Article

Mindful Encounters: A Buddhist Revisitation of Daniel J. Siegel’s Mind Definition

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Abstract: The mind holds crucial significance in Buddhism that encompasses a distinct understanding. While Daniel Siegel defines the “mind” as an embodied and relational process responsible for regulating energy and information flow, this article evaluates it from the Buddhist perspective. Here, I conduct a succinct analysis of this definition, suggesting potential modifications from a Buddhist perspective. Though Buddhism may recognize the mind’s role in regulating the flow of energy and information during dynamic interactions between individuals and their natural and social surroundings, as proposed by Siegel, it also acknowledges the intricate process of forming karmic imprints. Within this framework, I propose revisiting Siegel’s definition through the lens of Buddhist karma theory and steering towards a middle way of comprehending our mind, concluding that this revision not only enhances completeness but also practicality for mindfulness exercises.

Keywords: Daniel J. Siegel’s definition of mind; Buddhism; karma; action and morality; mindfulness

1. Introduction

Daniel J. Siegel (1957–) is a psychiatrist and neuroscientist known for his work in the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB, Siegel 2007, p. xvii; Siegel 2015, p. 1), which seeks to integrate findings from various disciplines including psychology, neuroscience, and mindfulness practices. Mindfulness involves observing one’s thoughts, feelings, and sensations without attachment or aversion, leading to the proper integration of various mental operations, including perception, emotion, cognition, memory, and behavior, and promoting a sense of discipline over habitual tendencies, which are important aspects of mental health and well-being (Siegel 2007). Mindful practices can be traced back to the teachings of the Buddha, who viewed mindfulness (Pali: sati, Skr. smruti) as a means to cultivate moment-to-moment awareness of one’s body, feelings, mind, and thoughts/dharmas, serving as a key to gaining insight into the interdependent nature of reality and achieving liberation.

While the Buddhist philosophy may align with certain aspects of Siegel’s interpretation of the mind, such as the acknowledgment of embodiment, interaction, and integration processes, it also introduces additional dimensions related to karma, impermanence, non-self,
and so on. As these concepts would contribute to a more expansive view of comprehending our experience and existence, adopting some of them could cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of our mental traits and functioning.

In this article, I thus discuss Siegel’s renowned definition of the “mind”, including the contributions and limitations of this definition while proposing potential modifications. My slightly modified concept of the mind suggests that, in regulating energy and information flow within the interactive relationship between ourselves and the environment (both natural and social), as proposed by Siegel, the mental function implicitly creates karmic imprints within this process. I contend that this proposition provides improved coherence and systematization, presenting a middle way for knowing the mind and its role in the cultivation of mindfulness.

2. The Buddhist Mind and Its Relation to Karma

The Buddhist concept of “mind” is quite crucial and connotes understandings that differ from Western perspectives. The term commonly understood as “mind” in English is “citta” or “citta-caitta”, encompassing various mental factors (cetasika) such as feeling (vedana), perception (sanyjha), volition (cetana), and attention (manasikara), among others. Besides “citta”, the terms “manas” and “vijñana” are also used to refer to the general and non-technical sense of “mind”. Although their primary uses are distinct, these three terms are sometimes used in sequence to refer to one’s mental processes as a whole (Hamilton 1996, pp. 105–7). Taken together, mental terms used in Buddhism are included within the broader category of “nema”, which may infer all mental activities or phenomena.

The counterpart of “nema” is “rupa”, which are often linked together as “nema-rupa” and generally interpreted as “mind–body”. However, this interpretation is provisional since there are more subtle differences between “mind–body” and “nema-rupa”. Sue Hamilton, for instance, suggests that a more meaningful understanding of “nema-rupa” would be the individualizing or abstract entity of a human being. “Nema” provides an abstract identity for the individual as the entire conceptual identity of the individual. “Rupa”, in turn, provides form or recognizability to the individual by giving shape to that abstract identity, making it apperceptive through sensory impressions. Nema-rupa thus represents both the name and the named, with each being mutually necessary for the existence of the other.

While talking about “nema”, provisionally understood as mind in English, it implicitly connects to our karma and its continuum into future lives (samsara). Nema is what “tends towards” or “bends down” to a new birth due to the force of karma and the afflictions. This implies that the quality of our perceiving objects and mental operations is closely related to the state of our moving to a new birth. Therefore, in Buddhist philosophy, our mind, particularly volition or intention (cetana), is intricately linked with karma. It is considered the primary factor of karma, or even the forerunner of all things. This connection forms a crucial aspect of understanding reality and the path to liberation. That is, karma operates following the law of cause and effect, which pertains to intentional actions of body, speech, and mind carrying moral and soteriological significance. While the concept of karma may initially seem mystical, its core lies in action, especially moral action, embodying the causal law where specific moral consequences are determined by one’s deeds. Hence, our actions not only mirror our character but also mold our future by generating karma. Since karma is closely tied to the morality of our conduct, acknowledging karma is recognizing the presence of morality in our world. In contrast, denying karma may lead one toward nihilism, much like rejecting morality would.

As the mind serves as the function of intention and volition, it serves as the core generator of karma. Thus, every thought, emotion, and mental state carries the potential to shape karma, whether it be wholesome (resulting in positive outcomes) or unwholesome (leading to suffering). To elaborate, actions driven by greed, hatred, or ignorance plant seeds of suffering, whereas those rooted in kindness, compassion, or wisdom foster karmic conditions that promote abundance and happiness. Buddhism thus emphasizes the practice
of ethical conduct (śīla) as the basis for accumulating positive karma. Also, the practice of meditation, particularly mindfulness and insight meditation (vipassana), is central to purifying the mind and overcoming the roots of unwholesome karma—greed, hatred, and ignorance and gradually freeing from the cycle of karmic conditioning.

The significance of the mind and its connection to karma is a common understanding in Buddhism, transcending particular traditions or sects to be universally embraced by all branches of Buddhism. In contrast, within Brahmanism, karma was often seen as primarily determined by one’s position within the social hierarchy, as prescribed by the caste system. Buddhism rejects this fatalistic view of karma but emphasizes the role of individual intention in shaping karma. Actions are perceived as stemming from personal choices rather than being predetermined by social status or cultural background, as elucidated by the eminent scholar of early Buddhism, Richard Gombrich (2009, vol. vii, pp. 19–44; 2006, pp. 27–64; 1988, pp. 66–69), who sheds light on how the Buddha’s concept of karma diverged from the prevalent Brahmanical views of his time.

While Brahmanical ideology upholds a belief in a divine cosmic order (ṛta), governed by deities and emphasizes ritualistic actions and social obligations as means to accrue positive karma and achieve favorable rebirths, Buddhism’s non-theistic interpretation of karma places greater emphasis on mental training and the development of moral virtues. Ethical conduct is viewed as compulsory for mental growth and liberation from suffering, rather than solely as a pathway to worldly success or heavenly rewards. The Buddha’s stress on the mind and its connection to karma thus reshaped the understanding of morality by highlighting the significance of individual volition. This not only represented a paradigm shift in ancient India but also holds relevance for contemporary perspectives.

3. An Analysis of Daniel Siegel’s Definition

The question of whether the mind is definable remains a matter of discussion. If it is definable, how should we precisely define it? If not, how can we understand it? Overall, “mind” is a profound and complex concept that can be approached variously, depending on the field of study and the philosophical or scientific framework employed. The grasp of mind thus is subject to diverse views, often linked to notions such as soul, behavior, brain, and body. From physicalist viewpoints, such as identity theory, behaviorism, AI, and biological naturalism, the mind is considered a product of material processes. Conversely, other interpretations reject physicalism and embrace Cartesian or theistic perspectives, which regard the mind as a substantial soul. Both simplistic reductionist perspectives, whether identifying the mind with the soul or equating it solely with the brain, fall prey to the pitfalls of essentialism or substantialism, portraying the mind as a fixed and concrete entity akin to svabhava (intrinsic nature) that would be challenged in Buddhism, particularly Madhyamikas that deny things have any inherent natures at all.

Daniel J. Siegel’s definition differs from these two extremes, which suggests, “(A core aspect of) the mind is an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information” (Siegel 2015, pp. 2–10). We could deduce four main attributes of the mind as articulated in the definition: 1. The mind works as a process, 2. it is an embodied and relational process, 3. this process encompasses the flow of energy and information, and 4. it is a regulatory process governing the flow.

3.1. Process-Oriented

As a process in operation, the mind is not a static entity; instead, it functions as a process of flow that is capable of change and growth throughout the lifespan. This occurs without the need to invoke a separate, immaterial soul as the source of consciousness and cognition. Such an approach is more likely to garner support from modern science and philosophy and is widely accepted in current discussions of the phenomenon of the mind.
3.2. Embodied and Relational

While Siegel’s definition acknowledges the embodied relational aspects of the mind, it recognizes the significance of the biochemical body, embedded within the social and cultural context, in shaping our mental experiences. Mind is not understood in isolation; rather, it emerges from the intricate interactions among the brain, body, and various environmental contexts in which we exist, illustrating the interconnected nature of multiple internal and external factors and the imperative for their harmonious collaboration.

3.3. The Flow of Energy and Information

The term “energy” refers to the electrochemical processes in the brain, reflecting the neural firing and communication between neurons. Meanwhile, “information” consists of swirls of energy that have symbolic meaning, pertinent to the generation of understanding during cognitive activities such as thoughts, perceptions, and emotions (Siegel 2015, pp. 5–7). Siegel’s definition thus portrays the mind as an actively engaged system, integrating both physiological and epistemic elements to facilitate adaptive and purposeful functioning.

3.4. Regulation of the Flow

The term “regulates” implies the active control, coordination, and modulation of the flow of energy and information within our mental process. “Regulates” signifies a spontaneous capacity wherein the mind organizes and optimizes its activities to maintain a balanced state for effective cognitive operation. This ability showcases the brain’s remarkable feature for plasticity and change, serving as a crucial indicator of mental health.

As Siegel proposes in his theory of IPNB, he regards the mind, brain, and relationships as three inseparable facets of energy and information flow. His definition of the mind may offer a valuable and insightful perspective, illustrating the dynamic, integrative, embodied, and relational traits of mental phenomena. However, when viewed through the lens of Buddhism, this definition could be strengthened by incorporating views from Buddhist psychology to make it more comprehensive and persuasive.

4. A Buddhist Revisitation of the Mind Definition

While various definitions and theories attempt to capture the nature of the mind, achieving a universally agreed-upon and precise definition remains challenging. Since the mind involves subjective aspects and includes various cognitive mechanisms like consciousness, emotion, and memory, diverse perspectives emerge to catch the complexity of this concept. The question of whether Buddhism offers a universally applicable definition of the mind is a subject open to debate. Some Buddhists may characterize the mind as inherently luminous (prabhāsva or abhāsva), while others may emphasize the pollutive aspect of our mental consciousness that inclines towards attachment (upādāna). One simplistic approach is to demonstrate what the mind is or does through direct demonstration, known as ostensive definition.

Given that Siegel’s offering is a working definition (Siegel 2017, p. 26; 2015, pp. 1&3, etc.), such an understanding of the mind may prove valuable by providing clarity and measurability in contemporary inquiry. It highlights the functional and regulatory dimensions of the mind, not only resonating with the new findings of modern psychology but also aligning with the Buddhist perspective. While the tentative definition being developed offers a practical framework within the realms of empirical investigation, it may not capture the full richness of our experiences and their axiological meanings. Comparing and complementing it with Buddhist perspectives would yield valuable insights.

Considering the crucial role that regulation plays in the mind (Siegel 2017, p. 39), from a Buddhist perspective, this regulatory process inevitably entails the accumulation of “karma”. This suggests that the various actions shaping karma and being shaped by karma are intricately intertwined with the mind’s regulatory capacity. That is, in line with Siegel’s definition that “The mind is an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy
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and information”, it is conceivable that the entire process may lack proper regulation or suffer from dysregulation, which carries both descriptive and normative aspects within the term “regulation”. Apart from medical conditions like neurological diseases or schizophrenia, an individual may struggle with regulation due to factors such as greed, lust, anger, hatred, arrogance, and so on. The contrast between well-regulated and ill-regulated corresponds to the differentiation between wholesome and unwholesome minds, which is relevant to one’s karmic state in Buddhism. This implies that our mental processes are not entirely neutral but encompass specific qualities that rely on our capacity for regulation.

Furthermore, Siegel’s definition may implicitly presume the proposed addition, as karmic imprints could be considered part of the “relational process”, which likely includes the significant dimension of Buddhist morality. The karmic disposition of our mind and behavior manifests in our interactions and relationships with others, primarily the relationship with humans. These decades, the relationship extends to animals, plants, and environments due to the uprising of eco-consciousness. Therefore, given his view of the mind as a relational process, Siegel might agree to integrate the concept of karma into his definition, as relationality inherently involves pertinent moral considerations. Incorporating the idea of karma into the definition would render the implicit moral dimension of the mind more explicit, highlighting the importance of the moral concern underlying the concept of mind.

Therefore, the possible modified Buddhist definition would introduce the concept of karma into the definition: “The human mind is (or works as) a relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information in a way that (invariably) leaves karmic imprints”. The revision alludes to karma, a noteworthy concept not only in Buddhist philosophy but also potentially in contemporary ethical discussions. As mentioned, in Buddhism karma especially refers to the intentional or volitional actions that individuals perform through body, speech, and mind. The claim that “volition (cetana) is karma” thus is significant in Buddhism, highlighting the critical role of the intentional mind in the generation of karma. As our cognitive processes are continuous, karmic accumulation persists incessantly and is interwoven with our daily activities. Even during states of deep sleep and meditative absorption, subtle karmic formation may still occur, except upon realizing nirvana or entering nirodha-samāpatti, a state that reaches “the cessation of ideation and feeling” (Pāli, saññā-vedayita-nirodha). A factor distinguishing humans from animals and humanoid robots would be the difference in intentionality or mentality. This does not negate the possibility of animals and robots possessing some level of mind or intention (the existence of consciousness in animals and robots remains a subject of debate), but humans in wholesome conditions are undeniably beings characterized by both sentimentality and rationality. It could be said that animals are sentient beings with limited rationality, while robots perform rational processes but struggle to truly “feel”.

As Siegel (2015) proposes, our mind undergoes continuous development, shaping our identity through the ongoing interaction of our brain and various relationships. This development, in line with the proverb “Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny” (Keown 2000, p. 37), encapsulates the interconnected elements of destiny, character, habit, and action in defining who we are. Our ongoing actions, deeply rooted in mental qualities, actively contribute to the formation of our identity as proposed by the Buddhist theory of karma. We could posit that the process of mental development is also the accumulation of karma. The resilience of the brain or mind also implies the resilience of our karma; neuroplasticity could be seen as akin to “karmic-plasticity”. This illustrates the crucial role that our mental training, inner disposition, and intentional behavior play in unfolding our personality and destiny over time.

In brief, while Siegel’s definition remains neutral and portrays the functional aspects of the mind, the modified Buddhist definition introduces an ethical and philosophical dimension. This suggests that mental activities carry axiological connotations, aligning not only with real human experiences but also with ideal human values. By comprehending
and refining our minds, we can dynamically shape our karmic condition and progress toward spiritual enlightenment and liberation.

5. Toward a Middle-Way Understanding of the Mind

Siegel’s definition highlights the biological and cognitive aspects of the mind; however, I argue that morality holds equal significance in this context. By integrating these three aspects, we may achieve a more in-depth interpretation of the mind, which encompasses its biological mechanism, cognitive activities, and moral effects. In other words, the physical processes of our brain not only enable the cognition of information but also mold our thoughts and character. The brain’s operation can impact both our cognitive abilities and moral behaviors, while our morality can, conversely, mirror our cognitive state about our brain function. Thus, these three dimensions of the mind are intricately intertwined.

By considering this “trinity” of mind, particularly the moral part inspired by the Buddhist theory of karma, we may adopt a middle-way approach to the theory of mind. This approach aims to steer clear of the extremes of monistic reductionism and dualistic presumption by offering a balanced depiction of our mental phenomena. That is, by avoiding both extremes of monism and dualism, the middle-way approach in the Buddhist theory acknowledges that our mind arises from the dynamic interactions of physical and moral factors without reducing the mind entirely to physical processes of the brain or positing a separate, permanent soul.

According to Buddhist teachings, a human being is considered a holistic entity composed of five aggregates (pañca-skandha), which arise depending on various causes. These aggregates include physical processes of the body (form, rūpa) as well as mental factors such as feeling (vedanā), conception (saññā), will (samskāra), and consciousness (vijñāna) (Hamilton 1996). Suffering arises from ignorance of these aggregates, leading to blind deeds that create karma and subsequently cause suffering. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the mind in its entirety, including its axiological implications. This acknowledgment elucidates our role as human beings in recognizing and alleviating suffering, underscoring the significance of our mind in seeking a purposeful life without reducing it solely to neurological activities or attributing it to a theological concept such as the soul. We can understand the Buddhist view of getting out of the two camps through the following diagram (Lin 2013, p. 251, Figure 1):

![Figure 1. The Buddhist “middle-way approach” to the understanding of mind.](image-url)

The middle-way approach connotes in Figure 1 suggests that mental processes emerge from complex interactions within the brain and body, while also recognizing the distinctive characteristics of the mind that cannot be fully explained by purely physical means because of its close relation to karma. Furthermore, as we incorporate the concept of karma into our comprehension of the mind, it incorporates both bio-physical functions and moral-
axiological effects. The mind thus may work as a mediator between the physical and axiological realms. While applying physical science to matters of value presents challenges, if not insurmountable barriers, the mind may serve as a linking bridge to connect these two domains, playing a unique role in the physical world by mediating our journey toward the realization of meaningful goals.

In sum, the middle-way approach may propose a holistic view of the mind that encompasses its physical, cognitive, and axiological dimensions, proposing their interdependence and complexity while avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism or dualism. It further urges an exploration of the intricate connection between the mind and morality without oversimplifying or mystifying our human existence. Given the inseparable link between moral deeds and the quality of one’s mind, it follows that Buddhist ethics and Buddhist psychology are closely connected. The practice of mindfulness therefore is important for both our moral virtue and serene happiness.

6. Mindfulness Practice with Karma in “Mind”

Siegel adeptly proposes that our cognition is agent-embodied and context-relative, situated within the interplay of a system and its environment. Integrating karma into Siegel’s definition of mind, given his prominence as a contemporary mindfulness advocate (Siegel 2007), could offer significant support. As the process of forming understanding or constructing meaning often involves inadvertent and thoughtless levels of conceptual projection and attachment, the adapted Buddhist definition can therefore yield various implications and benefits for mindfulness practice, such as fostering moral sense, concerning long-term values, broadening outlook on human existence, and enhancing our pursuit of happiness.

Firstly, mindfulness encourages individuals to observe the mental states that lead to their actions. When coupled with the concept of karma, the idea that one’s deeds influence future experiences, a profound sense of obligation emerges. Karma thus reinforces the importance of paying attention to the quality of thoughts, as they can lead to karmic effects. Through mindfulness, individuals assume responsibility for what they do and think, cultivating a heightened sense of moral awareness in their cognitive activities.

Secondly, mindfulness is often associated with present-moment awareness, but the introduction of karma encourages people to consider the long-term consequences of their actions, both in this life and possibly in future lives. This farsighted outlook can enhance judicious discernment and facilitate prudent decision-making. That means the belief in karma and the will to accumulate positive karmic imprints can serve as a concern for tenable values, cultivating a conscious and forward-thinking way of life.

Thirdly, as mindfulness practice also aims to strengthen the awareness of interconnectedness, emphasizing the unity of all beings, the concept of karma can deepen our appreciation of how individual actions affect the broader web of existence. Acknowledging the karmic consequences of physical and mental actions can assist the motivation to engage in altruistic compassion, encouraging a more inclusive and expansive understanding of human feelings. Mindfulness practice thus can be enriched by the moral concept of “collective karma”, as it aligns with alleviating suffering for both oneself and others.

Fourthly, since mindfulness practice helps to develop wisdom and insight, it has been associated with various aspects of well-being, including reduced stress, transformed anger, increased emotional regulation, and improved mental health. The integration of mindfulness and karma empowers our understanding of the human condition, enabling us to choose actions that are coherent with our values and the well-being of ourselves and others. We are directed towards a purposeful and harmonious life, laying the ground for lasting contentment and sustainable joy. Therefore, karma may play a crucial role in the interplay between mindfulness and happiness.

In sum, adding “karmic imprints” into the definition of mind could provide a virtuous dimension to our mindfulness practice that promotes greater well-being via ethical deeds. It fosters awareness of the consequences of our actions, cultivating sensitivity to cause and
effect, interconnectedness, responsibility, compassion, and personal growth potential. This also underscores the significance of mindfulness, motivating individuals to contemplate suffering and pursue happiness for themselves and others. As mindfulness gains increasing popularity in contemporary society, revisiting the meaning of the mind through a lens inspired by Buddhism would be highly advantageous.

7. Conclusions

Daniel J. Siegel illustrates the mind’s social and neural dimensions as a dynamic and embodied relational process (Siegel 2017, p. 13); nevertheless, this process involves karmic effects that extend into the axiological domain. When neutrally describing mental operations, it inevitably connects with certain degrees of moral causality. Just as depicting a sharp knife piercing deeply into one’s body predicts legal outcomes of death or serious injury, describing mental activities similarly entails moral consequences. The addition of karma to Siegel’s definition thus illustrates the biological and social aspects of the mind with its normative significance.

While Siegel proposes that a working definition of the mind would prove valuable in understanding the development of our lives and the nature of a healthy mind (Siegel 2015, p. 1), this paper does not aim to refute Siegel’s definition. Instead, it could be considered a supplement to enrich the depth of the definition from the Buddhist perspective. It seems that Siegel would likely support this redefinition or supplementary definition of the mind, given his advocacy for mindfulness practice. The revised definition, stating, “The human mind works as a relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information in a way that invariably leaves karmic imprints”, implies three key points: 1. The intimate link between the mind and morality underscores that our cognitive tendencies play a crucial role in determining the condition of our karma, and consequently, our destiny. 2. The significance of mental or mindful training in fostering the development of moral deeds. 3. The realization that mindfulness leads to happiness results from both mental and moral qualities.19

The interconnection between mindfulness, the purification of karma, and the alleviation of suffering constitutes the core of Buddhist philosophy. By integrating the Buddhist concept of karma into Siegel’s definition of mind, we progress toward a middle way in the theory of mind that balances scientific understanding through empirical methods with spiritual transformation facilitated by mindfulness practice. In particular, the transformative aspect of mindfulness enhances mental resilience, enabling more effective and refined regulation to mitigate suffering. This ultimately leads to a profound sense of contentment and inner peace, harmoniously aligning with universally shared human values.

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Notes

1 In addition to offering a working definition of the mind, Siegel endeavors to provide an overall understanding of it by identifying at least four fundamental facets: subjective experience, consciousness, self-organization, and information processing, all of which are relevant to enhancing well-being in life (Siegel 2018, pp. 41–45).

2 Key Buddhist terms are primarily presented in the Roman alphabet of Sanskrit in this article. Any exceptions, such as Pali, will be specifically noted.

3 See Hamilton (1996, pp. 121–37) for more discussions on “nāma-rūpa”.

4 Refer to Salvini (2015, pp. 33–37) for the definition of “nāma” and its relationship to rebirth and karma. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this inspiration.
The notion that the mind is the precursor to all phenomena is widespread in Buddhist teachings. For instance, the Dhammapada opens with the assertion that the mind leads all actions and creations. If one speaks or acts with a corrupted mind, suffering ensues, akin to how a wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart. Conversely, since the mind precedes all things, speaking or acting with a tranquil mind results in happiness, akin to the certainty of one’s shadow. For further exploration of the interplay between mind, intention, and morality or karma, please refer to Heim (2014).

Although non-Buddhists may pose skeptics on karma, there is a tacit acknowledgment of its truthfulness in the universe when we admit the existence of moral deeds or “morality”. The Lama Dalai (2005, p. 109) succinctly expresses the core of Buddhist ideas of karma, stating, “The theory of karma is of signal importance in Buddhist thought but is easily misrepresented. Literally, karma means ‘action’ and refers to the intentional acts of sentient beings. Such acts may be physical, verbal, or mental—even just thoughts or feelings—all of which have impacts upon the psyche of an individual, no matter how minute. Intentions result in acts, which result in effects that condition the mind toward certain traits and propensities, all of which may give rise to further intentions and actions. The entire process is seen as an endless self-perpetuating dynamic. The chain reaction of interlocking causes and effects operates not only in individuals but also for groups and societies, not just in one lifetime but across many lifetimes”. For introductions to the shared foundations of Buddhist ethics and the Buddhist theory of karma, please refer to Harvey (2000, pp. 11–31).

The key aspects of the Buddhist view on the mind are also closely connected to the ideas of Impermanence (anatta), No-Self (anattan), Dependent Origination (pratityasamutpada), and Suffering (dukkha). These are the fundamental Buddhist teachings, regarding all phenomena, including the mind, are constantly changing. This view challenges the notion of a fixed, independent self and encourages introspection to recognize the transient nature of mental phenomena. Due to all being impermanent without fixed and isolated essence, suffering arises from ignorance and clinging, which lead to disturbance and create negative karma. The cultivation of the mind thus is pivotal in fostering wholesome mental states, enabling a clearer perception of reality, and alleviating suffering.

Gombrich (2006, pp. 2–4), quoting Karl Popper, presents the perspective that essentialism is based on a flawed assumption, proposing that our understanding progresses by focusing on how things occur rather than seeking essential or ultimate definitions of their nature. Diverging from Aristotelian or essentialist views, nominalist approaches to definitions or interpretation prioritize understanding “what mind does/how mind operates” rather than defining “what mind is”. They describe mental function more based on empirical facts rather than assuming the existence of a fixed nature, essence, or origin of the mind. The recognition that all phenomena, including our mental states, exist as dynamic processes rather than immutable essences, is rooted in the Buddhist principles of impermanence and dependent origination. For further exploration, please consult Gombrich (2009, pp. 10–11; 2006, vol. 6, pp. 43–47, 62, etc.).

Instead of saying the mind is a process, it seems more appropriate to state that the mind works or operates as a process. The notion of mind as a process contrasts with that of mind as an entity or substance, like the soul. Considering the mind as a process doesn’t diminish its significance as an ability, function, quality, or state. It also incorporates the concepts of activity, event, and phenomenon, thus encompassing the understandings of mental activities, events, and phenomena, among others.

More and more scholars, such as Davidson and Begley (2012, pp. 172, 252), have conducted research supporting similar theories. They propose that we can alter our brain through the training and transformation of our mind.

In Siegel’s own words, “Brain is the embodied neural mechanism shaping that flow; relationships are the sharing of the flow; mind is the embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information. If we ask, ‘Where is the mind?’, we can say that its regulatory functions are embodied in the nervous system and embedded in our interpersonal relationships. This emergent process of both the neural and the interpersonal locates the mind within both the physiological and relational frame of reality. The mind develops in the interaction of at least these two facets of our human lives” (Siegel 2015, p. 7).

Batchelor (2015, pp. 184–85, 188) for instance argues that the Buddha provides lucid examples through ostensive definitions in early texts to clarify mental processes like feeling (vedanā), perception (saṃjñā), and consciousness (vijñāna). These ostensive definitions, rooted in tangible experiences, are empirical rather than abstract or mystical concepts and theories.

While the mind is viewed not as a substance but as a dynamic process, it aligns with Buddhism’s standpoint that everything is a process, particularly within the domain of the mind and body, without ascribing essential substance to them; as said, this perspective is consistently underscored by Gombrich (2009, pp. 10, 67, 124–25, 160, 196–98, etc.).

I am grateful to an anonymous referee for reminding me that Siegel’s account of the “relational process” might already include the proposed inclusion of karma.

As Wright (2004) suggests, “karma” is a promising concept with significant value that will contribute substantially to our future ethical reflections and discussions; it could be understood as a naturalistic concept without necessarily involving mythical consideration of rebirth.

To quote the Buddha, “It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind” (Bodhi 2012, p. 963).
For further discussions, please refer to Lin (2013, pp. 255–58; 2014, pp. 188–90).

This could be considered an approach to naturalized ethics, meaning that the moral term “good” (kusala) in Buddhism is attributed to the wholesomeness of our mind.

References


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