



AN INTRODUCTION TO

BUDDHIST MINDFULNESS

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism defines itself as *a path*. This because it has destinations to reach (goals to be achieved) and a series of well-traced routes to be followed in order to achieve them. What travels that path is the entirety of what one is ... and this turns out to be consciousness. Put simply, it is a way of working with the human mind to make it progressively freer, kinder and wiser until it is as free, kind and wise as is possible.

The goals of Buddhism and its methods for achieving them are defined with various shades and nuances depending on the tradition—Theravada, Zen, Ch’an, Pure Land or Vajrayana. There are significant differences but these are not the topic here. What is important is that *all* the paths agree on *mindfulness* being their starting-point; their basis (see Annexe I). **The Four Foundations of Mindfulness represent the self-knowledge that informs self-change.** Mindfulness is the basis for all that follows. Here, we shall consider that common basis and not venture into the special developments arising from it in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

Mindfulness is a vital aspect of meditation but one should not think of “meditation” as something other. Bombarded as we are these days with publicity images of meditating monks or of young ladies wearing leotards and sitting blissfully in a (sort-of) meditation posture, it is easy to associate meditation with an alternative world of serenity to which one can *escape*. Nothing could be further from the truth of real meditation, which is a means for coming to know oneself better, *as one is*. Meditation is a means and the *means* should not be confused with the *end*. The means does involve formal training, sitting in meditation postures and using all sorts of special methods. These are like going to a gym and working-out on specific machines but in a much more general perspective of having a healthy body, all day long, wherever one is. The meditation cushion is where we work on the mind, so that the mind can deal with its inconsistencies, suffering, confusion and ignorance, on the one hand, and find its strengths and blessings, on the other. The aim is to end up with a clear, happy, loving, calm and very wise mind, wherever one goes, whatever one does. From this angle, mindfulness can be far-reaching indeed, as it is the term for an advanced meditator’s enlightened way of being in the moment. It is not only the beginning. In some ways it is also the end.



“Mindfulness” in its broadest sense

The term *mindfulness* has somehow become used rather loosely as a global term to cover several quite precise Buddhist topics. This already happened in Tibet but it has become more pronounced with the global spread of Buddhism and with the advent of secular “mindfulness” training in the West, which is in many ways more what

Buddhists call *awareness training*. Traditional Buddhist mindfulness is part of a threesome of mutually-supporting factors:

Awareness¹

Mindfulness²

Care³

Tibetans often use a hybrid term, which sounds like *drenshee*⁴, to cover all three in unison. It is this term that a lama will often have in mind when saying something like, “Be mindful!” In fact, it means, “Be carefully, mindfully aware!”

Traditionally, Mindfulness, unlike awareness, is charged with ethical values. It is about setting up the intelligence needed for taking one’s life in hand and shaping it into what one would like it to be. In Buddhism, *how one would like it to be* is (as you would expect) rooted firmly in Buddhist values. One could equally well create other forms of “mindfulness” rooted in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Humanitarian or other values. *Awareness*, by contrast, is simply a question of being aware of what is happening, like a camera or a microphone picking up “live” information. Like those devices, it cannot, by its very nature, evaluate or judge. It is interesting to note that the various forms of secular mindfulness, in trying to avoid being limited to any religious belief, run a risk of creating their own “religions” because any work on the mind *is obliged* to make some assumptions concerning what is an improvement for the individual and what is damaging—otherwise, there is no point in doing it⁵.

Therefore *mindfulness* could be taken very literally as the mind *being full of*, i.e. not forgetting, its purpose. In Buddhism, *mindfulness* is synonymous with *remembering* or, more precisely, *not forgetting*. The general outline is:

Being very *aware* of what is happening in the moment, one *remembers* wise counsel, because one *cares* deeply about the outcome.

Let us now consider the three specific factors of global “mindfulness”, one by one.



Awareness

The development of mindfulness, described above, relies on being aware. That ranges from a beginner's general awareness of physical sensations through to an

¹ Tib: *shes bzhin*, Skt: *samprajanyam*.

² Tib: *dran pa*, Skt: *smrtih*.

³ Tib: *bag yod*, Skt: *apramādhā*.

⁴ Tib: *dran shes*.

⁵ For instance, even the idea of being “non-judgemental” becomes a contradiction, as it makes the judgement that judgement is not helpful, this in turn being based on a certain psychological view of how things ought to be; how people are damaged; how they can help themselves. **The benefits of secular mindfulness are well proven and this is not at all a reproach but simply a reflection of the inevitability of moral values and paradigms becoming part of any system of self-help.**

experienced Buddhist's subtle awareness of interdependence at play. The awareness we will explore in this section is called *samprajanyam* in Sanskrit. In this context, it means *cultivating vigilance*. It is a process of self-awareness that is a tool for checking that all is going as it should. Although far from perfect as an example, a good modern metaphor for this would be the security camera, constantly watching to make sure there is no danger, or conveying the danger when it happens so that something can be done to avert it. A good point about this example is that the camera is unemotional, non-judgemental. It just gives an image of what is happening. *Samprajanyam* is a high-quality mind camera that gives an excellent view of what is happening each second. What is then done about it is very much the next topic, *mindfulness*, which is like the well-informed person watching the screens, who acts swiftly and skilfully due to *care*. Obviously the way the camera is set up or the way an airport scanner analyses baggage is heavily influenced by what is being sought. Awareness and mindfulness work in synergy.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, there is a special way of getting the right “feel” of such awareness, in practices where, one way or another, the Buddha or guru is imagined as being constantly present within, as the centre-point of the observer⁶. The “feel” of this checking awareness then becomes that of the peaceful, benevolent wisdom of the Buddha. As we know that the Buddha is the true essence of our being, this process creates no internal conflict, no splitting oneself into two, as in the famous image of the good angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other. It is simply the wiser part of the mind observing the old habits of the less-wise part. One could say it is like the ocean knowing its waves. It helps discover the meaning of *compassion for oneself*.

The *Mahamudra* system of meditation has many skilful and subtle techniques for helping to deepen and stabilise *awareness*, this insightful part of one's mind. First, there needs to be a healthy basis of peaceful stability (*shamatha*). Then the peaceful mind can be used to know itself more profoundly. This opens up many unexpected doors of insight and a quality of awareness never before experienced. Although this work is vital, it is even more vital to prepare the mind beforehand. *Refuge* brings the strength, support and psychological protection. The *compassionate attitude* of the bodhisattva sets in place a vision of the journey and its main ethical values. *Purification* practices reduce the backlog of harmful karma that might pose problems. Developing *generosity of spirit* creates a positive motor force and so forth. Details of the thorough preparation for Mahamudra may be found in many texts.

Simply being very aware is not necessarily virtuous in itself. One could be vividly aware yet doing horrible things and enjoying them. **Therefore, the essential characteristic of this Buddhist awareness is to be aware of whether or not one is being mindful of noble purpose.** Put another way, it is helping us to live to our

⁶ Please note that this is only one of the many benefits coming from the guru relationship.

highest ethical standards and not “turn a blind eye” to the more negative habits: not to live in a state of denial.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a living thing. Like beautiful music or the feel of a warm, breathing animal in the hands, it cannot be described but needs to be directly experienced. In order to get this “feel” of mindfulness, we train in it progressively. At first this is necessarily somewhat artificial but, with time, it does become natural: “second nature”. It has two aspects—a **meditation aspect** and a **wisdom aspect**:

1. The **meditation aspect** is the development of an *aware, attentive calm*; a living “presence” in the moment. This usually starts with physical things: mindful walking, mindful eating, mindfulness of breathing and so forth.
2. When the meditative aspect is familiar, the light of wisdom needs to be brought into it. This **wisdom aspect** cultivates the habit of *remembering*. The remembering is mainly two-fold: maintaining technique and recalling advice.

Traditionally, there are four main steps in mindfulness training:

1. **Body** - all things physical.
2. **Feelings**.
3. One's own **mind**.
4. **Phenomena** in general.

1. Mindfulness of Body.

Mindfulness means recollection! The **meditation aspect** of mindfulness of body is where most people start: often with walking meditation, so let's take that as an example. The object is to maintain awareness with the sensations of the feet, as one walks. At first the mind finds it hard to remain with the sensations: its vigilance flags and attention runs away here and there, remembering things of the past, imagining the future or just flitting around like a butterfly, from one thought or idea to the next or from one sense input to the next. By repeatedly *remembering* to bring mind back to, and anchor it to, the sensations in the feet, one trains in mindfulness and its characteristic quality of recollection. Recollection has several aspects, from simply remembering to do the practice (be aware of the feet, in this case), through keeping wise counsel in mind up to maintaining deep meditative presence.

It is interesting to note that when someone has made a mistake, the excuse is often, *I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking!* This is not quite true because the reason for not doing what ought to have been done was precisely that the person *was thinking...* but of

something else. What they mean is, *I'm sorry; I wasn't remembering what I ought to have remembered*. Each time there is *distraction* and the mind flies away in its reveries, one has *forgotten* the intention, which, to return to our example, is to keep the mind with the body—the sensations of the feet. Only when one realises that attention has wandered can the *recollection* be re-established.

With time, the distractions become fewer and shorter-lasting, starting to allow the calm joy and actual “feel” of mindful presence to be experienced. With this new, calm centre-point, one gains, as a side benefit, more clarity about the habit-patterns of one's mind. However, that sort of naturally-occurring self-analysis is not the main point. In fact, getting too interested in the comings-and-goings of one's own thoughts causes people to lose track of where mindfulness could be taking them—somewhere quite beyond the stuffy old room of habit. The first destination is a stable place of serenity.



One extends mindfulness from walking to other physical activities, such as eating, breathing and speaking. The important thing is to persist assiduously during the practice session until the artificial laboriousness of training has matured into a smooth, natural feeling of mindful presence. This *will* happen but it takes the time it takes. Sometimes, one also has to overcome awkwardness. The first few sessions of silent, mindful eating, during a retreat, can be quite a challenge for those always used to conversation over food. They can feel embarrassed and self-conscious. However, with time, the discomfort transforms into a pleasure. One really tastes the food and finds it pleasant, indeed a luxury, to enjoy the movements of hands, lips and mouth as meditative presence, without the need to think of topics of conversation. A new space opens up.

The next step is not to lose the benefit the moment the training session is over. A lot of the day is spent walking, even if it be from one room to another. All walking can become mindful, as can all eating and, with time, most physical activities. Without becoming lost in the sensorial, a whole new physical relationship with material reality emerges: a feeling of being awake, alive and in the present; breathing each breath as a new person and moving through a world of awakened odours, flavours and tactile sensations. More than that, the meaning of "presence of mind" becomes vivid. One gains a new awareness of the areas of scope of mindfulness of body:

- One's own body and physical functions.
- The body's inter-relation with other people's bodies and

- The “body” of the surrounding world, the environment.

This is all very well and rather pleasant but it is not yet Buddhist mindfulness: more the stage being set for the actor of mindfulness to make an entry. The feeling of presence and peaceful awareness, described above, *needs to be enhanced by the light of wisdom*. This is done by understanding the Buddha's teachings about physicality and by testing their veracity—not in one's intellect or through pre-formed opinions but in the actual living reality of mindful experience. This is a process of becoming much wiser about what our own bodies and other people's bodies make us do. **It is an awakening to the helpful and harmful sides of material existence.**

This awakened awareness—and this is the point—means that one's body can now become a vehicle for helping make life what one wants it to be. This requires some clear vision of where life should be heading and that, in turn, necessarily involves value judgements, ethics and beliefs. It is interesting to reflect that a murderer or a thief could do everything he or she does with great awareness and calm, in-the-moment, presence. Simply being aware—even *very* aware—is, in itself, amoral. The sort of awareness generated by breathing meditation or careful walking may *feel* “good” but in fact what we mean by that is that it feels *pleasant*. *Pleasant* and *beneficial* are not always synonymous. Furthermore, the pleasure of mindfulness only lasts as long as it lasts and only brings temporary benefit to the one who does it.

Although Buddhism is not one single path but a range of possibilities, its “bottom line” is always to reduce suffering, for oneself and others, and to bring a better quality of happiness. It is ethically engaged. It works for long-term benefit.

The body can be a major cause of suffering. Its needs and desires have repercussions on many levels, as we realise these days in our global economy, where the shoes we wear may be made by slave labour and the beautiful wood of our furniture involves destroying the habitat of tribal peoples and wild animals. All over the world, the sexual needs of the human body are causing heartaches and damage to their owners and for others. There are, of course, beneficial and happy things that bodies do too and one needs to have a balanced view of things. This is the aim: to reach a *true* view of things based in the reality of life, rather than illusions, self-made or inherited from the surrounding culture. Sadly, human beings seem to find it difficult to take full responsibility for what they are doing in order to obtain or maintain their own pleasure. This has always been the case and Buddhism is something of a wake-up call inviting us to examine not only our place in the scheme of things but also the very nature of our presumptions concerning happiness itself and its vectors.

Most Buddhists will conclude that they want their physical presence in this world to be something that brings peace, joy and harmony, not only to themselves but also to other people, to the animal kingdom and to the environment. **The wisdom aspect of mindfulness is therefore to train in maintaining this “best” vision of human life**

and to let it inform whatever the body does, rather than the body continuing merely to be the puppet of old habits.

A few practical examples of the above may be:

- Wishing to replace “inherited” racial, class or sexual assumptions—the sort of reflex that spring up instantly on meeting someone—with a more enlightened approach.
- Wishing to change lifestyle, e.g. habits of diet, such as compulsive eating, unhealthy eating or use of food and luxuries that exploit others.
- Wishing to change habits of wasting time in mindless pursuits.
- Wishing to see other people in terms of their humanity or their buddha nature rather than as objects of sexual desire or in terms of their beauty or ugliness.
- Wishing to remove from one’s mind reactive patterns of jealousy, of old resents or of self-pity.

There are many more: all the activities of body, speech and mind that fall within the scope of Buddhist reflection. One could simply reflect upon these issues and try to change one’s life accordingly. However, life is short and the potential of the mind is enormous. Sometimes a little change takes a whole lifetime. The purpose of mindfulness and of many meditations is to considerably accelerate this process of bringing the human mind to greater wakefulness and wisdom.

How does this work? Suppose, for example, that, in the light of awareness and mindful recollection of the Buddha’s teachings on bodies, a person decided that his physical desires and preoccupations were taking too much space in his life. The dharma teaches that although the body is such a powerful thing, it is primarily controlled by mind. Therefore, the person sets to work on the mind, and comes to discover his habitual **illusions of beauty and ugliness, of permanence, of purity, of life’s purpose** and so forth. Recognising the direct power of these illusions over his mind and their indirect influence on the body, he may want to transform the habitual patterns of thought into new ways that are wise and helpful.

The Buddha’s teachings on mindfulness of body have a strong focus on physical desire—gratifying the senses—as it is something that powerfully affects all cultures and all levels of society. An oversexed person will find the imagination running wild very frequently, exciting the body. It pulls evocative images out of memory and a familiar process of association and fantasising then swings into place. Imagination sometimes leads to action. In real life, the process will be triggered by seeing either real bodies or images of bodies. If someone wants to change this, it will require re-programming the patterns of thinking that are triggered by seeing bodies.

In Buddhist India, in order to counteract a romanticising of bodies, monks and nuns would go to meditate in charnel grounds—places where dead bodies were left to be eaten by the birds and jackals and could be seen in various states of decomposition. There, they would contemplate the various exposed components of a body, especially its thirty-six **impure** substances⁷. Their objective was not to persuade themselves into a different illusion (Buddhist illusion) but to unveil, to witness, the truth: simple, uncompromising and unassuming vivid knowledge of what physicality really is. The image of a human being projected from the catwalk, cinema screen or glossy magazine is rather different from the one seen by the doctor next to the operating table. Just before Prince Siddhartha's final departure from the palace, his parents threw a huge party. There were exquisite dancing girls. The party over, the Prince saw those same "beautiful" girls asleep, drunk and in inelegant postures, slumped over the furniture, snoring with their mouths open and farting in their sleep. He understood the power of illusion.

Comment by several contemporary lamas: These days, in "highly-developed" countries, there are of course no charnel grounds and it becomes increasingly rare to even see a dead body. In hiding away old age and death, our civilisations plunge themselves deeper into illusion and deprive themselves of a natural understanding of the truth of ageing and mortality. The fact that those who *have* nursed the dying often say, *It was such a privilege*, shows us the rarity of the experience. It is so different from former times in Europe and present times in villages in developing countries, where old age and dying are a natural part of everyday existence in which everyone participates. *End of comment*



Another meditation that monks did, traditionally, was that on the human skeleton. These days, we might call it the "osteopath's meditation", as it involves a detailed study of the human skeleton. In the past, the monks did this in the charnel grounds. Today, we can do it with books or on Internet. They also did a sort of "body scan" meditation to implant in their imagination an awareness of their own skeleton, at the same time as studying those of others in the charnel ground. If this is done extensively enough, perception changes, and one actually "sees" people as walking skeletons, much in the same way as some men will "see" a woman undressed even though their physical eyes see her



⁷ Hair, facial hair, teeth, nails, excrement, urine, sweat, mucus, tears, saliva, secretions*, skin, flesh, blood, bones, fat, marrow, blood vessels, sinews, lungs, heart, liver, spleen, kidneys, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, colon, urinary bladder, grease, lymph, pus, phlegm, bile, brain and cerebral membrane. *Secretions (*dri ma*) includes eye secretions, ear wax, and plaque

clothed or an osteopath's gaze is very aware of the bones of a person who is standing or walking. It is all to do with the power that the imagination and habitual thinking wield over perception.

Mindfulness of body concerns living bodies and the "body" of the world around us. It is particularly interested in whatever is experienced by the five senses, because:

- They make the body what it is, by giving it their powers to "live". This can be best appreciated by contemplating how life would be without one or more or them or without all five.
- It is they that convey to the mind every experience of the "outer" world and other people. They are all we have, in that respect. We do not experience "the world", we experience our senses and can never go beyond them.

The remit of *mindfulness of body* is to work extensively with acquired behaviour within this world of the five senses, in order that we understand it better and learn to manage our sense faculties in the most fruitful way. They should become our servants: not we their slaves. There may be more to life than living like sophisticated animals: only nesting, mating and feeding, albeit in a complex way.

We develop a deeper understanding of bodies for what they really are, rather than the illusions which we or others tend to spin around them. **We do the same for material goods**, questioning previous assumptions about "prosperity" and "civilisation". Through this, it is possible to reach a more awakened appreciation of the way in which the mind clings to sense pleasure, gets involved with it and makes karma because of it. This leads us into the next step: mindfulness of feelings.

❖ 2. *Mindfulness of Feelings*

"Feelings" is a very loose term in English, covering physical sensations, emotions and even opinions: *What do you feel about the latest political developments...? I feel lonely...* and so forth. It has been used universally to translate the Sanskrit dharma term *vedanā*, which is, by contrast, something very specific and precisely-defined. There are only three vedana: *feels good, feels bad* and *neutral (no feeling)*. These can be stretched to five: physically pleasant, mentally pleasant, physically unpleasant, mentally unpleasant and neutral.

Meditation aspect: the new skill of mindfulness, first developed with physical things, now shifts from the world of the five senses to that of the mind itself, becoming aware of the mental consequences of sensorial experience.

In the very instant that follows seeing, smelling, hearing etc., there will be this immediate, reactive “feeling” of pleasantness or unpleasantness or else, for the vast majority of sense experiences, there will be no feeling at all. In the instant following the feeling, the feeling is given voice in the mind's inner chatter: *This colour is ugly!, Oh, gosh that's soft! What delicious plums! Horrible noise!* etc. Although the latter are primarily thoughts, they reveal the feelings that preceded them and they testify to the power and nature of those feelings. The relationship between thought and feelings is actually quite complex. They are truly interdependent and cannot be categorised automatically into a parent-and-child relationship, at least not in their daily triggering of each other.

From a long-term perspective, it is clear that changing the thinking can gradually modify the habitual reactive feeling. Someone happy to be on a diet can learn to enjoy the feeling of being slightly hungry, because it is a sign he is moving in the desired direction. That selfsame feeling may previously have been unpleasant.

Mindfulness of feelings makes one thing very evident: the quest for pleasant feelings and the fleeing of unpleasant ones dominates ordinary life. It is the driving force behind actions. *Action is karma* in Sanskrit. Karma shapes its doer's future. Feelings are a vital factor in the creation of karma (see annexe on the twelve links of interdependence).

Humans find excrement repulsive: dogs are quite attracted to it. “One man's meat is another man's poison.” Some people like hot climates. Others prefer the cold. Some people become excited by certain, natural body odours; others find them repulsive.

It is very useful to become mindful of one's own habitual feelings, as described above. Just as, in the earlier training, one maintained awareness of the sensations in the feet, here one maintains awareness of the ever-changing feelings provoked by sights and sounds. Once there is awareness of feelings provoked by data coming in through the five senses, one turns to feelings provoked by thoughts—by being aware of how one's own mind reacts so differently to the thoughts that are none other than itself, its own creation. Some thoughts engender sheer delight, others trigger unbearable pain. As one becomes aware of what one's own mind does to itself—the places to which it takes itself and the states it can twist itself into—the process witnessed is recognised as quite amazing, often absurd, sometimes quite out of control. People can often be “their own worst enemy”. That did not ought to be.

All the above is the *awareness* aspect of mindfulness of feelings. **Once one is aware of feelings, it is important to develop the wisdom aspect, by understanding the Buddha's teachings concerning them, their role in the production of karma and therefore in the creation of future suffering.** In particular, at this point, it becomes important to develop an intimate understanding of the three main types of suffering:

1. *Manifest suffering*, where it hurts now, physically or mentally. This is “final-stage karma”, likened to being ill due to having eaten poisoned rice.
2. *Suffering due to change*, where all may be well now but causes are being set in place for future suffering. This is “cause-stage karma”, likened to eating delicious rice that contains poison.
3. *Inherent suffering*, as the very nature of worldly existence, compared with other possibilities. This is “karmic propensity”, like unripe rice still growing in the field. Whether it will become clean food or poisoned food is yet to be seen.

These leads one to appreciate that often what *feels* good is not necessarily good for you in the longer term! And what is good for you can feel difficult or uncomfortable! Mindfulness of feelings is to be aware of the role of feelings in one's own life and of their role in the processes of interdependence in general. *Feelings* are important because they trigger “*craving*”. Craving gives rise to all the other mind poisons and it is craving which causes one to become involved with situations and to *create karma*, through actions. By becoming mindful of this, a possibility of *choice* develops, supplanting habit. The feelings can be either followed or re-channelled wisely, according to the teachings on karma. One should note that *suppression* of feelings is not the Buddhist answer. Depending on the situation, one aims to either *transform* them or to *dissolve* them. By changing the basic mentality, over time, the feelings themselves will change and there will be no need for suppression, transformation or dissolution anyway. A few weeks’ meditation on the forbearance practices, for example, may suffice to change a person so that what was previously an unpleasant reaction of angry resent (on seeing a certain person) becomes compassion and a feeling of grateful liberation.

The texts describe feelings as being “like a water-tree”. This is often translated as a plantain or banana tree, which has no heartwood and is hollow. Some Tibetan lamas take the meaning as driftwood, in the sense of something useless while others keep the plantain meaning but translate the description as meaning “useless”, inasmuch as one cannot make furniture or build houses with plantain wood. **Whichever the case, feelings are a very vivid example of how the mind makes solid something which has no existence of its own and which comes and goes and changes in seconds. These chimeras of feelings dominate life and lead humans into all sorts of actions.**

🌀 3. *Mindfulness of Mind*

Mindfulness of feelings makes us gradually more aware (**meditation aspect**) of our mind's constructs around those feelings and, in particular, the thoughts of “I”. First, the awareness aspect of *mindfulness of mind* is cultivated, by placing quiet awareness

on one's thoughts and mental activity, just as one did with the soles of the feet in walking meditation. Here, one is being mindful of mind:

- Mind the observer.
- Mind, the experiencer of the five senses and of feelings these provoke.
- Mind, the subject as opposed to the object—other people.
- Mind as the feeling of “me” and all the internal discourse about oneself.
- Mind, the stream of consciousness of this life and the next.

When there is a degree of meditative familiarity with the mind, one needs then to cultivate the **wisdom aspect** of *mindfulness of mind*. We will use parts of a traditional teaching from Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche as a basis for explaining this.

The Five Aggregates (<i>skandha</i>)	
1. Form	—specifically: what one sees, i.e. shape and colour —more generally: the human form and all physical or mental forms
2. Feelings	pleasant, unpleasant, neutral
3. Cognition	recognition of things, with or without thought that labels and defines them
4. Mental creations	mainly the 51 main mental activities
5. Consciousness	the 5 senses and their objects + (6) mind and its 'objects' + (7) defiling consciousness + (8) universal basis consciousness

Thus far, mindfulness has been focussed on body and feelings. These correspond to the first two of the five aggregates.

The notion of self—the way one thinks of oneself or of another person—is based upon the person's mind. It is *mind* that is commonly considered to continue from one life to the next, since the five senses depend upon the body and cease at death. Mind itself is primarily consciousness, i.e. an ability to know; a clarity or spaciousness that allows experiences to happen within it. **Therefore mindfulness of mind is focused on consciousness, the fifth aggregate.**

Some Buddhist traditions only talk about six consciousnesses. In that case, mind is the sixth of the consciousnesses. In the traditions that discuss consciousness as eightfold, “mind” means the sixth, seventh and eighth consciousnesses.

Whichever system one uses, mind is observed meticulously. It is discovered to be **impermanent**. Mind is different from one life to the next, from one decade to the next, from one year to the next and so on. Even the mind of one short instant of

awareness is different from the next one. No lasting thing can be found that we could call “mind”. But still we entertain the idea of a lasting mind, a lasting self, even though it is never found. We entertain a total illusion. That illusion dominates life. Thus we need to examine it again and again to reverse our mistaken habits.

*Looking again and again at the mind, which cannot be looked at,
There is deep insight into the true point, of not seeing anything.
May there be self-recognition of what one really is,
By the very act of ascertaining the fact of mind existing or not*

HH the IIIrd Gyalwang Karmapa

Why do we bother to investigate like this? Belief in personality—self—lies at the root of our actions, which cause the suffering of this and future lives. Most Buddhists—who theoretically do not hold the view of a personal self as truly existing—mostly act, in their daily lives, as though they did believe in a self. It is very helpful to reflect upon such glaring contradictions between our beliefs and our actions.

Aryadeva says:

*Believing in a stream, one believes in a lasting self
Believing in skandhas (as one), one believes things to truly exist.*

Thus people believe the skandhas to be lasting and take one or more of them for a “self”. By applying mindfulness of mind, one witnesses the truth of the skandhas and discovers them to be non-lasting and not to be a single entity.

The above is an investigation of the ultimate nature of mind. The most refined form of such investigation is found in the traditions based on the *prajnaparamita*; the perfection of wisdom teachings from Nagarjuna.

On a relative level, it is by long-term, observation of mind that we come to understand directly and intuitively how the successive instants of consciousness relate to and trigger each other. It becomes clear how habits are formed and how they repeat themselves, from year to year, from life to life; how they can be weakened and how they can be strengthened.

The best outcome of developing mindfulness of mind is to understand the continuity of the stream of consciousness from life to life, without falling into the “extremes” of permanence (believing in a lasting self that is reborn) or nihilism (dismissing relative reality, cause and effect, reincarnation etc. through a misunderstanding of voidness). This is the famous “Middle Way”. The IIIrd Gyalwang Karmapa says, of mind:

It is not something which exists: even the Enlightened Ones have not seen it.

*It is not something which does not exist; it's the basis for all of samsara and nirvana.
There is no contradiction in this but the two-in-union Middle Way.
May the very nature of mind, free of these extremes, be realised.*

4. Mindfulness of Phenomena (dharma)

This is the most subtle step of mindfulness, as it is to remain mindful of the very nature of things. One way of expressing this would be *the unity of interdependence and voidness*. In a limited interpretation of this point, the objects of mindfulness are *dharmas*. Just as shapes and colours are the objects of visual consciousness, *dharmas* are whatever the subjective mind can be conscious of. These can be ideas, memories, imaginary situations, a mathematical puzzle etc. etc. The wider understanding of the term *dharmas* is of the very nature of all things—the whole of the Buddha's teachings being precisely about that. Let us consider some points emerging from Kongtrul's teachings on this. Concerning the **awareness aspect**, he says, "Here we turn our attention to the third and fourth aggregates."

The third aggregate is **cognition**. Cognition is easily remembered by thinking of the word *recognition*. It is the way in which the mind recognises and labels things. Things can be recognised *without concept*. This happens hundreds of times every minute, as our senses recognise their objects. Animals recognise their homes and their food. Things can also be recognised *with concept*, in which case discursive thought names and categorises the experience. These conceptual references build into complex notions of reality, which in turn colour the whole tableau of our life experience.

The 56 samskaras	
5 Universals	Focussing the mind (1) , feeling (2), cognition (3), holding the mind on its object (4) and sense contact (5)
5 things which determine the object	aspiration (6), certainty (7), recall (8), concentration (9) and understanding (10)
11 virtues	trust (11), care (12), proficiency (13), equanimity (14), self-respect (15), sense of shame (16), non-attachment (17), non-aggression (18), absence of confusion (19), non-violence (20) and diligence (21)
6 basic non-virtues	ignorance (22), desire and attachment (23), aggression and rejection (24), pride (25), doubt (26) and erroneous views (is generic term for 27-31 below)
5 misconceptions (erroneous views)	attitudes related to skandhas ("destructible complex") (27), extremists' attitude (28), perverse attitudes (29), rigid convictions (30) and rigid convictions about morality and conduct (31)
21 subsidiary non-virtues	wrath (32), resent (33), rage (34), irritation (35), jealousy (36), discontent (37), deceit (38), pretence/hypocrisy (39), absence of self-respect (40), absence of a sense of shame (41), dissimulation (42), avarice (43), narcissism (44), absence of trust (45), time-wasting (46), negligence (47), no mindfulness (48), no awareness (49), torpor (50), agitation (51) and total distraction (52)
4 variables	sleep (53), regret (54), thinking (55) and examination (56)

The fourth aggregate is very global. In fact, in one way, it contains all the others. It is called **mental events** or **karmic formations** (Skt: *samskara*) Fifty-two important instances of the mind's activity are given. They become fifty-seven, when erroneous views (no. 27) is expanded into the five misconceptions (see table above)⁸.

Furthermore, this fourth skandha also includes various lists of abstract concepts (often twenty-four are mentioned) that also play an important part in our lives. Examples of those would be notions like *loss* or *gain*, or of things being *similar* to each other. These are superimposed values, not values innate to things themselves.

The **wisdom aspect** and the reason why we turn our mindfulness to cognition and the samskaras is in order **to have an intelligent appreciation of quite what is happening with "rebirth" and what the "unborn" nature is**. There are many aspects to this, summed up in the bullet-points below but not developed in detail here:

- Each notion and each mental event has its own nature. The 'mind' is not one thing, like an actor wearing many masks, but an endless series of different flashes of mental activity, the previous one triggering the next. We call this the 'mind stream'. The stream is not a thing in itself, just as a mountain stream is not something other than the drops of water of which it is composed.
- Just as one moment of mind triggers, and leads to, another moment of mind in this life, so also does that stream of consciousness continue after death, carrying its imprints (programming) into the next life.
- The mind of the past shapes the mind of the future and there is an infallible rule that virtue always leads to happiness and non-virtue always leads to suffering. One could say this good karma-bad karma conditioning in consciousness is like either gold dust or pollution being carried with the stream.
- "Cause and effect" is more subtle than it first appears. One needs to contemplate deeply what the Buddha intended, in the Rice Shoot Sutra, when, holding a rice seed in one hand and a rice shoot in the other, he said that, "Because there is *this*, *that* arises". He did not say, "*This* creates *that*". We do this through exploring the twelve links of interdependence through three aspects: *ineluctability*, *impermanence* and *karmic programming*. In the process, we apply the voidness teachings of the perfection of wisdom.
- Sentient beings are highly complex, changing streams of results created by actions in the past. What they are doing now, through each of their complex personalities, is shaping the future.

⁸ The list often cites 51 mental activities, becoming 56 when views are included. This is based on Mipham.

By becoming mindful of the reality of the above points—as moment after moment this or that skandha manifests and disappears—a heightened sensitivity develops to the actual nature and power of actions, and to the motivation which underpins action. Life processes become illuminated by the wisdom of voidness, at first conceptual and later non-conceptual. Long-held illusions—the myths of self, of other, of concrete reality, of future possibilities, of luck, of God and so forth—evaporate in the morning sunlight of truth, especially when naked, unqualified reality is witnessed. Great compassion arises for our fellow sentient beings lost in confusion.

Summary of above

Minfulness of:	Meditative aspect focuses on:	Wisdom aspect recollects Buddha's teachings on:
BODY	walking, eating, speaking, physical contact with people, material objects - all these make the form aggregate	impurity , in the sense of missing life's main and noble opportunity
FEELINGS	feelings	Interdependence & Suffering
MIND	consciousness	Impermanence
DHARMA	cognition and mental events	Voidness

Care

Whereas mindfulness and awareness are very much things which take place "in the moment", *care* is something developed generally, over time. It grows or weakens from year to year, according to enthusiasm and many other factors. There is a very famous quotation from Guru Rinpoche⁹:

Keep your view as broad as space
And your action as fine as flour.

This is a healthy reminder not to let slip everyday values of human goodness as the view of voidness and understanding of illusion deepen. The greatest masters—those who had a "view" as broad as space itself—are famous for never considering any good thing too trivial to bother doing and never considering any harmful thing so small it could be ignored: action as fine as flour.

Care is usually increased by awareness of how fleeting and precious this human life is and, by consequence, awareness of death and impermanence.

⁹ *Guru Rinpoche* was the person who established dharma in Tibet in the 8th century.

Annexe I: The Five Phases of the Path

One of the earliest ways of analysing the journey to liberation was through the “five phases of the path”. These portray the necessary and inevitable transformations that the mind must go through in order to get rid of its karma and harmful habits, as well as to acquire deep meditative experience and penetrative wisdom. With the advent of Mahayana Buddhism, this same, essential, fivefold model was maintained, with its detailed explanation being adapted to suit the actual Mahayana journey.

Each phase requires the development of particular qualities. Taken together, they are known as the **thirty-seven factors of awakening**. Below is a simple table, going up from the beginnings, represented by our ordinary meditator "Sammy" (Skt: *samadhi*,



Tib: *bsam gtan*) through the five phases of the path up to liberation, represented here by the Buddha. The first two phases of the path have sub-stages, of which the first (“lesser”)—the foundation of all that follows—is informed by mindfulness.

The Universal Five Phases of the Path & the Thirty-Seven Factors of Awakening			
	Phase 5: No More Training		
	Phase 4: “Cultivation”	8 —	The Eightfold Path
	Phase 3: “Insight”	7	Seven Aspects of Awakening
	Phase 2: “Integration”	Highest Wordly”	5 Powers
		“Forbearance”	
		“Summit”	5 Faculties
		“Warming”	
	Phase 1: “Accumulation”	Greater	4 Feet of miracles
		Middling	4 Eliminations
		Lesser	4 Foundations of mindfulness



Annexe II: Interdependence & Interdependent Origination

Nothing simply *is*. Nothing exists all by itself. Everything and everyone *depend* upon other things in order to be what they are. There are two aspects to interdependence: momentary interdependence and historical interdependence:

- **Interdependence in the instant** is the way one thing depends upon other things for its seeming existence in the instant. For instance, a “yellow wall” seems to be yellow in its own right—a yellow thing—yet the yellow we see when we look at “the wall” is in fact the *yellow component of sunlight* reflected off the wall, not the yellow of the wall at all. The wall absorbs some of the spectrum but “bounces” off the yellow part. Without light shining on the wall, there is no yellow. Furthermore, without an eye to see it, there is no “yellow” either, as yellow is an experience that happens in a human brain. No actual yellow colour travels through space but whatever (if anything) does travel through space triggers the eye which triggers the brain which produces the yellow experience. It is the coming-together of many things—a human eye, the substance of the wall, the sun’s rays etc.—that produces the momentary experience of yellow.

This is simply an example that is easy to understand, using “modern” scientific intelligence. It demonstrates to anyone that in each instant, each seeming “thing” is in fact the coming-together of many circumstances and not something fixed forever in its own nature. It is not what it seems at first.

- **Interdependence over time** follows the cause-and-effect process through time. The eye that sees yellow was created by the person’s parents, along with the rest of the child. It was sustained, protected and developed through food and other conditions until this moment. The wall was built from bricks, because of someone’s idea to build it there. The bricks themselves came out of mud due to silt deposited over centuries by a river and so forth. The light shining on the wall comes from nuclear reaction in the Sun. Each circumstance during a moment of interdependence has its own history and causality.

One could simplify the above and talk of *interdependence in space and in time*. In this section, we are investigating interdependence in relation to suffering. The main process has already been outlined, step by step:

ignorance ⇨ ego illusion ⇨ affliction ⇨ karma ⇨ suffering

The classical way of looking into the historical interdependence of this is through a topic known as *Interdependent Origination* or *The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination*. These twelve are presented clearly as a chain-reaction. Interdependent origination shows us that once a certain number of factors are gathered together, the consequences will surely be triggered, like putting a match to dry gunpowder. They also show, in reverse, that if any single link in the chain is destroyed, then none of the subsequent links will happen. With the "Twelve Links of Interdependence", we have the genetic code of samsara. It is a sort of universal template that can be applied over a series of lifetimes, over two lifetimes or to a single instant of time.

The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination:

Ignorance ⇒ creations ⇒ consciousness ⇒ name and form ⇒ perceptual gateways ⇒ contact ⇒ feeling ⇒ craving ⇒ grasping ⇒ becoming ⇒ birth ⇒ ageing and death

We shall now study Gampopa's presentation of the Twelve Links, supported by images from the outer ring of the Wheel of Life thangka¹⁰: In the explanation below, links in **blue** are afflictions (*klesha*), links in **red** are action (*karma*) and the **others** are suffering itself.



The Twelve Links of Interdependence

1. The first (link) established, represented by a lost, blind person, is the condition of "**confused ignorance**", a non-recognition of that unique nature¹¹ which ought to be known, due to which

2. There is the actual doing of **tainted action**, be it virtuous or non-virtuous,

represented by a potter (fabricating a reality by his own actions). This is known as "**creation** due to the condition of ignorance".



¹⁰ A thangka is a Tibetan hanging scroll painting. The Wheel of Life depicts the Six Realms, the Three Poisons and the Twelve Links, all reflected in a mirror held by Yamaraja, the Lord of Death.

¹¹ Tathagatagarbha.



3. The mind polluted by the seed-like potentials imprinted in it by such actions is known as “**consciousness** due to the condition of creations”, represented by monkeys gathering fruits. Through the power of action, mind is

4. Transformed into something quite aberrant and joins up with the procreative elements in the mother’s womb to become the various stages of embryo and then foetus. This is known as “**name and form** due to the condition of consciousness”. Name and form (see below) are represented by two people in the same boat. Through the development of this



5. The various sense and mind faculties—of sight, smell etc.—become complete. They are known as the “**six perceptual gateways** due to the condition of name and form”, represented by a house with six sections.

6. When these various faculties, such as sight and so on, meet up with their corresponding objective fields through the corresponding consciousness, this three-fold meeting causes an actual experience of the object. This is known as “**contact** conditioned by the six perceptual gateways”, represented by a couple in passionate embrace. According to the nature of



this contact there arises



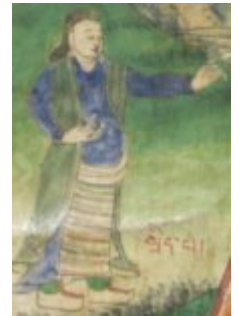
7. **Feeling**, or sensation, in the sense of a pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent experience, represented by a person with an arrow in the eye. This is known as “feeling due to the condition of contact”.

8. Attachment to feeling—craving and powerful craving for it or against it—is known as “**craving**¹² due to the condition of feeling”, represented by a picnic. Through such craving there is a



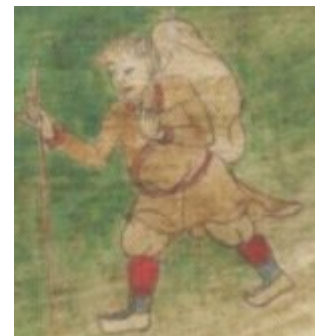
9. Mental striving in order either not to lose the experience or to bring it back (if pleasant) or to work out how to avoid it (unpleasant). This is known as “**grasping** due to the condition of craving”, represented here by picking fruit from a tree. Due to this striving one

10. Performs actions—physically, verbally or mentally—which generate rebirth. This is known as “**becoming**, due to the condition of grasping” and is represented by a pregnant woman.



11. Whatever existence composed of the five aggregates is generated by those actions is known as “**birth** due to the condition of becoming”, represented by childbirth. Through having been born,

12. the development and maturation of the actual existence is ageing and its destruction is death, depicted by a man carrying a shrouded corpse to the cremation ground. These are “**ageing and death** due to the condition of birth”.



The section accompanied by a **green line** can represent the inheritance from past lives, in which case we are considering timeless ignorance and all the things done in the past that have made the unique consciousness coming into this life.

The section accompanied by a **purple line** represents the generating and the generated in respect of the future life¹³.

¹² “Involvement” may be a better term.

¹³ This is based upon the *Ten Dharmas Sutra*.

Let us consider four of the less-obvious links above:

Link 3: Consciousness is the consciousness moving from one life to the next. Having left the body of the last life, it is in the *bardo* or in-between state. It carries with it all of its past, including all the karmic programming generated by actions in the previous life.

Link 4: Name and Form is another way of saying the five aggregates or, to put it simply, the new life, once the *bardo* is over. *Form* covers the tangible aspects and means the new body whereas *Name* means the intangible things—mind—in the sense of feelings, cognition, mental events and consciousness. In this link the *bardo* consciousness has joined the sperm and ovum of the parents to make a new sentient being. Although technically the new life has started, most of its physical and mental functions are not yet present and are only there nominally (potentially). That is another reason it is called *Name*.

Link 5: Six Perceptual Gateways develop as the body of the foetus grows, enabling its world to be perceived. As the ear and brain develop, a “gateway” opens to the world of sound and likewise for the other four fields of the senses: sights, odours, flavours, tactile sensations. The sixth perceptual gateway is that of the mind. This has two aspects, the first of which is simply to receive and process inputs from the five senses. It is a little like a switchboard, with attention shifting continuously from one sense to another, first to sound, then to physical sensations, then to odour and so on and so forth. The second aspect of the mental perceptual gateway is for mind, as a subject, to be aware of mind as an object.

To illustrate this, if just now you think of a childhood memory, your mind, the thinker, is contemplating its object, another aspect of your mind, its memory. Just as your power to see opens out to the world of visible objects through the gateway of vision, so does your mental power to be aware opens out to the world of things you can be aware of¹⁴ through the mental perceptual gateway. If we apply this to the newly-conceived child (in the womb), there is already a sense of identity within the child and there are mental reactions to the environment of the womb. With birth comes a whole new set of subject-object situations at play in the baby’s mind. With the acquisition of language, names can be given to the various components of the already-established mental landscape. With time, this becomes the inner dialogue about self and other.

Link 10: Becoming may not sound as important as it is. It covers *all* the actions of the present lifetime, in other words all the karma created in the present lifetime. These actions contribute, one by one and inescapably, to creating the future person. By performing actions, we are becoming what we will be in the future.

¹⁴ The objects of mental consciousness are technically known as *dharmas* in Sanskrit.

Some people sensitive enough to be aware of the process, may feel that all-important shift from being inclined to do something (link 9, intense mental involvement and grasping) to actually giving way to the impulse and performing the action. This critical step is what link 10, becoming, is all about. By creating karma (action), we not only give reality to what we have thus far only imagined but we also create a future: we are *becoming* what we will be.

Having clarified these three links, let us return to the overall process of the twelve steps of interdependence. In one discourse, the *Rice Shoot Sutra*, the Buddha uses the example of a rice plant to illustrate interdependence:

Bhikkhus! Whoever understands this rice shoot understands interdependent origination. Whoever understands interdependent origination understands the nature of phenomena. Whoever understands phenomena understands buddhahood.

Monks! Through the existence of this, this will arise. Through this having arisen, (then) this arises. That is how it is. Through the condition of ignorance, there will be creations¹⁵ ... etc. (up to) ... there will be birth and through that condition there will be ageing and death, sufferings and lamentations, pain, mental stress and upsets. That is how this great cluster of nothing but misery is produced.

In the above quotation, one needs to imagine the Buddha holding a rice seed in one hand and a rice shoot in the other. Note, in passing, that the Buddha does not say, "This seed makes a shoot" but more accurately points out that *once there is this* (the seed) *then there will be this* (the shoot).

The Twelve Links of Liberation

By understanding the billiard-ball effect of one thing triggering another in the twelve links described above, one has the key to sabotaging the whole process of suffering. The removal of any one link means that none of the following links can happen. This means:

- Removing link 11 prevents link 12
- Removing link 10 prevents link 11 & 12 etc. up to
- Removing link 1 removes links 2 - 12

¹⁵ Creations: Skt: *samskara* Tib: *'du byed* . This term is often translated as "mental formations". As neither the Sanskrit nor the Tibetan contains a reference to "mind" and since mentioning mind creates certain problems, I have omitted it. The twelve links of interdependence can also be explained severally. Sometimes this refers to the immediate coming into being of the notion of self, then other etc. At other times it refers to the whole backlog of conditioning that one has at any given moment: one's own creations from the past that one has to live with. For these and other reasons, "creations" seems a best-possible though still inadequate translation. Another possibility would be "conformation" but the word is little used and unwieldy.

In particular:

Action	Prevents this link
Wise action (link 10, becoming) in this life will avoid the ten non-virtues and therefore links 11 and 12—unfortunate rebirth and suffering, due to non-virtuous actions—cannot occur. Until someone has completely transcended all samsaric action, there will still be rebirth, link 11, but in fortunate circumstances due to virtuous karma.	11 & 12
Self-control in the sense of not giving way to thoughts and impulses (link 9) will prevent non-virtuous karma	10
Mindfulness and meditation help one be aware of how craving (link 8) for certain experiences of the mind or of the senses leads into intense mental activity (link 9) around the things craved for or detested. One learns not to let the mind wander into and dwell within those danger zones.	9
“ Snipping it in the bud ” meditation practices create the skill of immediately recognising when feelings (link 7) give rise to craving and of cutting off the processes described above instantly.	8
Bardo instruction ¹⁶ helps someone use consciousness skillfully to find a better rebirth. These are special vajrayana instructions, not part of the general twelve-links teachings. They help the transitions from links 2 to 3 and from links 10 to 11 to happen in a more helpful way.	3 or 11
Purification practices help one to modify the content of the conditioning carried in the universal basis consciousness (link 3) and this will change the type of existence one will be reborn into.	4
Voidness wisdom ¹⁷ tackles the very root of samsara—ignorance (link 1). It is the best—the most radical—way to tackle suffering. In the Hinayana, this means understanding the voidness of ego. In the Mahayana, it means understanding the voidness of everything. One cannot overestimate the importance of centreing efforts on achieving direct realisation of voidness, as this solves all the problem of samsara in one fell swoop. When samsara, in all its complexity, is compared to a mighty, long-standing tree, then this is the equivalent of severing its trunk.	2

The *Treatise on Interdependence* says:

¹⁶ Training for dying and for facing the post-death experiences

¹⁷ “Voidness wisdom” is a pleonasm but it communicates the point. Voidness means wisdom by its very definition.

Also, to exemplify this: ignorance is like the one who sows a seed, karma is like the field, consciousness like the seed itself, grasping is like moisture, name and form like a shoot and the remaining links are like the branches and leaves (of the plant).

Were ignorance not to occur, creation and so forth could not occur ... (etc. up to) ... and were birth not to happen then ageing and death could not occur.

No one's "fault"

The Buddha, in his great compassion, simply pointed out that this is the way things happen. In the Rice Shoot Sutra, he put his finger on it, "Once there is *this*, then there will be *this*." Suffering and happiness are not the punishments and gifts of God, or of the gods. In many ways, the sufferings are not even the creation of the person one was in the previous life: who would intentionally create future sufferings for themselves? Simply, one thing inevitably leads to another, in a world confused by ignorance. Fortunately, just now, we have the intelligence that enables us to understand the process and to do something about it. In this context, Gampopa says:

In these processes, ignorance does not plot, thinking, *I will make creations truly manifest*, nor do the creations have a mind which thinks, *We were created and made to manifest by ignorance ...* etc. Likewise birth does not plot, thinking, *I will make ageing and death truly happen* nor do ageing and death consider themselves actually brought about by birth.

Nevertheless, it is through the existence of ignorance that creations and so forth do become manifest realities and will occur and, likewise, through the existence of birth that ageing and death are made manifest and will happen.

The twelve links are *outer interdependence*. *Inner interdependence* deals with the nature of the six elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness. It is not treated here. These six elements, corresponding respectively, to matter, gravity, energy, kinesis, space and consciousness, are a profound topic that opens up many interesting philosophical and scientific questions concerning the nature of the perceived universe.