

KNOW YOUR MIND, PART 2: MINDS AND MENTAL FACTORS

With Ven. Sangye Khadro

Sravasti Abbey – August 21-22, 2021

A. What is mind?

Definition of mind/awareness (Tib. *blo*): clarity and knowing.

- “Clarity/clear” means that mind is not material. It is not made of atoms; it does not have color, shape, or tangibility; and thus it cannot be perceived by our senses.
- “Awareness” means that mind knows / experiences / is aware of an object.
- Synonyms:
 - Mind/awareness (*blo*)
 - Consciousness (*shes pa*)
 - Knower/cognizer (*rig pa*)

Our mind is not a single, monolithic thing, but is a stream/continuum of individual mind-moments, or experiences. These include sense perceptions, thoughts, memories, emotions, fantasies, dreams, etc. The mind is always changing—each moment of mind arises and immediately ceases, giving rise to the next moment.

B. Sense consciousnesses and mental consciousnesses

This is one way of dividing minds. Every instance of mind is either a sense or a mental consciousness. The difference between them is in terms of the sense power/faculty they depend on:

- A sense consciousness depends on a physical sense power.
- A mental consciousness depends on the mental sense power: the previous moment of mind.

C. Perceptions and conceptions

This is another way of dividing minds. The difference between them is how they engage with their object. A **perception** (literally, a non-conceptual mind) engages with its object directly. A **conception** (thought) does not engage its object directly, but through the medium of a mental image (conceptual appearance).

- Examples of perceptions: seeing a tree, hearing a bird singing, smelling bread baking, tasting chocolate, feeling cold.
- Examples of conceptions: remembering a conversation, thinking about a friend, doing analytical mediation on impermanence, visualizing the Buddha.

Perceptions and conceptions can be either correct or wrong. For example:

Perception

- Correct: seeing green as green; seeing a tree as a tree.
- Wrong: seeing green as red; seeing a mirror reflection as a real object.

Conception

- Correct: thinking that the earth is spherical; thinking that one's body is impermanent.
- Wrong: thinking that the earth is flat; thinking that one's body is permanent.

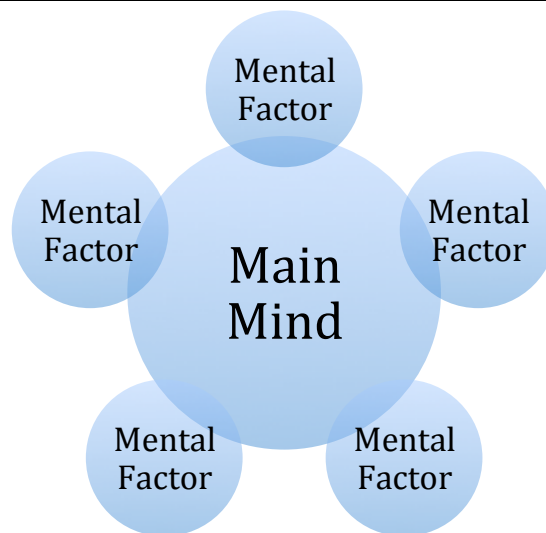
D. Main minds and mental factors

This way of dividing minds is from the point of view of their function— how they engage with an object, the role they play in knowing an object.

- A **main mind** (*gtso sems*; also known as **primary consciousness**) knows the mere presence of an object. There are **six types of main minds**: eye primary consciousness, ear primary consciousness, nose primary consciousness, tongue primary consciousness, body primary consciousness, and mental primary consciousness (this can be conceptual or non-conceptual).
- **Mental factors** (*sems byung*) apprehend various features of the object, and affect the way the mind apprehends the object. There are more than a hundred mental factors mentioned in various Buddhist scriptures, but we usually study **fifty-one mental factors**.

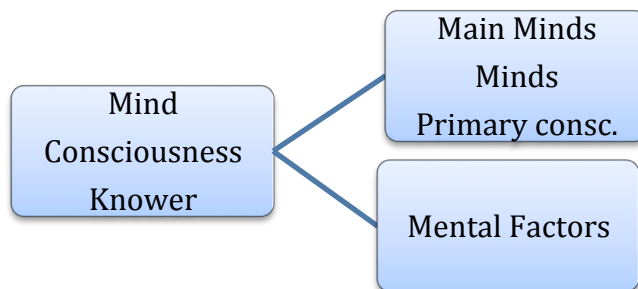
Minds and mental factors always work together, never separately—a main mind can never exist by itself without mental factors accompanying it, and a mental factor can never exist by itself without accompanying a main mind. For example, when we look at a flower, there is an eye primary consciousness (a main mind) along with a number of mental factors. The main mind knows just the bare presence of the object (the flower), and the mental factors engage with the object in different ways—e.g. **feeling** experiences it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; **discrimination** distinguishes the flower and its details (colors, shapes, etc.) from other types of objects; and so forth.

Each mental event consists of a main mind and at least five mental factors



Several analogies are used to help us understand the relationship between main minds and the mental factors that accompany them. One analogy is that the main mind is like the main part of a hand, and the mental factors are like the fingers. Another is that the main mind is like a leader, and the mental factors are like his or her ministers, each with their own portfolio. But these analogies are rough, not exact, because a main mind and its accompanying mental factors are **one nature**, meaning they arise, abide, and cease together and cannot be perceived separately.

Note: here, main mind (*gtso sems*), mind (*sems*), and primary consciousness (*rnam shes*) are synonymous. As mentioned above, the term "consciousness" (*shes pa*) is synonymous with mind (*blo*) and knower (*rig pa*). Those three terms encompass both main minds as well as mental factors:



E. The five similarities

The term “retinue” is sometimes used for the mental factors that accompany a main mind, e.g. “the feeling that is in the retinue of that consciousness.”

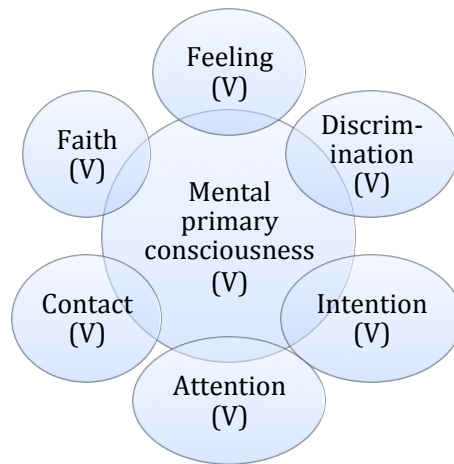
Another term used is “concomitant” or “having similarity,” e.g. “the feeling that is concomitant (or has similarity) with that consciousness.” Being concomitant means that a main mind and the mental factors accompanying it are one nature/entity, and have **five similarities** (*mtshungs ldan lnga*):

1. Basis/support: they arise in dependence on the same uncommon empowering condition, i.e. the sense power (eye sense power, etc. through mental sense power).
2. Object of observation: they observe the same object.
3. Aspect—e.g. regarding an eye consciousness seeing blue, both the main mind and its accompanying mental factors are generated in the aspect of blue (this is similar to the way a mirror takes on the aspect/reflection of blue).
4. Time—they arise, abide, and cease simultaneously.
5. Substance/substantial entity—this means that in the retinue of a main mind, there can be only one mental factor of each type, e.g. there can be only one feeling, one discrimination, etc.

The mental factors color or flavor the mind. For example, if a virtuous mental factor such as faith is present, the main mind and other mental factors concomitant with it all become virtuous; likewise, if a non-virtuous mental factor such as anger is present, the main mind and other mental factors concomitant with it become non-virtuous. And such states of mind, in turn, influence our actions. Geshe Rabten says:

“It is the mental factors that are primarily responsible for leading us to all forms of experience. When the mind is under the influence of unwholesome mental factors, such as attachment and anger, one is led into committing actions that cause experiences of frustration and suffering. But whenever the mind is dominated by wholesome factors, such as compassion and patience, then any ensuing physical and vocal activity will only result in happiness and wellbeing.”

The presence of a virtuous mental factor such as faith causes the main mind and the other mental factors accompanying it to become virtuous (V)



F. The fifty-one mental factors

There are different ways of enumerating mental factors in different Buddhist texts and traditions—e.g. Theravada Abhidharma lists fifty-two, Vasubhandu’s *Treasury of Knowledge (Abhidharmakosa)* lists forty-six, and so on.

The Sautrantika school lists fifty-one mental factors. This explanation is common to the Cittamatra and Madhyamaka schools. They are divided into six groups:

- (1) Five omnipresent
- (2) Five object-ascertaining
- (3) Eleven virtuous
- (4) Six root afflictions
- (5) Twenty secondary afflictions
- (6) Four changeable

The Dalai Lama has said: “Whether the system includes fifty-one mental factors or more or less, none of those sets is meant to be all-inclusive, as though nothing is left out. They are only suggestive, indicative of some things that are important.”

(1) The five omnipresent mental factors

These are called “omnipresent” because they accompany all main minds. All five are needed in order to have a complete cognition of an object.

1. **Feeling** (*tshor ba*) is an experience of pleasure, pain, or neutrality. Feeling experiences the results of our past actions and can lead to reactions of attachment, anger, confusion, and so forth.
2. **Discrimination** (*'du shes*) functions to distinguish “it is this and not that” and to apprehend the characteristics of an object. It differentiates and identifies objects.
3. **Intention** (*sems pa*) moves the primary consciousness and its accompanying mental factors to the object. It is the conscious and automatic motivating element that causes the mind to involve itself with and apprehend its object. It is action, karma. Although the mental factor of intention itself is not constructive, destructive, or neutral, it becomes so depending on what other mental factors—such as attachment or anger—accompany that mental state.
4. **Attention** (mental engagement, *yid la byed pa*) functions to direct the primary consciousness and its concomitant mental factors to the object and to actually apprehend the object. It focuses and holds the mind on an object without allowing it to move elsewhere.*
5. **Contact** (*reg pa*) connects three things—the object, cognitive faculty, and primary consciousness, thereby acting as a basis for feelings of pleasure, pain, and indifference. It is the cause of feeling.

* Note: The difference between intention and attention is that **intention** moves the mind to general objects/a general field of reference (e.g. a garden), and **attention** directs the mind to a particular object (e.g. a flower or leaf).

(2) The five object-ascertaining mental factors ¹

These are so-called because they apprehend the individual features of an object. The *Treasury of Knowledge* says that these five accompany all mental states, whereas the *Compendium of Knowledge* says that they accompany only virtuous mental states.² These five are not themselves virtuous, but become virtuous because of being associated with a virtuous mental state. In this case, the mindfulness accompanying a mental consciousness that apprehends and has aversion toward a repulsive object would not be the mindfulness of the five object-ascertaining mental factors, but would be a different mental factor similar to it.

1. **Aspiration** (*'dun pa*) takes a strong interest in an intended/desired object and is the basis for joyous effort. There are three types: wanting to meet the object, to not separate from the object, and to obtain the object.
2. **Appreciation** (belief, resolution, *mos pa*) stabilizes the apprehension of a previously ascertained object and holds it such that it cannot be distracted by another view.

¹ In *Science and Philosophy in the Indian Buddhist Classics, Vol. 2: The Mind*, these are called “mental

² Other works mention cases of these five that accompany afflictive mental states.

3. **Mindfulness** (*dran pa*) repeatedly brings to mind a phenomenon of previous acquaintance without forgetting it. It does not allow the mind to be distracted from the object and is the basis for concentration.
4. **Concentration** (single-pointedness, *ting nge 'dzin*) dwells one-pointedly for a sustained period of time on a single object. It is the basis for developing serenity and increasing wisdom.
5. **Wisdom** (understanding, intelligence, *shes rab*) functions to discriminate precisely with analysis the qualities, faults, or characteristics of an object held by mindfulness. It cuts through indecision and doubt with certainty and maintains the root of all constructive qualities in this and future lives. There are various types of intelligence:
 - a. **Inborn** intelligence is natural acuity of mind that comes as result of karma from previous lives.
 - b. **Acquired** understanding or wisdom is cultivated in this life. A person may have it with respect to various topics of the stages of the path. It is of three types:
 - i. The understanding or wisdom arising when hearing, learning, or studying a topic. It brings initial knowledge of the topic and lays the foundation for the other two types of understanding.
 - ii. The understanding or wisdom arising from critical reflection or contemplation is generated by thinking about a topic on our own or debating and discussing it with others. Through it, we gain a correct conceptual (inferential) understanding of the topic
 - iii. The understanding or wisdom arising from meditation is derived from deeper personal experience when understanding of the topic arises automatically in our mind because we are very familiar with it.

(3) The eleven virtuous mental factors

In general, virtue is that which brings an agreeable result and nonvirtue is that which brings a disagreeable result. Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* speaks of five types of virtue:

1. *Natural virtues* include the eleven virtuous mental factors—faith and so forth (see below). These are called natural virtues because their nature is virtuous; they naturally bring pleasing results.

2. *Related virtues* are main minds and mental factors that become virtuous because they are accompanied by virtuous mental factors. For example, when faith is present, the mental primary consciousness and the other mental factors (feeling, etc.) that accompany it become virtuous.

3. *Subsequently related virtues* are seeds and latencies of virtue established by virtuous minds and mental factors and by virtuous actions; for example, the karmic seed created by the mind of generosity. Seeds and latencies are not actual virtues; this is an example of the name of the cause (the virtuous path of action) being given to the effect (the seeds and latencies of virtue.)

4. *Virtues due to motivation* are physical and verbal actions motivated by the naturally virtuous mental factors. For example, prostrating to a Buddha image with an attitude of faith is a physical virtue.

Vaibhāṣikas and Prasangikas assert that virtue includes both minds and forms, thus virtues due to motivation—physical and verbal actions motivated by virtuous mental states—are virtues. Since Prātimokṣa precepts are form according to these two schools, the precepts are virtuous forms. However, according to Sautrantikas, Cittamatrins, and Svatantrikas, only minds can be virtues.

5. *Ultimate virtue* is emptiness because realizing it eradicates all obscurations and enables actual virtue to flourish. However, emptiness is not an actual virtue because it is permanent and itself does not bring results.

The eleven virtuous mental factors cause the omnipresent, object-ascertaining, and variable mental factors to take on a virtuous aspect and bring peace to oneself and others. Each of the eleven is an antidote to particular afflictions.

1. **Faith** (confidence, trust, *dad pa*) is confidence in such things as the law of karma and its effects and the Three Jewels. It produces a joyous state of mind free from the turmoil of the root and auxiliary afflictions and is the basis for generating the aspiration to develop new constructive qualities and enhancing virtuous aspirations already generated. It is of three kinds:
(1) Inspired faith knows the qualities of the object and rejoices in them.
(2) Aspiring faith knows the qualities of the object and aspires to attain them.
(3) Convictional faith (believing faith) knows the qualities of the object and has confidence in it.
2. **Integrity** (*ngo tsha shes pa*) avoids negativity for reasons of personal conscience. It enables us to restrain from harmful physical, verbal, and mental actions and is the basis for ethical conduct.
3. **Consideration for others** (*khrel yod pa*) avoids negativity for the sake of others. It enables us to restrain from harmful physical, verbal, and mental actions, acts as the basis for maintaining pure ethical conduct, prevents others from losing faith in us, and causes joy to arise in the minds of others.
4. **Nonattachment** (*ma chags pa*) is not the mere absence of attachment, but the opposite of it and the direct antidote to it. Referring to an object in cyclic existence, nonattachment prevents and counteracts attachment and subdues obsession with attractive objects and people.
5. **Nonhatred** (*zhe sdang med pa*) is the opposite of animosity—it is love and benevolence, not just the absence of anger and ill will. When referring to someone who harms us, the harm itself, or the cause of the harm, it has the characteristic of love and directly overcomes anger and hatred. It is the basis for the prevention of anger and the increase of love, benevolence, forgiveness, and fortitude.
6. **Nonconfusion** (*gti mug med pa*) is the opposite of confusion. Arising from an inborn disposition and nurtured by study, reflection, and meditation, it acts as a remedy for confusion and ignorance and accompanies the firm wisdom that thoroughly analyzes the specific meanings of an object. It prevents confusion, increases the four types of wisdom or understanding, and helps to actualize constructive qualities.

7. **Joyous effort** (*brtson 'grus*) counteracts laziness and joyfully engages in constructive actions. It acts to generate constructive qualities that have not been generated and to bring those that have to completion.
8. **Pliancy** (flexibility, *shin tu sbyangs pa*) enables the mind to apply itself to a constructive object in whatever manner it wishes and dissipates any mental or physical tightness or rigidity.
9. **Conscientiousness** (*bag yod*) values the accumulation of virtue and guards the mind against that which gives rise to afflictions. It brings to fulfillment and maintains all that is good, keeps the mind from pollution, and is the root for attaining all grounds and paths.
10. **Equanimity** (*btang snyoms*) does not allow the mind to be greatly affected by agitation and laxity without having to exert great effort to prevent them. It enables the mind to settle and remain on a virtuous object and is important for the development of serenity. This equanimity differs from the equanimity of the four immeasurables and the equanimity that is a neutral feeling.
11. **Nonharmfulness** (noncruelty, *rnam par mi 'tshes ba*) is compassion. Lacking any intention to cause harm, it wishes all sentient beings to be free from suffering. It prevents disrespecting or harming others and increases the wish to benefit and bring them happiness.

Even a moment of a virtuous mental factor, i.e. a natural virtue, can have far-reaching results. For example, when the mental factor of conscientiousness arises in the mind, the primary consciousness and mental factors associated with it all become virtuous. The physical and verbal actions done with that motivation are also virtuous. While the karmic seeds of those actions are neutral, they carry the potency for agreeable results to arise, and for that reason they are subsequently related virtues although they are not actual virtues.

Colophon: These notes were compiled by Sangye Khadro from various sources, including *Mind and its Functions* by Geshe Rabten (Edition Rabten), *A Necklace for Those of Clear Awareness Clearly Revealing the Modes of Minds and Mental Factors* by Ye-she Gyel-tsen (an FPMT Masters Program translation), and *The Foundation of Buddhist Practice* by The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron (Wisdom Publications.)