

Buddha Mind, Buddha Body

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How the Mind Works

BEFORE WE CAN WALK for our ancestors, before we can walk for those who have harmed us, we need to learn how to walk for ourselves. To do that, we need to understand our minds and the connection between our feet and our heads. The Vietnamese Zen Master Thuong Chieu said, “When we understand how our mind works, our practice becomes easy.” In other words, if we can walk mindfully with our consciousness, our feet will naturally follow.

The Buddha taught that consciousness is always continuing, like a stream of water.

There are four kinds of consciousness:

mind consciousness,
sense consciousness,
store consciousness,
and manas.

Sometimes, these four kinds of consciousness are considered eight, with sense consciousness being divided into five (eyes, ears, mouth, nose, touch). When we walk mindfully, all four layers of consciousness are operating.

Mind consciousness is the first kind of consciousness. It uses up most of our energy. Mind consciousness is our “working” consciousness that makes judgments and plans; it is the part of our consciousness that worries and analyzes. When we speak of mind consciousness, we’re also speaking of body consciousness, because mind consciousness isn’t possible without the brain. Body and mind are simply two aspects of the same thing. Body without consciousness is not a real, live body. And consciousness can’t manifest itself without a body.

It’s possible for us to train ourselves to remove the false distinction between brain and consciousness. We shouldn’t say that consciousness is born from the brain, because the opposite is true: the brain is born from consciousness. The brain is only two percent of the body’s weight, but it consumes twenty percent of the body’s energy. So using mind consciousness is very expensive. Thinking, worrying, and planning take a lot of energy.

We can economize the energy by training our mind consciousness in the habit of mindfulness. Mindfulness keeps us in the present moment and allows our mind consciousness to relax and let go of the energy of worrying about the past or predicting the future.

The second level of consciousness is sense consciousness, the consciousness that comes from our five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. When we walk, we use this kind of consciousness as well. We see in front of us, we taste and smell the air, we hear sounds and our feet touch the ground. We sometimes call these senses “gates,” or “doors,” because all objects of perception enter consciousness through our sensory contact with them.

Sense consciousness always involves three elements:

first, the sense organ (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or body);

second, the sense object itself (the object we’re smelling or the sound we’re hearing);

and finally, our experience of what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching.

The third layer of consciousness, store consciousness, is the deepest. There are many names for this kind of consciousness. In the Mahayana tradition this is called store consciousness, or *alaya* in Sanskrit. The Theravada tradition uses the Pali word *bhavanga* to describe this consciousness. *Bhavanga* means constantly flowing, like a river. Store consciousness is also sometimes called root consciousness (*mulavijñāna* in Sanskrit) or *sarvabijaka*, which means “the totality of the seeds.” In Vietnamese, we call store consciousness *tang*. *Tang* means to keep and preserve.

These different names hint at the three aspects of store consciousness.

-The first meaning is of a place, a “store,” where all kinds of seeds and information are kept. A mustard seed is very small. But if the mustard seed has the opportunity to sprout, the outer shell will break, and what is very small inside will become very big— a huge plant of mustard. In the Gospels there is the image of a mustard seed that has the capacity to become a huge tree where many birds can come and take refuge. The mustard seed is the symbol of the contents of store consciousness. Everything we see or touch has a seed lying deep in store consciousness.

-The second meaning is suggested by the Vietnamese name *tang*, because store consciousness doesn’t just take in all the information, it holds it and preserves it.

-The third meaning is suggested by *bhavanga*, the sense of processing and transforming.

Store consciousness is like a museum. A museum can only be called a museum when there are things in it. When there is nothing in it, you can call it a building, but not a museum. The conservator is the one who is responsible for the museum. Her function is to keep the various objects preserved and not allow them to be stolen. But there must be things to be stored, things to be kept. Store consciousness refers to the storing and also to what is stored— that is, all the information from the past, from our ancestors, and all the information received from the other consciousnesses. In Buddhist tradition, this information is stored as *bija*, seeds.

Suppose this morning you hear a certain chant for the first time. Your ear and the music come together and provoke the manifestation of the mental formation called touch, which causes store consciousness to vibrate. That information, a new seed, falls into the store continuum. Store consciousness has the capacity to receive the seed and store it in its heart. Store consciousness preserves all the information it receives. But the function of store consciousness isn’t just to receive and store these seeds; its job is also to process this information.

The work of processing on this level is not expensive. Store consciousness doesn’t spend as much energy as, for example, mind consciousness. Store consciousness can process this information without a lot of work on your part. So if you want to save your energy, don’t think too much, don’t plan too much, and don’t worry too much. Allow your store consciousness to do most of the processing.

Store consciousness operates in the absence of mind consciousness. It can do a lot of things. It can do a lot of planning; it can make a lot of decisions without your knowing about it. When we go into a department store and look for a hat or a shirt, we have the impression, while looking at the items displayed, that we have free will and that, finances permitting, we are free to choose whatever we want. If the vendor asks us what we like, we can point to or verbalize the object of our desire. And we likely have the impression that we are free people at this moment, using our mind consciousness to select things that we like. But that is an illusion. Everything has been decided already in store consciousness. At that moment we are caught; we are not free people. Our sense of beauty, our sense of liking or disliking, has been decided very certainly and very discreetly on the level of store consciousness.

It’s an illusion that we are free. The degree of freedom that our mind consciousness has is actually very small. Store consciousness dictates many of the things we do, because store consciousness continuously receives, embraces, maintains, processes, and makes many decisions

without the participation of mind consciousness. But if we know the practice, we can influence our store consciousness; we can help influence how our store consciousness stores and processes information so as to make better decisions. We can influence it.

Just like mind consciousness and sense consciousness, store consciousness consumes. When you are around a group of people, although you want to be yourself, you are consuming their ways, and you are consuming their store consciousness. Our consciousness is fed with other consciousnesses. The way we make decisions, our likes and dislikes, depend on the collective way of seeing things. You may not see something as beautiful, but if many people think that it's beautiful, then slowly you may come to accept it as beautiful also, because the individual consciousness is made up of collective consciousness.

The value of the dollar is made up of the collective thinking of people, not just of objective economic elements. People's fears, desires, and expectations make the dollar go up and go down. We are influenced by the collective ways of seeing and thinking. That's why selecting the people you are around is very important. It's very important to surround yourself with people who have loving kindness, understanding, and compassion, because day and night we are influenced by the collective consciousness.

Store consciousness offers us enlightenment and transformation. This possibility is contained in its third meaning, its always-flowing nature. Store consciousness is like a garden where we can plant the seeds of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, and then flowers, fruits, and vegetables will grow. Mind consciousness is only a gardener. A gardener can help the land and take care of the land, but the gardener has to believe in the land, believe that it can offer us fruits, flowers, and vegetables. As practitioners, we can't rely on our mind consciousness alone; we have to rely on our store consciousness as well. Decisions are being made down there.

Suppose you type something on your computer and this information is stored on the hard drive. That hard drive is like store consciousness. Although the information doesn't appear on the screen, it is still there. You only need to click and it will manifest. The bija, the seeds in store consciousness, are like the data you store on your computer. If you want to, you can click and help it appear on the screen of mind consciousness. **Mind consciousness is like a screen and store consciousness is like the hard drive**, because it can store a lot in it. Store consciousness has the capacity of storing, maintaining, and preserving information so that it can't be erased.

Unlike information on a hard drive, however, all the seeds are of an organic nature and they can be modified. The seed of hatred, for example, can be weakened and its energy can be transformed into the energy of compassion. The seed of love can be watered and strengthened. The nature of the information that's being kept and processed by the store consciousness is always flowing and always changing. Love can be transformed into hate, and hate can be transformed back into love.

Store consciousness is also a victim. It's an object of attachment; it's not free. In store consciousness there are elements of ignorance—delusion, anger, fear—and these elements form a force of energy that clings, that wants to possess. This is the fourth level of consciousness, called manas, which I like to translate as “cogitation.” Manas consciousness has at its root the belief in a separate self, the belief in a person. This consciousness, the feeling and instinct called “I am,” is very deeply seated in store consciousness. It's not a view taken up by mind consciousness. Deeply seated in the depths of store consciousness is this idea that there is a self that is separate from nonself elements. The function of manas is to cling to store consciousness as a separate self.

Another way of thinking of manas is as adana consciousness. Adana means “appropriation.” Imagine that a vine puts forth a shoot, and then the shoot turns back and embraces and encircles the trunk of the tree. This deep-seated delusion—the belief that there is a self—is there in store consciousness as the result of ignorance and fear, and it gives rise to an energy that turns around and embraces store consciousness and makes it the only object of its love.

Manas is always operating. It never lets go of store consciousness. It's always embracing, always holding or sticking to store consciousness. It believes store consciousness to be the object of its love. That's why store consciousness isn't free. There's an illusion that store consciousness is "me," is my beloved, so I can't let it go. Day and night there's a secret, deep cogitation that this is me, this is mine, and I have to do everything I can to grasp, to protect, to make it mine. Manas is born and rooted in store consciousness. It arises from store consciousness and it turns around and embraces store consciousness as its object: "You are my beloved, you are me." The function of manas is to appropriate store consciousness as its own.