

THE UPANISHADIC CONCEPTION OF MIND

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WHAT the Hindus understand by mind is so different from our conceptions no matter from what philosophical camp they may come that it is well to abandon the method of investigating comparatively the Eastern and Western ideas. Hindu thought cannot be explained on the basis of a parallelism because it rests on presuppositions totally different from ours. Thus far no exposition of the typical Hindu conception of mind has done full justice to the niceties embodied in the latter. Moreover, what peculiar conception there is now current in Indian thinking is firmly rooted in the past and all philosophical reflection is ultimately grounded in the Veda, especially that portion of it called the Upanishads, the earliest of which were composed about 600 B. C.

The Sanskrit *terminus technicus* for mind is *manas* which is etymologically identical with Latin *mens* and our English equivalent. The term is met with already in the pre-Upanishadic literature. The sections, however, in which it occurs yield with our present methods of interpretation little that is of interest philosophically unless it be the idea that cosmic phenomena are akin to what passes in the human being. Most instructive, and revealing the introspective observations of the Hindus at their best, are the similes in the Upanishads in which the mind figures. These similes are most artistic, imaginary and original while happy and pertinent at the same time. The interdependence of mind, for instance, with life (*prāṇa*) is illustrated by a bird tied to a string. He flutters in every direction, but, not finding a foothold, he has to settle down on his fastening. Explaining the origin of mind out of the finest essence of "food" it is likened to the butter which moves upward in the process of churning.

However, these similes do not as yet convey the precise meaning and significance of the Hindu conception. There is a classical conception in the Kaṭha Upanishad which is copied with modifications or alluded to in later literature, including the Buddhist literature. There mind is compared to the reins checking the unbridled horses which are the *indriyas* or the powers that reside behind the sense faculties. Elsewhere, mind is the charioteer of the body, it is a messenger, and again a cart.

All this imagery if not really, at least by suggestion points to a physical explanation of mind. But at the bottom of it we find concealed behind a psycho-physical a logical point of view which emphasizes the functional element throughout. Mind is essentially that which functions in conjunction with the faculty and material of creative imagination, will and sensory experience. In fact, to the Hindu, mind has no other significance.

The characteristics of mind viewed phenomenally are by no means exhausted by the above-quoted similes. A moderate degree of agility and animation, however, could be inferred. The mind is a 'procurer' (*avarodhinī*), it acts vigorously in dream as well as in waking. It is hard to manage, is restless, wandering astray, impetuous, strong, stiff, and as difficult to get under control as the wind.

By way of interpretation we may say that mind as a purely contemplative function has no meaning in this Eastern view. The character of meditating and musing which we are prone to ascribe to the Hindu temper is but a special function of mind, if we are to believe the Upanishadic records. Mind is of the active, impulsive, and volitional in the same measure as it is or makes for mental calmness.

This bifurcation of mind must be considered at length. According to the domination and preponderance of one element at the expense of the other, mind is called 'pure' or 'impure'. Whoever is familiar with Hindu ideas is able to judge at once what is meant by these predications, without knowing the passage. Whatever is dissociated from passion, rashness, and desire is considered good and praiseworthy. Consequently, that quality which changes the mind into a vehement and aggressive element is desire, *kāma*, in Sanskrit. Not that the mind is conditioned by desire. Acting spontaneously the mind releases or creates desire. Similarly, the manifestations of human nature which seem to be motivated by desire,

doubt, fear, sensory enjoyment, and the like, are really actuated by the mind. One passage, in fact, identifies all these.

Hence, it is not only the opinion of various commentators that the mind in its volitional and restless aspect is responsible for the round of rebirth. One Upanishad expressly designates the mind as the root of the tree of *saṁsāra*.

Actuation of will, then, is the work of mind, according to the Upanishadic conception. But the mind exhibits its tendency to vivacity and mobility in still another way. The control of the *in-driyas*, the powers underlying the faculties of our senses, falls to the lot of mind also. The mind, therefore, incurs the responsibility—although in an indirect fashion—for our sensuous experience, be it of a vehement or temperate type.

These powers, as we shall call them briefly, stand at the frontier of the subjective and objective, so to say. They are not, as is commonly supposed, the sense-organs. At any rate, they are spoken of as either unrestrained steeds or well-trained and willing horses. The wise and virtuous will control the urges residing behind the various senses by means of the mind. Perfect self-restraint, as far as sensuous experience goes, is the ideal of Stoics and Saṁnyāsins alike.

Yet a well-checked sense activity is not all that the Hindu requires for perfection. Because the mind possesses self-motion, it requires steadiness no less. Subjugation of the action of the sensory powers must be followed by an aversion of the mind from the objects, in the sense of aims (*artha*), which are conjoined with each particular organ. Otherwise conduct is false and deceitful, as the Bhagavad Gītā says—by the way, a fine ethical distinction of the Hindus who are generally reputed to be indifferent in matters of morality.

Thus far we have considered the mind in its more or less 'impure' form. As such it appears as a psycho-physical complex whose activity and influence extend over the various functions of the sensuous organism as well as over the exertions of will and desire. It is reckoned throughout as 'more than', or 'higher than' the sense powers. This is not only because the mind is subtler and less material than they; but mainly for the reason that it mediates the knowledge and understanding of the self or *ātman*. This is in part accomplished by the thoughts (*dhīyah*).

The Kaushītaki Upanishad conveys the impression that thoughts are existential elements (*bhūta*). They retain a kind of mobility, yet they may be steadied and fixed. Desire is only very indirectly associated with thought and thinking in general. The presumption seems to be throughout that thought itself is able to produce a certain effect, or, rather, be it. This involves, of course, the whole theory of *tapas*, *medha*, and *yoga* which cannot be dealt with here. We can say only that in this view the thing desired achieves reality in employing one's thought about it. However, thought as such tends towards the opposite of will which makes for motion and unrest. In the conception of *dhyanā* thinking has reached quiescence and stability.

In order to reconstruct for ourselves the Upanishadic conception of mind and to present a summary picture we may say that in the concept *manas* the intellectual and the volitional are combined. Although it is not described as such, the various statements made concerning it presuppose a certain set of ideas and associations which make possible these sketches, characterizations, and allusions upon which posterity relies in the restoration of the ancient mind.

Mind serves the duty of the wishing, willing, and thinking agency with a proper balance between them. The wise man is he who observes an equilibrium throughout, who remains the same (*sama*), not following his whims and passions, nor dreaming and reposing in a state of *dolce far niente*. Harmony is better than excess in either direction; even though the Hindu mind has a bent towards quiescence, this is the final solution of India's most revered book, the Bhagavad Gītā.

In point of relationship mind may be considered to have an objective and a subjective aspect. The two coincide in Hindu thought with the active and passive principles respectively. The logical relation of objectivity and subjectivity is, perhaps, more instructive than the psychological antithesis.

The *indriyas*, as faculties of sensation, mediate an external world through the various sense organs. Thoughts (*dhiyaḥ*) have to be present in order to change these sensations into perceptions. This is our Western interpretation of the checking of the *indriyas*. Perceptions or ideas are the stable elements of mind according to this theory, while sensations are continuously fluctuating. Later

speculations, however, concern themselves not so much with these two but with *citta* which has a significance of its own.

The normally functioning mind has thus a double reference in wishing and thinking. These two must be properly balanced; if not, mind lacks the objective reference, the character of mediating and exchanging subjective and objective elements and its activity will not have objective validity. In fact, this special function of the mind (*manas*) is 'to believe', 'to opine', 'to hold', and the like (*man*). The mind confined to itself may thus entertain opinions which may be well or ill founded, or it may engender guesses of the nature of a conjecture, hypothesis, or imagination for want of a precise and ascertainable idea or fact.