

# BUDDHIST CONCEPTS OF REALITY AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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## Abstract

This article explores Buddhist conceptions of reality in dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind. Classical Buddhist philosophy, particularly in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, presents a non-substantialist and process-oriented understanding of reality grounded in dependent origination, impermanence, and non-self. Contemporary philosophy of mind, especially in debates concerning consciousness, mental representation, and the self, increasingly questions substance-based and reductionist models of mind. This study argues that Buddhist insights into consciousness and reality offer valuable conceptual resources for addressing persistent problems in philosophy of mind, including the nature of subjective experience, personal identity, and the mind–body relationship. By examining points of convergence and divergence, the article demonstrates that Buddhist philosophy contributes a distinctive ethical and phenomenological perspective to contemporary discussions of mind and reality.

**Keywords:** Buddhist philosophy, Consciousness, Non-self, Philosophy of mind, reality

## Introduction

The nature of reality and the mind has long been a central concern of philosophical inquiry across cultures. In Western philosophy, contemporary debates in philosophy of mind focus on enduring questions such as the relationship between mind and body, the ontological status of consciousness, and the problem of personal identity. Despite significant advances in neuroscience and cognitive science, many of these issues remain unresolved, particularly the so-called “hard problem of consciousness,” which concerns the explanation of subjective experience in purely physical terms (Chalmers, 1996). The persistence of this explanatory gap has led philosophers to question reductionist models of mind and to explore alternative metaphysical and phenomenological approaches (Dennett, 1991; Metzinger, 2003)

Buddhist philosophy offers an alternative and philosophically sophisticated framework for understanding reality and mind, one that challenges substance-based metaphysics and emphasizes process, interdependence, and experiential analysis. Rather than positing an enduring self or mental substance, Buddhist thought analyzes experience in terms of impermanent and conditioned phenomena arising through dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Central doctrines such as impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*), and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) articulate a non-essentialist ontology in which reality is understood as relational and dynamic rather than static and substantial (Gethin, 1998; Garfield, 1995). This perspective has attracted growing attention from contemporary philosophers seeking non-dualist and non-reductive approaches to consciousness and selfhood.

This article examines Buddhist concepts of reality in dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind, arguing that Buddhist philosophy does not merely anticipate certain modern insights but provides a coherent and ethically grounded framework for understanding consciousness. By foregrounding experiential analysis and ethical transformation, Buddhist philosophy integrates metaphysical inquiry with practical concern for suffering and liberation (Harvey, 2013) The analysis proceeds by outlining key Buddhist conceptions of reality, examining their implications for theories of consciousness and personal identity, and exploring points of convergence and tension with contemporary philosophy of mind. In doing so, the article aims to demonstrate that Buddhist philosophy contributes not only descriptive insights into the nature of mind but also normative perspectives relevant to ongoing philosophical debates.

## Reality in Buddhist Philosophy

In Buddhist philosophy, reality is understood as dynamic, contingent, and devoid of permanent essence. This view is most clearly articulated through the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which asserts that all phenomena arise in dependence upon specific conditions and cease when those conditions change. By emphasizing conditionality,

Buddhist thought rejects both eternalism, which posits unchanging substances or selves, and nihilism, which denies causal continuity and moral responsibility. Instead, reality is conceived as a structured network of causal relations in which phenomena are intelligible only through their interdependence (Gethin, 1998). This process-oriented ontology provides a middle way between metaphysical extremes and grounds Buddhist analyses of existence in causal explanation rather than metaphysical speculation.

Central to this framework is the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*), which denies the existence of a permanent, autonomous self underlying experience. Rather than presupposing a unified subject, Buddhist philosophy analyzes what is conventionally called a “person” as a temporary aggregation of physical and mental processes known as the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness). This analysis dissolves the notion of a substantial self without denying experiential continuity, thereby offering an account of personal identity based on causal and psychological continuity rather than ontological essence (Harvey, 2013). From this standpoint, reality is not composed of enduring substances but of processes unfolding moment by moment.

This process-based understanding of reality has significant philosophical implications. By interpreting existence as a flow of conditioned events, Buddhist philosophy anticipates contemporary process metaphysics and challenges static conceptions of being. Scholars have noted that this dynamic ontology allows Buddhist thought to explain change, continuity, and moral responsibility without appealing to metaphysical substances (Collins, 1998). Reality, in this sense, is not something that exists independently of conditions but is constituted through patterns of arising and ceasing, which can be known through experiential investigation rather than abstract theorization.

Mahāyāna Buddhism further radicalizes this insight through the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which holds that all phenomena lack intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). Emptiness does not imply non-existence or nihilism but signifies relational existence: phenomena exist only through their dependence on causes, conditions, and conceptual designation. Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka philosophy emphasizes that emptiness itself is empty, thereby preventing reification of any metaphysical principle (Garfield, 1995). This relational and anti-essentialist ontology offers a sophisticated account of reality as fundamentally non-substantial, aligning closely with contemporary philosophical critiques of essentialism and substance ontology.

## Consciousness and the Mind in Buddhist Thought

Buddhist philosophy treats consciousness not as an independent substance but as a conditioned process arising in dependence upon sense faculties and objects. Consciousness is momentary, relational, and functionally defined, lacking any enduring core. This analysis

avoids both dualism, which separates mind from matter, and reductive physicalism, which reduces consciousness to mere material processes.

In the Abhidhamma tradition, consciousness is analyzed into discrete moments, each conditioned by previous mental states and karmic dispositions. Yogācāra philosophy extends this analysis by emphasizing the constructive role of consciousness in shaping experience, proposing that what is perceived as external reality is inseparable from cognitive processes. However, even in Yogācāra, consciousness itself remains impermanent and conditioned, not an ultimate substance.

These perspectives challenge common assumptions in contemporary philosophy of mind, particularly the idea of a unified, enduring subject of experience. Instead, Buddhist thought presents consciousness as a flow of interdependent events, offering a process-oriented model that resonates with certain contemporary approaches such as functionalism, enactivism, and embodied cognition.

## Dialogue with Contemporary Philosophy of Mind

Contemporary philosophy of mind increasingly recognizes the limitations of both substance dualism and strict physicalism. While dualism struggles to explain the causal interaction between mind and body, reductive physicalism faces persistent difficulties in accounting for subjective experience, or qualia. These challenges are most clearly articulated in discussions of the “hard problem of consciousness,” which highlights the explanatory gap between objective physical processes and first-person phenomenology (Chalmers, 1996). As a result, many philosophers have sought alternative frameworks that move beyond traditional metaphysical assumptions about mental substances and material reduction.

Within this context, several contemporary thinkers have questioned the existence of a unified and enduring self. Daniel Dennett (1991) famously characterizes the self as a “center of narrative gravity,” while Thomas Metzinger (2003) argues that the self is a phenomenal construct generated by cognitive processes rather than an ontological entity. Similarly, enactivist and phenomenological approaches emphasize the embodied, relational, and processual nature of experience, challenging the idea of a fixed inner subject (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). These perspectives increasingly converge on a view of mind as dynamic and constructed rather than as a static substance.

Buddhist philosophy anticipates many of these insights while grounding them in systematic phenomenological analysis and ethical practice. The Buddhist denial of a permanent self (anattā) parallels contemporary theories that regard the self as a functional or narrative construct, yet Buddhist analysis extends further by offering a detailed account of the causal processes underlying experience. Through doctrines such as dependent origination and momentariness, Buddhist thought provides a fine-grained phenomenology of

consciousness that complements contemporary philosophical and cognitive models (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013). Moreover, the Buddhist emphasis on first-person experiential investigation—particularly through meditation—offers methodological resources for studying consciousness that go beyond third-person scientific observation.

At the same time, Buddhist philosophy differs from many contemporary approaches by integrating metaphysical inquiry with ethical and soteriological concerns. Understanding the nature of mind and reality is not pursued for theoretical clarity alone but for its transformative potential in reducing suffering. Insight into the constructed and impermanent nature of the self is ethically significant, as attachment to a reified self is seen as a primary source of suffering. This ethical orientation distinguishes Buddhist philosophy of mind from many contemporary discussions that remain largely descriptive or explanatory, suggesting that theories of mind carry implicit normative implications for how individuals relate to themselves and others (Keown, 2005; Garfield, 2015).

## Ethical Implications and the Transformation of Mind

In Buddhist thought, insight into the nature of reality and mind has direct and unavoidable ethical implications. Misunderstanding reality—especially through attachment to a permanent and autonomous self—constitutes a fundamental source of suffering (*dukkha*). According to Buddhist analysis, reification of the self generates craving, aversion, and ignorance, which in turn condition unethical behavior and psychological distress. Conversely, understanding impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*), and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) transforms one's ethical orientation by weakening attachment and fostering clarity, compassion, and equanimity (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013). In this framework, philosophy of mind is inseparable from a disciplined practice of mental cultivation aimed at transforming perception and conduct.

This ethical dimension provides a significant contribution to contemporary philosophy of mind, which often focuses on descriptive or explanatory accounts of consciousness while neglecting the normative implications of its metaphysical assumptions. Theories that implicitly posit an enduring self or reduce mental life to impersonal mechanisms may shape how individuals understand responsibility, agency, and moral accountability. Buddhist philosophy, by contrast, suggests that conceptions of mind are ethically consequential: how one understands consciousness directly influences how one relates to oneself and others (Keown, 2005). From this perspective, metaphysical views of mind are never ethically neutral, as they inform patterns of desire, attachment, and moral evaluation.

Furthermore, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that ethical transformation requires more than intellectual assent to philosophical doctrines. Insight into the nature of mind must be cultivated through systematic practices such as mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samādhi*), and

wisdom (paññā). These practices refine attention, reshape habitual cognitive patterns, and gradually transform ethical dispositions. Contemporary research in contemplative studies has begun to document how such practices influence emotional regulation, empathy, and well-being, lending empirical support to Buddhist claims about the transformative power of mental cultivation (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Garfield, 2015). This integration of theory and practice distinguishes Buddhist philosophy of mind from approaches that remain primarily speculative.

By integrating metaphysical insight with ethical cultivation, Buddhist philosophy presents a holistic approach to mind and reality that has important implications for contemporary philosophy of mind. It invites philosophers to reconsider not only what consciousness is but also how understanding consciousness might contribute to human flourishing. Rather than treating ethics as a secondary or applied concern, Buddhist philosophy places ethical transformation at the center of inquiry into mind and reality. This perspective suggests that a complete philosophy of mind should account not only for the structure of experience but also for its capacity to transform suffering into wisdom and compassion.

## Conclusion

This study has argued that Buddhist concepts of reality provide a rich and philosophically rigorous framework for engaging with contemporary philosophy of mind. By rejecting substance-based metaphysics and emphasizing process, interdependence, and experiential analysis, Buddhist philosophy offers alternative approaches to understanding consciousness, selfhood, and reality. Core doctrines such as dependent origination, non-self, and emptiness articulate a non-essentialist ontology that resonates with current philosophical critiques of the unified self and reductive materialism (Gethin, 1998; Garfield, 2015). At the same time, Buddhist philosophy distinguishes itself by integrating metaphysical analysis with ethical cultivation, thereby framing the study of mind as a transformative inquiry oriented toward the alleviation of suffering rather than mere theoretical explanation.

This dialogue demonstrates that Buddhist philosophy is not merely of historical or religious significance but constitutes a valuable interlocutor in contemporary philosophical debates about mind and consciousness. By bringing Buddhist concepts of reality into sustained conversation with philosophy of mind, this study highlights the potential of cross-cultural philosophy to illuminate enduring problems such as subjective experience, personal identity, and the normative implications of theories of mind. Such engagement suggests that a comprehensive philosophy of mind should attend not only to explanatory adequacy but also to ethical consequences and human flourishing (Harvey, 2013; Keown, 2005). In this sense, Buddhist philosophy contributes both conceptual clarity and ethical depth to contemporary reflections on consciousness and its role in human life.

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