (*citta*) in Early Buddhism before Abhidhamma Pitaka was comprehended. Although the central teaching of Buddha was based on Mind but hardly understood what exactly does mind means in Early teaching. The argument encounters while answering the continual life process without a permanent soul, how a new life form or *Kamma* gives resultant effect in the new existence? This paper gives a brief explanation how five aggregates and six senses play vital role in the process of new existence and how mind is called different names in Early Buddhism.

*Keywords:* Mind (*citta*), No-self (*anatta*), Five-aggregates (*khandha*), Six Senses (*ayatana*), Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), Nibbana

## INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist concept of mind is a far more complex teaching than the notion of Western psychologists, who understand by it what are generally called the affective, cognitive, and cognitive functions in man. Like the modern schools of psycho-analysis Buddhism regards mind as both conscious and unconscious in its working condition. Such concepts as *saṅkhāra* and *bhavaṅga*, occurring in the early *Pāli* literature, show that the Buddhists knew of the existence of unconscious states of the mind long before the West.

The problem of understanding the concept of mind is both theoretical and practical. The theory of Soul (*atta*) was popularly debated and highly studied among all Indian religions during the Buddha's time. The Buddha emerged with totally new doctrine of *anatta* (no-soul), which was hardly understood at beginning and sometime “*citta*” of Buddhism was misunderstood as “soul”. Therefore, the concept and understanding of mind has become a very important part in Buddhism is because without having a proper understanding it the fundamental goal of Buddhism will be difficult to attain.

In the very verse of the *Dhammapāda* the Buddha said that:

“Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts suffering follow him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox”.<sup>1</sup>

This verse gives a clear idea that mental states are being controlled by the mind and the mind is the creator of all concomitants of the aggregates, because all phenomenon things are coming from the mind. But Mind is also not the Soul, which sometimes misunderstood as soul. In the Early Buddhism the concept of mind was not very clear alike in the *Abhidhamma* it has been elaborated and illustrated in extension. The Early Buddhism refers to the *Suttapitaka* of Buddha's teaching.

---

<sup>1</sup>Dhp-I. **Yamakavagga: Pairs** (PTS), Acharya Buddharakkhita (trans);(*Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā; manoseññhā manomayā, Manasā ce paduññhena; bhāsati vā karoti vā, Tato naū dukkham-anveti; cakkaū vā vahato padaū.*) <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.01.budd.html> retrieved 22/04/2017.

## DEFINITION OF “MIND”:

The Oxford Dictionary defines the term “Mind” as thus: “The element of a person that enables them to be aware of the world and their experiences, to think, and to feel; the faculty of consciousness and thought.”<sup>2</sup> It has many synonyms including “brain, intelligence, intellect, intellectual capabilities, mental capacity, brains, brainpower, wits, wit, powers of reasoning, powers of comprehension, powers of thought, understanding, reasoning, judgement, sense, mentality, perception, head, imagination, subconscious, psyche, ego.”<sup>3</sup>

## DEFINITION OF MIND (CITTA) IN BUDDHISM:

In the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* of Acariya Anuruddha, the definition of “*citta*” is given thus, “The Pāli word *citta* is derived from the verbal root *citi-* “to cognize, to know.” The commentators define *citta* in three ways: as agent, as instrument, and as activity. As the agent, *citta* is that which cognizes an object (*ārammaṇam cintetī ti cittam*). As the instrument, *citta* is that by means of which the accompanying mental factors cognize the object (*etena cintetī ti cittam*). As an activity, *citta* is itself nothing other than the process of cognizing the object (*cintanamattam cittam*).”<sup>4</sup>

*Citta* is used in *nikāyas* to refer to the mind, and its synonyms are *manas* and *viññāṇa*. Each of these terms may sometimes indicate in *Pāli* what may be called the “nonphysical factor” in man and other living beings, as is implied in the *Dīgha Nikāya*: “Whatever there is to be called *citta* or *mano* or *viññāṇa*, that is not the soul, permanent, constant, eternal, unchanging, etc. This shows that in the common usage of the times these three terms were applied more or less synonymously for the “mind.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Oxford Online Dictionary: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mind> retrieved 22/04/2017.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/thesaurus/mind>

<sup>4</sup>Acariya Anuruddha, Bhikkhu Bodhi (Editor). *The Abhidhammattha Sangaha* (A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma). Charleston Buddhist Fellowship, 2007, p.23.

<sup>5</sup>O. H. De A. Wijesekera. *The Buddhist Concept of Mind*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 2008. p.3.

In the Pāli-English dictionary mentioned that the term ‘*citta*’ comes from the root ‘*cit*’ which psychologically refer as the heart, i.e. the centre and focus of man’s emotional nature as well as that intellectual element which inheres in.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, in earliest *suttas* of the Buddhism *citta* was commonly mentioned as single term of *nāma* in the name-form (*nāma-rūpa*) or five aggregates (*khandhas*). The name-form is the basic and fundamental bound of a person containing the physical and psychological strata of human body and mind.

In explaining the mind in Early Buddhist system the name and form will be reasonable to determine as the proper understanding of the mind’s value as appeared in the earliest *suttapitaka*.

## MIND AND THE FIVE AGGREGATES

Early Buddhism rejected a concept of self-composed of the aggregates, there seem to be suggestions that there is in some sense a self, but not an “I”, and at the same time the Five Aggregates are also explained the cognitive process of the mind objects. The teaching of The Five Aggregates or The Five *Skandhas*, is an analysis of personal experiences and a view on cognition from a Buddhist perspective. The teaching also provides a logical and thorough approach to understand the Universal Truth of Not-self. In contemporary language, the Buddhist doctrine of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandā*) describes the human condition. In the era when the doctrine was first marked, it was a counter-argument to Classical Hinduism’s *ātman* (eternal and purely spiritual soul). The five aggregates (*khandhas*) are a list of what humans are composed of: matter (*rupa*), sensations (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). By examining the five aggregates that constitute the human condition, the Buddha concludes that there is consciousness but no-self. In the *Khandha Sutta*<sup>7</sup> the Buddha explained about the five-aggregates in thus;

---

<sup>6</sup>T.W. Rhys Davids & William Stede. Pali-English Dictionary. Pali Text Society, 1921–5. p. 266.

<sup>7</sup>SN 22.48 . *Khandha Sutta*: Aggregates. Bhikkhu Thanissaro (trans).<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.048.than.html> retrieved on 20/04/2017

“Whatever form is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the form aggregate.

Whatever feeling is .....That is called the feeling aggregate.

Whatever perception .....That is called the perception aggregate.

Whatever (mental) formations are .....Those are called the fabrications aggregate.

Whatever consciousness is .....That is called the consciousness aggregate.

These are called the five aggregates.”

The aggregates are the continual changing phenomenon, and whenever they arise in past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near –are being given the name as own. The feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and mental formation (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*) are the state of psychological sense or mental in literary meaning, however, the consideration takes place that the mind is the combination of the name (*nāma*) aggregates explained in the later canonical and post-canonical literatures.

## THE SIX SENSES

The relationship among the six senses and name aggregates have been discussed by the Buddha in *Mahā-salayatanika Sutta* (The Great Six Sense-media Discourse), where the Buddha explained the senses are related and coming one after another, are exactly the mind’s door. The Buddha taught the great six sense-media to a group of monks in thus;

“Not knowing, not seeing the eye as it actually is present; not knowing, not seeing forms... consciousness at the eye... contact at the eye as they actually are present; not knowing, not seeing whatever arises conditioned through contact at the eye — experienced as pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — as it actually is present, one is infatuated with the eye... forms... consciousness at the eye... contact at the eye... whatever arises conditioned by contact at the eye and is experienced as pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>MN- 149. *Maha-salayatanika Sutta*: The Great Six Sense-media Discourse. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (trans). <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.149.than.html> retrieved on 12/04/2017.

In that discourse the Buddha explained the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind-base in the same way. The sense of *citta* in terms of sensation and emotion would have much to do with the six basic senses (*indriyāni*, or *āyatana*) in Buddhist system. They are<sup>9</sup>:

- (1) Eye (*cakkhāyatana*), or visual organ for visible object;
- (2) Ear (*sotāyatana*), or auditory organ for sound, or audible object;
- (3) Nose (*ghānāyatana*), or olfactory organ for odour, or olfactory object;
- (4) Tongue (*jivhāyatana*), or gustatory organ for taste, or gustatory object;
- (5) Body (*kāyāyatana*), or tactile organ for body-impression, or tactile object;

and

- (6) Mind-base (*manāyatana*) or consciousness for mind-object.

Mind-base (*manāyatana*) is the collective term for all consciousness whatever, and therefore should not be confounded with the mind-element (*mano-dhātu*) which performs only the functions of advertiring to, and receiving, the sense object.<sup>10</sup> The state of one's *citta* which can be regarded as one's general mood or feelings has close relation with the control over his sense-organs and sense-faculties (including *mano* in the forms of *manindriya* and *manoviññāna*).

Human consciousness (*viññāna*) is not only dependent upon the other four aggregates: with material form, humans sense and then perceive objects in the world; humans create mental formations necessary for action and for understanding the world. All four allow consciousness to be conscious of something. In addition, consciousness is aware that it is conscious; that is, it is self-conscious.

In *Khajjaniya Sutta* of *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha distinguishes consciousness in the following manner:

“why do you call it ‘consciousness’? Because it cognizes, thus it is called consciousness. What does it cognize? It cognizes what is sour, bitter, pungent,

---

<sup>9</sup>MN- 148 *Chachakka Sutta*: The Six Sextets. Thanissaro Bikkhu, 1998. The Pali word translated as “consciousness” is *viññāna* and the word translated as “mind” is *mano*. Thus, the faculty of awareness of the mind (the base of, e.g., abstractions synthesized from physical sensory experience) is referred to as *mano-viññāna* (“mind-consciousness”). <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.148.than.html> retrieved on 12/04/2017.

<sup>10</sup> Nyanatiloka, *Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*. The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Taiwan, 1970. p.28.

sweet, alkaline, non-alkaline, salty, & unsalty. Because it cognizes, it is called consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

This type of awareness appears to be more refined and introspective than that associated with the aggregate of perception (*saññā*) which the Buddha describes in the same discourse as follows:

“why do you call it ‘perception’? Because it perceives, thus it is called ‘perception.’ What does it perceive? It perceives blue, it perceives yellow, it perceives red, it perceives white. Because it perceives, it is called perception.”<sup>12</sup>

## MIND AND DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

The Dependent Origination describes that ignorance (*avijjā*) is the root cause of suffering, and origin of all the other 11 links of *samsaric* circle. As ignorance gives rise to exist mental-formation (*Saṅkhāra*) and therefore, mental-formation gives rise to exist name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*). However, the name (*nāma*) is dependently bound to the matter (*rūpa*), in other word they are inseparable and indistinguishable. In the *Mahānidānasutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha taught that, from name-and-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness (*nāmarūpapaccayā viññāṇam*), and from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form (*viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpam*). The emphasis of co-dependent relationship between name-form and consciousness is somewhat important in attaining the liberation (*nibbāna*) since they even are given the primary focus while practicing the insight (*vipassana*). The ignorance is a term of name (*nāma*). The true understanding of what is ignorance, what is the origin of ignorance (*avijjāsamudayo*), what

---

<sup>11</sup> SN 22.79; ***Khajjaniya Sutta***: Chewed Up. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (trans).  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.079.than.html> retrieved on 12/04/2017  
*(Kiñca bhikkhave, viññāṇam vadetha: vijānātīti kho bhikkhave, tasmā viññāṇanti vuccati. Kiñca vijānātīti: ambilampi vijānātīti, tittakampi vijānātīti, kaṭukampi vijānātīti, madhurakampi 3- vijānātīti, khārikampi vijānātīti, akhārikampi vijānātīti, loṇikampi vijānātīti, aloṇikampi vijānātīti. Vijānātīti kho bhikkhave, tasmā viññāṇanti vuccati.)*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* (*Kiñca bhikkhave, saññām vadetha: sañjānātīti kho bhikkhave, tasmā saññātīti vuccati kiñca sañjānātīti: nīlampi sañjānātīti; pītakampi sañjānātīti; lohitakampi sañjānātīti. Odātampi sañjānātīti; sañjānātīti kho bhikkhave, tasmā saññātīti vuccati. ).*

is the cessation of ignorance (*avijjānirodho*), what is the way leading to the cessation of ignorance (*avijjānirodhagāminī paṭipada*).

This is explained by the Venerable *Sāriputta* in *Sammādiṭṭhisutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya* in thus:

Not knowing about *dukkha*, not knowing about the origin of *dukkha*, not knowing about the cessation of *dukkha*, not knowing about the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha* — this is called ignorance. With the arising of the taints there is the arising of ignorance; with the cessation of the taints there is the cessation of ignorance. The way leading to the cessation of ignorance is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view... right concentration.<sup>13</sup>

Again comes the consciousness (*viññāṇam*) in the way ignorance is ceased and eradicated. From the six senses the mind-consciousness (*manoviññāṇam*) is one, the other five senses co-operatively give rise to have consciousness are fundamentally to mind-consciousness, therefore, the mind-consciousness is the last and main of six.

## MIND IN ABHIDHAMMA LITERATURE:

The concept of Mind in later *Abhidhamic* literatures have been illustrated in philosophical and psychological sense with scholastic approach, it is said that the *abhidhamma* is a complex and sophisticated system of psychology developed in the early centuries of the Buddhist dispensation.

The *Abhidhamma* describes that all *dhammas* can be analyzed into four all-inclusive categories:

1. *Rupa* (matter or form)
2. *Citta* (consciousness)
3. *Cetasika* (mental concomitants; all mental factors besides consciousness)
4. *Nibbāna*

<sup>13</sup> MN –9. *Sammādiṭṭhisutta*. Ñānamoli Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans).

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.009.ntbb.html#p66> retrieved on 11/04/2017. (*Yam kho āvuso dukkhe aññāṇam, dukkhasamudaye aññāṇam, dukkhanirodhe aññāṇam, dukkhanirodhagāminiyā paṭipadāya aññāṇam - ayam vuccatāvuso avijjā. Āsavasamudayā avijjāsamudayo. Āsavanirodhā avijjānirodho. Ayameva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo avijjā nirodhagāminī paṭipadā seyyathīdam: sammādiṭṭhi sammāsaṅkappo, sammāvācā, sammākammanto sammāājīvo sammāvāyāmo, sammāsati, sammāsamādhi. )*

One of the *Abhidhamma*'s most important contributions to human thought, though still insufficiently known and utilized, is the analysis and classification of consciousness undertaken in the first of the *Dhammasangani*. The *Dhammasangani* presents its subject matter, the analysis of mind.

There are Four Classes of Consciousness (*catubbidha-cittāni*) in *Dhammasangini*:

1. *kāmāvacaram*, (Consciousness pertaining to the Sensuous Sphere)
2. *rūpāvacaram* (*Consciousness pertaining to the Form-Sphere*)
3. *arūpāvacaram*, Consciousness pertaining to the Formless Sphere
4. *lokuttaram c'ati*. (Supra mundane consciousness)

## MIND AND NIBBANA

*Nibbana* translates into English as “liberation, emancipation or destruction of all defilements”. In the Four Noble Truth, the cessation of *dukkha* is actually meant the attainment of *Nibbana*. Liberation or emancipation is attained by purifying the mind which is also called the cessation of consciousness. In the *Sammādiṭṭhi sutta*, Venerable *Sāriputta* explained about what is consciousness, what is the origin of consciousness (*viññāṇasamudayo*), what is the cessation of consciousness (*viññāṇanirodho*), what is the way leading to the cessation of consciousness (*viññāṇanirodhagāminī paṭipadā*) in thus:

There are these six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, mind-consciousness. With the arising of formations there is the arising of consciousness. With the cessation of formations there is the cessation of consciousness. The way leading to the cessation of consciousness is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view... right concentration.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> MN –9. *Sammādiṭṭhisutta*. Ñānamoli Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans).

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.009.ntbb.html#p66> retrieved on 11/04/2017. (*Chayime āvuso viññāṇakāyā: cakkhuviññāṇam, sotaviññāṇam, ghānaviññāṇam, jīvhāviññāṇam, kāyaviññāṇam, manoviññāṇam, saṅkhārasamudayā viññāṇasamudayo saṅkhāranirodha viññāṇanirodho. Ayameva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo viññāṇanirodhagāminī paṭipadā - seyyathīdam :sammādiṭṭhi sammāsaṅkappo, sammāvācā, sammākammanto, sammāājīvo sammāvāyāmo sammāsati, sammāsamādhi.*)

In the *Mahānidāna Sutta* again explained to the Venerable *Ananda* that, there are total eight emancipations (*aṭṭha kho ime vimokkhā*) based on mind-foundation, such as the first emancipation is, possessed of form (*rūpī rūpāni passati*), one sees forms. To see the true nature of form one has to develop the concentration of mind. Even in the ultimate state the consciousness (*viññāna*) stop generating new deeds. In the same way the second to until the eight emancipations gradually are gained through cultivating the mind, explained in thus:

Not percipient of form internally, one sees forms externally. This is the second emancipation.<sup>15</sup>

One is intent only on the beautiful. This is the third emancipation.<sup>16</sup>

With the complete transcending of perceptions of [physical] form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not heeding perceptions of diversity, [perceiving,] ‘Infinite space,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. This is the fourth emancipation.<sup>17</sup>

With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, [perceiving,] ‘Infinite consciousness,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is the fifth emancipation.<sup>18</sup>

With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, [perceiving,] ‘There is nothing,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. This is the sixth emancipation.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> DN – 15. *Mahānidānasutta*. Bhikkhu Thanissaro (trans). <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html> retrieved on 10/04/2017. (Ajjhattaṇi arūpasaññībahiddhā rūpāni passati. Ayam dutiyo vimokkho.)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. (subhanteva adhimutto hoti. Ayam tatiyo vimokkho.)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. (Sabbaso rūpasaññānam samatikkamā paṭīghasaññānam atthaṅgamā nānattasaññānam amanasikārā ‘ananto ākāso’ti ākāsānañcāyatanañ upasampajja viharati. Ayam catuttho vimokkho.)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. (Sabbaso ākāsānañcāyatanañ samatikkamma ‘anantam viññāṇa’nti viññāṇañcāyatanañ upasampajja viharati. Ayam pañcamo vimokkho.)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. (Sabbaso viññāṇañcāyatanañ samatikkamma ‘natthi kiñcī’ti ākiñcaññāyatanañ upasampajja viharati. Ayam chattho vimokkho )

With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, one enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is the seventh emancipation.<sup>20</sup>

With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, one enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling. This is the eighth emancipation.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A so-called being (*puggala*) or a human is an ultimate reality of the aggregates, when the five aggregates are bound to him then he is called a man or person bearing an identity of non-identity. An identity of non-identity, which is called *anatta* in Buddhism, in other word selfless-self, oneself, which neither a true-self nor the no-thing of the existence. It exists when the five-aggregates are combined, but out of the five-aggregates there is nothing to be identified as so-called eternal soul (*atman* in *upanishads*). So, the concept of mind in *suttapitaka* is mainly *nāma* (name) of five-aggregates along with *citta*, *mano* and *viññāna*.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* (*Sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanaṁ samatikkamma nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṁ upasampajja viharati. Ayaṁ sattamo vimokkho.*)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* (*Sabbaso nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṁ samatikkamma saññāvedayitanirodhaṁ upasampajja viharati. Ayaṁ atṭhamo vimokkho.*)

## REFERENCE

---

**Ānguttara Nikāya.** R. Morris (ed.). Vol I – V. Oxford: PTS, 1985 – 1995.

**Ānguttara Nikāya.** E. Hardy (ed.). Vol III – V. Oxford: PTS, 1974 – 1994.

**Dīgha Nikāya.** T. W. Rhys Davids and Carpenter (ed.). Vol I – II. Oxford: Pāli Text Society, 1982 – 1995.

**Dhammasaṅgani.** London: Pāli Text Society, 1978.

**Majjhima Nikāya.** Trenker (ed.). Vol I. V. Oxford: PTS, 1993.

**Samyutta Nikāya.** M. Leon Feer (ed.). Oxford: PTS, 1991.

**Sutta-Nipāta.** Andersen, Dines, and Helmers Smith (ed.). Oxford: Pāli Text Society, 1997.

**Sutta-Nipāta.** K.R. Norman (ed.). Oxford: PTS, 1985.

**Therīgāthā.** K.R. Norman (ed.). Oxford: PTS, 1971.

**Vimuttimagga.** Rev. N.R.M. Ehara, SomaThera, Kheminda Thera. Ceylon: Dr. D. Roland D. Weerasuria, 1961.