**Tibetan and Western Models of Mind - Part 2**

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In *Two Views of Mind,* Christopher deCharms sets himself very much the same task that faced the participants in the Mind and Life conference, namely to explore whether there is anything that Buddhism and Western science can learn from each other on the nature and mechanisms of mind. The author, a neuroscientist at the University of California at San Francisco, draws much of his material from discussions he had with the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan teachers at Dharmsala throughout 1992, though he also draws extensively from the literature and from other sources.

deCharms begins by detailing conversations with the Dalai Lama and with Lobsang Gyatso on the Tibetan view of mind. He then proceeds to explore some of the differences between the Buddhist and the Western approaches to the subject - the former grounded in meditative observation and the latter in empirical verification - and points out that the Buddhist methods are what the Western science of mind lacks in any systematic form. In his contention, the main value of these methods to Western thinking is that they may be:

*both subjective and systematic to a level of detail that current Western systems of observation have not yet reached. They are subjective in the sense of being ... observations of one's own experiences. To call them subjective exactly negates their main potential value to science - which is to provide a basis for carefully observing the mind from the 'inside'... (however) no amount of neural data alone can completely explain the functioning of the mind, for mental states are not experienced as neural impulses nor are they describable in those terms alone. (pages 46 and 47)*

At the same time, deCharms considers that Western science provides the broad consensus, arrived at through testing and verification and lacking in Buddhism, of the neural processes that accompany mental states (though this consensus may be more apparent than real, as Wallace makes clear in *Choosing Reality* is the case in physics). Although deCharms does not pursue the point, the contribution of this consensus to Buddhist understanding would seem to be that differences between neural functioning may help us to distinguish between the various forms of mystical experience, though I have my doubts about this, not least because the inadequacies of language make it difficult to classify mystical experiences with any certainty.

deCharms stresses that we should not be misled by the apparent similarities that exist in some areas between the Buddhist concepts of mind and those of Western science. The Buddhist approach - as expounded particularly in the*Abhidharma,* the earliest compilation of Buddhist philosophy and psychology - is largely descriptive and explained by means of metaphor and illustration, whereas that of Western science is mechanistic and explained in terms of material forces acting upon constituent parts of the brain. He points out in addition that the major concern of the Buddhist is with practices designed to bring about desirable changes in mental states, rather than with the chemistry behind these changes. By contrast, the Western scientist is concerned precisely with this chemistry (and its associated biology and physics), and if changes in mental states are required, he or she seeks to bring them about by manipulating this chemistry. To look towards Buddhism for answers to Western

questions about physical mechanisms, or to look to Western science for answers to Buddhist questions about mystical states, is to court disappointment and confusion. It is the complementarity of their approaches rather than the overlap between them that should attract us.

Of course, deCharms might also have pointed to another frequently overlooked difference between Buddhist and Western ideas on the mind, namely that of historical time-scale. Buddhaghosa, the Indian sage who codified the*Abhidharma,* lived some 1500 years ago, whereas the great majority of our Western knowledge on the neural aspects of the brain has been acquired only over the last decades. The *Abhidharma* still remains the dogmatic basis for both Theravadin and Mahayana Buddhism after a millenium and a half, while our modern neurology textbooks are out of date almost as soon as they are written. What does this tell us? That Buddhists are stuck incurably in the past while we in the West continue to forge ahead? Or that the knowledge of the mind revealed in the *Abhidharma* (and said to originate in the teachings of the Buddha himself) has so stood the test of time - more specifically the direct experiences of countless thousands of advanced meditators - that it has been verified beyond reasonable doubt? The point is one to which I return in my conclusions.

Perception and Truth

Turning to perception and consciousness, deCharms discusses further differences between East and West. In Buddhism perception is seen as a way of acquiring the truth of experienced reality, whereas in science it is regarded as the brain's interpretation of sensory information. The differences in philosophy between East and West are shown up sharply here. For Buddhism, perception is a means through which we can liberate ourselves from the ignorance that prevents us from seeing into the real nature of things, while in the West it is simply a function of our fundamental urge for survival. Buddhism wants to know whether the objects of perception are 'true' or not, science wants to know if they are of use. Buddhism holds that the purpose of perception is to provide us with consciousness of reality, science regards it as existing only to allow effective behaviour. Buddhism sees consciousness, particularly subtle consciousness, as quite literally what we are, while science questions why it should exist at all, given that survival would seem to be possible without it.

In spite of these differences, deCharms considers that Buddhism can learn from the West that the human body has many organs of sensory perception in addition to the five known traditionally - for example science has established that the mechanisms in the ear perceive not only hearing but movement, balance and orientation in space - while the West can learn from Buddhism the centrality of consciousness and of the knower in the interpretation and understanding of perception and awareness. However, he does not explore what the two traditions will do with the knowledge generated by the other should they decide to become more familiar with it. Knowing the mechanisms of the inner ear is of enormous value if we are dealing with physical problems associated with these mechanisms, but it is hard to see how such knowledge can help us in overcoming ignorance about the real nature of the physical world and of one's own mind. Similarly, knowing the centrality of consciousness is vital if we want to understand the real nature of things, but is of little use if we are treating patients with disturbances of the middle or inner ear.

There follows a somewhat technical chapter which reports a discussion between deCharms and the Dalai Lama on various aspects of perception, and likely to prove of most interest to

those Western scientists with specialist interests in the detailed issues involved. The next chapter, a discussion with Lati Rinpoche, continues along similar lines. However, of considerable general relevance is Rinpoche's explanation that just as the eye allows seeing but is not itself sight, so the brain allows thought (presumably because it receives and registers the sense impressions which stimulate thinking) but is not itself thought. He insists that the brain does not in fact possess the 'illuminating element' ( *sal rig* ) that runs through cognitive states (and which presumably reaches back to cognition in previous lives).

Conceptualisation

From perception, deCharms goes on to explore conception, and makes clear that although the concepts we have about an object are not the object itself, phenomena can only be grasped initially *through* conceptualisation. Thus if the mind is to have direct awareness of the subtle nature of experience, it must replace the conventional conceptualisation which is our usual mode of thinking by what Buddhism calls true conceptualisation. Until it does so, even meditation cannot lead to this direct awareness, and reveal all the subtle features of phenomena. It is the need to refine and develop conceptualisation from the conventional to the true that explains the strong emphasis placed upon debate and scholarship by the Gelupa order, and the refusal of some Gelupa teachers to allow young monks to commence meditational practices until they have some grounding in this scholarship.

The development of true conceptualisation involves ridding ourselves of all aspects surrounding objects and events which do not pertain essentially to their nature. This practice allows us to approximate more and more closely to their subtle features until eventually we *realise* these features in their fullness. For example, if everyone wore gloves, we would mistakenly conceptualise hands as being in the form of gloves. However, if we become more acquainted with the hand (for example by feeling its structure underneath the superficial material of the glove), we would progressively recognise that gloves are only outer coverings, and not properties of hands themselves. This metaphor is of course an over-simplification, because it is not simply the outer coverings of objects that needs to be stripped away in order to realise objects in their fullness. Thus once having realised the hand we would then need cognitively to dissect it in turn, until we proceed from its fullness to its emptiness. But the metaphor conveys something of what Buddhism teaches.

Without these steps towards true conceptual understanding, we crucially fail to recognise that, in the form in which they are conventionally experienced, all matter and even the self are impermanent and constantly changing, a recognition which is essential if we are to cease to cling (be over-attached) to these things - a major cause of suffering according to Buddhist teachings. Once we start taking them we become aware of the simple, specific, and richly detailed nature of things, and are said to be on our way towards a realisation of ultimate truth at which point the object as it appears to perception, the object as it is conceptualised, and the object in itself are now experienced as one and the same.

deCharms tells us that by contrast, Western neuroscience regards thought and concept formation in a purely mechanistic way. Instead of starting with subjective experience, it begins from the opposite direction and examines how concepts might work and what they might do. Concepts are considered to be brain processes that follow physical laws, and the many trillions of interconnections involved in these processes are thought to allow the brain to be continually reshaped by experience (and thus to escape rigid determinism). The result of this mechanistic approach by Western neuroscience is that the brain is studied primarily

as a passive organ which merely processes information fed in from the outside, and little attention is paid to how the mind takes an active role in experience, and shapes perceptions and generates behaviour through active choice. Furthermore, as neuroscience considers that these various brain processes run in parallel, it does not recognise the existence of a single unified structure - such as a 'self' - behind it all. Indeed, as deCharms points out, the neural origin of our subjective experience of a 'self' as a controller or experiencer of all this mental activity remains a mystery to neuroscience.

Neural Pathways and Subtle Anatomy

deCharms then devotes several further chapters to discussions with Tibetan lamas on the details of how the neural pathways recognised by Western science and the subtle anatomical channels recognised by Tibetan thinking may relate to each other, and how both may operate to allow the processes of perception to take place at the physical (or in the case of the Tibetan system the quasi-physical) level. These discussions will have undoubted curiosity value for Western neuroscientists and psychologists, but are unlikely to engage the layperson. It is also difficult to see how they may assist the coming together of Western and Eastern ideas, as the level of conceptualisation represented by the respective systems appears to be quite different, and the relationship between them difficult to identify.

In view of this it is easy to understand why in his concluding chapter deCharms remarks that Western mechanistic analysis 'offers a way of thinking about the mind that is almost entirely different from that provided by (the Tibetan) tradition'. It is less easy to understand why he sees the former as bringing 'a whole new set of challenges' to the 'old beliefs' of the latter, and why he considers that 'the kind of objective understanding of the mind (practised in the West) has some practical and theoretical import for the Buddhist view'.

Put simply, what are Tibetan Buddhists supposed to do with the knowledge gained from the West? deCharms concedes that it is an open question whether the Western approach 'can help a meditator towards the elimination of confusion'. If the answer to this question, as I would suggest, is no, are there other ways in which it may prove useful? deCharms speaks of how Western discoveries have made it possible, within narrow limits, to make valid inferences 'about how the mind works based upon the functioning of the brain', and of how these inferences help us 'in diagnosing and treating numerous illnesses of the mind, such as manic-depressive disorder, schizophrenia, (and) impairment of the senses such as deafness'. If this is so (and it is open to challenge - most of the improvements in the treatment of mental disorders owe far more at the practical level to advances in psychopharmacology than to advances in brain science), how is this information to be put to use by Tibetan Buddhists, since it is unlikely they will be able to develop their own research laboratories and their own colleges of psychiatry?

Tibetan Buddhism, like most spiritual traditions, is a path of transformation rather than a path of neural science. deCharms considers that our Western knowledge of how the brain remodels its physical structure in response to experience suggests that the transformative processes described in Buddhism 'may have discoverable physiological underpinnings, and that an understanding of this physiology might someday lead to insights into how to change the mind more effectively'. Perhaps. It is just possible to imagine a scenario in which drugs are discovered which persuade the brain to 'remodel' itself in the way in which it may be remodelled by Buddhist transformational practices. But even in this highly unlikely eventuality, would the effects be the same as when this remodelling takes place as a result

of direct experience? Isn't it the experience itself that counts, and not just a tinkering with neural pathways? And would such tinkering miraculously produce a change from conventional to true conceptualisation? deCharms seems to overlook the fact that in Buddhism the path and the goal are seen as aspects of the same thing (e.g. Dogen's famous dictum that 'one does not meditate in order to become a Buddha, one meditates because that is what Buddhas do').

Western science, deCharms feels, can benefit from Buddhism in its search for a generally accepted definition of consciousness, and in its understanding of awareness, of mind, of the subject-object relationship, and of experience. Here he seems to be on less contentious ground, though whether Western science will take advantage of the opportunities offered is quite another matter. However, deCharms careful examination of both Eastern and Western approaches fully justifies his conclusion that the two systems should be seen as complementing rather than duplicating or contradicting each other. His final paragraph even claims to identify one point on which they agree, namely that on the one hand through meditation and logical reasoning, and on the other through mechanistic analysis and theoretical models, neither of them see any need 'for a belief in a self, there is only a process taking place which is our individual experience'.

Differing Methodologies

What is one to make of these three books? Do they add a great deal to our understanding of the differences between Western and Eastern ideas and how the debate between them can best be moved forward? The answer to the first question is certainly yes, but the answer to the second is more problematic. Although none of the books explores the issue in any detail, a major problem is the different methodologies used by Eastern and Western traditions. The approach of the former is based upon direct observation of one's own mind, and the practitioner is given guidance on how to test these observations against personal experience. The practitioner is, in a sense, his or her own experiment. But this testing may take a lifetime of dedicated practice. Very few, if any, Western neuroscientists are prepared to follow this path, and none of them would be prepared to accept Buddhist findings without supporting experimental evidence. In the absence of this evidence, is it likely that Buddhist ideas will attract any real mainstream attention?

Similarly, how likely is it that Western ideas will have practical relevance for Tibetan Buddhism? I have already questioned how Buddhism might be expected to use these ideas. They have no obvious application for meditative practices, or for the development of true conceptualisation. They might change Buddhist theories on such things as the existence of subtle channels, but the concept of subtle channels seems to relate to different levels of reality from Western neurological models. The former are quasi-physical, in the same way that the meridians of the acupuncturists are said to be quasi-physical and to relate to subtle 'energy bodies' rather than to physical systems. By contrast, Western models are firmly grounded in observable physical reality, however conventional our conceptualisation of this reality seems to be. Just as the meridians of the acupuncturist have withstood the criticisms of Western science (not least because they are seen to have practical value), so too may the Tibetan subtle channels.

The question that then arises for many Westerners, is why bother to study Buddhist ideas? Why does it matter whether we see the external world as objectively there or not? Why does it matter whether we think of ourselves and all other phenomena as self-existent or

not? Western science, however much we may criticise its models of reality, has been outstandingly successful in doing what it sets out to do, namely probing the secrets of the physical world and shaping this world to our service. Why concern ourselves with what may seem like metaphysical ponderings?

Buddhism and Therapy

The answer brings me to a point that none of the books really tackles. Buddhism is a religion, by which is loosely meant a set of teachings about spiritual realities. There is a tendency among some Western Buddhists to play down this side of things, assisted partly by certain misconceptions about the Buddhist *anatta* doctrine of no permanent 'self' or 'soul', and the absence of any teachings regarding a creator god. But if one strips out the spiritual side of Buddhism, with what are we left? A set of practices designed to alleviate mental suffering - in other words a form of psychotherapy and personal growth movement? As such it must compete with the many other psychotherapies (and psychopharmacologies) available in the West and the many other personal growth movements. In the face of such competition its appeal will remain limited. Few people will be prepared to embark upon the lengthy and committed training which it teaches when there are much quicker (if less deeply satisfying) alternatives available. The Western liking for quick solutions to its problems will see to that. In addition, the last thing many psychologically vulnerable people need is a psychotherapy that confronts them with the anatta doctrine. At the very least, such people require help in working towards an actualised self before they are strong enough to transcend it with higher realisations. deCharms is quite wrong when he speaks of no need for a belief in the self. At the relative level there is every need. The task is to distinguish between the conventional conceptualisation represented by this relative level, and the true conceptualisation which lies beyond it.

It may be objected that even without its religiosity, Buddhism teaches not just a way out of personal suffering, but compassion and loving kindness towards others. This is true, but the West has generally proved more effective at caring for the needy and underprivileged than has the East. It may also be objected that, through its doctrine of*ahimsa* (non-violence) and the unity of all things, Buddhism teaches respect for every form of life and for the environment. This is also true, but such respect is already a part - if an often unheeded part - of the Western tradition. Buddhism can certainly help strengthen this tradition, but this is not the same as initiating radically new ways of thinking and being.

Buddhist Teachings

No matter how one views it, the role of Buddhism can only be properly understood if its religiosity is recognised. This applies particularly to our understanding of its teachings on the mind. For Buddhism, conscious processes pre-date birth and survive after death. Such survival involves not only subtle consciousness but, as the references to the Dalai Lama's comments quoted in *Consciousness at the Crossroads* make clear, earth memories and the consequences of one's behaviour during earthly life. Moreover, Buddhism has detailed teachings on the nature of the afterlife, on rebirth, and on the ultimate aim of existence, namely the attainment of Nirvana, a state in which the subtle consciousness realises its true nature as ultimate reality. Buddhist theories of mind, Buddhist mind training, Buddhist ways of living, are all directed towards this realisation. It is for this that the Buddhist seeks to refine conventional conceptualisation into true conceptualisation, for this that the Buddhist strives to see into the real nature of things, for this that the Buddhist seeks to understand his

or her own mind. Buddhist teaching is that failure to follow a spiritual path, and to break free of the ignorance that mistakes physical reality for ultimate reality, condemns one to lifetime after lifetime in the world of *samsara,* of suffering (interspersed perhaps with the odd rebirth in one or other of the somewhat unpleasant hells said to await the unwary, or even as an animal).

Whether we accept the reality of any of this teaching or not, Tibetan Buddhism cannot be understood unless it is approached within the context of it. We may plead that Buddhism should be separated from cultural accretions such as a belief in previous and future lives, but such pleadings tend to come from those who have not studied Buddhist literature. Teachings on previous and future lives are not simply cultural accretions.
The *Abhidharma,* which I have mentioned as the dogmatic basis of Buddhism, makes explicit reference to them, and is said to go back to the words of the Buddha himself.
The *Prajnaparamita* ('The Perfection of Wisdom'), which is claimed as one of the highest expressions of Buddhist wisdom, is full of references to other lives, as are many of the Sutras. The Bodhisattva ideal of Mahayana Buddhism is based upon the idea of enlightened men and women taking voluntary rebirth in this world (instead of entering final Nirvana) in order to teach others. The *Bardo Thodol* (mistakenly translated as 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead') provides detailed guidance to the afterlife state. Even Zen Buddhism, which is regarded by many commentators as the most practical and iconoclastic of the Buddhist paths, pays special reverence to the Prajnaparamita, and Ch'an (Chinese Zen) masters, in additon to Ch'an teachings, will also teach the beliefs of Jodo-shin-shu ('True School of the Pure Land') which hold that veneration of Buddha Amida leads to rebirth in his Pure Land, where final enlightenment is easier to obtain than it is in this world.

As mentioned earlier, the longevity of Buddhist teachings on the mind and of former and subsequent lives suggests that they have proved of practical value. It is inconceivable that they would have done so had they been presented and used simply as theoretical models or as psychotherapies. Buddhists have followed the Buddhist path as a spiritual training leading to the realisation of a state of consciousness said to transcend the impermanent world of appearances and allow realisation of one's true, undying nature. If we are to look to Buddhism for guidance on the mind, we are unlikely to benefit much unless we approach it - whether ultimately to accept it or reject it - in its entirety.

Of the three books under review, Wallace's *Choosing Reality* comes closest to this approach. An absorbing text which sets out complex ideas on both Buddhism and Western science with persuasive clarity. Even those with no interest in Buddhism can read it as a perceptive critique of Western science, a critique reflecting not just personal scholarship and enquiry but much post-modern thinking. *Consciousness at the Crossroads* can be recommended for its presentation by Western authorities of orthodox neurological views, and as a demonstration of how resistant such views are likely to be to much of Buddhist teaching. *Two Views of Mind* is a much more specialist text, requiring in places some background knowledge - and some interest in - the intricacies of Western views of perception and cognition. Like *Consciousness at the Crossroads* it reveals the sizeable gap between Eastern and Western thinking, and, by virtue of its transcripts of interviews with a number of Tibetan lamas, will appeal to those who wish to know more of the intricacies of Tibetan theories on such things as subtle channels. Thus all three books have their place, and are of great help in highlighting some of the major differences between Tibetan and Western ideas (though the absence of an index in any of them is a puzzle and a handicap).

But if I had to recommend only one to both the specialist and the lay reader I would unhesitatingly name *Choosing Reality.* A splendid book viewed from both Eastern and Western perspectives.

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