

Richard H. Robinson Some Buddhist and Hindu concepts
of intellect-will

In the sixth century B.C., a chaotic variety of psychological terms and an array of divergent and unstable conceptual models of the human psyche prevailed in Indian thought. By the fourth century A.D., there existed a sizable vocabulary of terms common to all the Hindu and Buddhist philosophical schools, and each of these schools had a minutely worked-out chart of the structure of the mental realm. During the millennium that separates the early Upaniṣads from the final formulation of the classical *darśanas* (Sāṅkhya-Yoga, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta for the Hindus, and the four major Buddhist schools), organization replaced experimentation, and unsupported speculation gave way to reasoned proof.

One of the major factors in this process was the interaction between Buddhist and Hindu thought. The Buddhists were somewhat earlier in developing a truly technical psychology. Insofar as we can reconstruct primitive Buddhism, it appears to have contained a fairly well articulated theory of the structure of the mind-body. The situation is a bit confused because there are competing explanations for the same phenomena, as when the whole personality is described both as consisting of eighteen *dhātus* (constituents) and as consisting of the five *skandhas* (factors). By around the second century B.C., the Abhidharma schools were busy reconciling and unifying the traditional formulas, compiling long lists of mental states and factors, and placing them under the headings furnished by the early Buddhist lists. One result of this systematizing is that many of the old terms were given new meanings, and in some cases the original sense of the term has evidently been lost. The terms were members of set lists, and so survived even after their meanings had changed.

Another process at work throughout this period is the replacement of terms by synonyms in fixed formulas; the structure of the formula remains unchanged while some of its constituent terms are changed. This process affords some clues for reconstructing the earlier meanings of the formula as a whole. In general, the meaning of a technical term in Indian thought is determined by the place that it occupies in a schematic formula and by the attributes and predicates with which it occurs in collocations. This is the principle to be employed later in charting the development of *buddhi*, a remarkably multivalent term which illustrates Hindu influence on later Indian Buddhism.

The characteristic Indian map of the individual starts from the material elements, proceeds to the senses, then to the mental factors that relate immediately to the senses, and so on to the mental factors remotest from the senses and material objects. Each rank is more subtle and closer to being

ultimately real than the preceding one. The last element in the series is usually the real Self, though Buddhism denies that there is such a thing, and Sāṃkhya separates primordial matter or nature from the ultimate Selves. This formula follows the procedure of the *yogin* who first withdraws from material objects, then from the lower forms of mental activity, and finally from the higher forms of thought. A quite early instance of this pattern is in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (*KU*) 1.3.10–11. “Beyond the sense-powers (*indriya*) are the subtle objects (*artha*), and beyond the subtle objects (*artha*) is the *manas* (thought-organ), and beyond the *manas* is the *buddhi* (intellect, consciousness), beyond the *buddhi* is the *mahān ātmā* (great soul), beyond the *mahān ātmā* is the *avyakta* (unmanifest), and beyond the unmanifest is the *ṣuruṣa* (spirit). Beyond the spirit there is nothing.”

The objective is to realize the highest *ātman* (self, soul). According to the *KU* 1.3.12, the instrument for realization is the *buddhi*.

“The self, though hidden in all beings, does not shine forth, but is seen by the seers of the subtle through their pointed and subtle *buddhi*.”

A few verses earlier, the *KU* 1.3.3–4 lists the components of personality in descending order, in the parable of the chariot. “Know the *ātman* (self) as the master of the chariot, and the body as the chariot. Know the *buddhi* to be the driver, and the *manas* (thought-organ) the reins. The sense-powers (*indriyas*) they call the horses; the sense-objects are the roads.”

In verse 8, *buddhi* is replaced by *viññāna* (knowledge, consciousness): “He who has *viññāna* for driver and *manas* for the reins. . . .”

Viññāna is the regular Buddhist term for the fifth *skandha*, the last of the five constituents of the individual. It is usually translated as “consciousness.” It is sometimes replaced by *citta* (thought, mind), a term which in the Yoga School is synonymous with *buddhi*. In the Pāli Canon, the term has several meanings, one of which is “continuing psychic element, that which passes over from one life to another.”¹ This sense occurs occasionally in the earlier Upaniṣads too. The regular meaning in the Abhidharma and later Buddhism is “awareness of an object.”²

E. H. Johnston³ pointed out that the content of the formula of the five *skandhas* corresponds closely to the early Sāṃkhya analysis of the corporeal individual, omitting the *avyakta* (unmanifest). The early Sāṃkhya schema is represented by the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* passages just quoted. The *skandhas* are:

1. *rūpa*—form, the material elements
2. *vedanā*—feeling, classified in later Buddhism as pleasant, painful and

¹ Mrs. Rhys-Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology and Its Development in Buddhism* (London: Luzac and Co., 1936), pp. 245–246.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 73–77.

³ E. H. Johnston, *Early Sāṃkhya* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1937), p. 21.

neutral. In early Buddhism this probably referred to the function of the sense.

3. *saṃjñā*—conception, perception, the naming faculty.
4. *saṃskāra*—in later doctrine, the impulses, emotions and mental states at large. In earlier Buddhism, it probably meant something quite different. In the Pali Canon, it means a process, a shaping activity of the mind, and so forth.⁴
5. *viññāna*—consciousness

We have already established *buddhi* and *viññāna* as synonyms, therefore, we can begin by listing the *skandhas* and the classical Sāṃkhya *tattvas* which correspond in descending order.

<i>viññāna</i>	<i>buddhi</i>
<i>saṃskāras</i>	<i>ahamkāra</i> (the I-sayer, a mysterious term)
<i>saṃjñā</i>	<i>manas</i> (thought-organ)
<i>vedanā</i>	the <i>buddhīndriyas</i> (perceiving sense-powers)
<i>rūpa</i>	the <i>mahābhūtas</i> (great elements) and <i>tanmātras</i> (subtle elements), plus the <i>karmendriyas</i> (organs of action)

The correspondence is manifestly close except in the case of *saṃskāras* and *ahamkāra*, which are equally enigmatic in their respective lists and so correspond in being unclear. The point of this comparison is that from the very beginning the Buddhist map of man's body-mind has been of the same kind as the early Hindu—the Sāṃkhya-Yoga and the Vedāntic ones. (There are certain skewnesses that should be noted, though. *Viññāna* in early Buddhism was the transmigrating principle. In classical Sāṃkhya, the transmigrant was the subtle body, consisting of the *buddhi*, *ahamkāra*, and *manas* plus other subtle elements.)

Buddhi as a technical term does not occur in early Buddhist literature. The word exists in Pali but means knowledge or wisdom, in a general way. This is to be expected, since the technical function is assumed by the synonym, *viññāna*. Etymologically, *buddhi* derives from $\sqrt{\text{budh}}$, to be conscious (of) plus *ti*, a suffix indicating 'act, state or fact of'. Grammatically, it is an action noun,⁵ though by usage it has come to mean the faculty that performs the action. Its earliest meaning is evidently 'awareness, consciousness'.⁶

The Sāṃkhya system reached its classical formulation in the *Sāṃkhya-kārikās* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, somewhere between 200 and 400 A.D. Here *buddhi* is the first evolute to emerge from *prakṛti* (primordial nature). The term no longer means simply consciousness, but it has acquired the characteristic of judgment. Edgerton says: "'matter' develops first the faculty of conscious-

⁴ Rhys-Davids, *op. cit.*, pp. 322–326.

⁵ W. D. Whitney, *A Sanskrit Grammar* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1913), 1157.

⁶ E. H. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 55, n. 2.

ness or will (the term, *buddhi*, approximately covers both of these English terms).⁷ Indeed, *buddhi* is often translated as 'will'. This is strange, though, because there is really no word for 'will' in early Indian philosophy, and apart from *buddhi* there does not seem to be one in the classical systems. Mrs Rhys-Davids spends a great part of her *Birth of Indian Psychology* examining words that mean something close to volition, regretfully concluding that they all signify either desire or cognition, but not 'will'. She laments what seems to her a shortcoming in Indian thought about the nature of man. I disagree with her and maintain that given the typical Indian map of the personality, there is no need to posit the will as an entity. I propose to investigate the meaning of *buddhi* in three texts where it occurs frequently, and from the results to project some tentative conclusions about the relationship between thought and volition in Indian psychology.

The first to be examined is the *Bhagavadgītā*, the earlier part of which (chapters 1 to 12) dates from about 200 B.C. It is a Vedānta text, expounding the doctrine of *brahman* as the sole, underlying ground of the phenomenal world. It is a little later than the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, which it quotes, and it is more strongly imbued with early Sāṅkhya ideas. In the *Gītā*:

- (1) *Buddhi* is above *manas*, which is above the *indriyas*; it is below the *puruṣa* or *ātman* (3.42).
- (2) It comes above *ahamkāra* and below the *avyakta* (unmanifest) (13.5).
- (3) It comes above *manas* and below *ahamkāra* (vii.4). (The discrepancy between (2) and (3) is explained by the fact that chap. 13 is much later, and represents the classical Sāṅkhya doctrine whereas chap. 7 represents an earlier variant.)
- (4) *Buddhi* is subject to confusion (3.2), error, and distortion (18.31,32). It can also know things as they truly are (18.30). *Kāma* (desire, lust) and anger (*krodha*) obscure knowledge-wisdom (*jñāna*) (3.37–39). These are seated in the *indriyas*, the *manas*, and the *buddhi* (3.40).
- (5) It is *buddhi* that goes out from the jungle of delusion, and which in yogic practice becomes immovable in trance (*samādhi*) (2.52–53). This is termed *buddhi-yoga*, "the method of training buddhi" (10.10). Through *buddhi-yoga* the devotee goes to Lord Kṛṣṇa (10.10, 18.57). *Karma-yoga*, the *yoga* of action is inferior to *buddhi-yoga* (2.49), which casts off the bonds of action *karman*. One should take refuge in the *buddhi* (2.49). But *yoga* can also be performed with the body, the *manas* and the *indriyas* (5.11). The *yogin* gradually makes his *buddhi* firm, controls his *manas*, and withdraws from the *indriyas* (6.25, 26, 24). Having forsaken sense-objects, he purifies his *buddhi* (18.51). He should

⁷ Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), Part II, p. 39.

fix his *manas* and his *buddhi* on Lord Kṛṣṇa alone, and will dwell in Lord Kṛṣṇa alone (12.8).

- (6) *Buddhi* is either resolute (*vyavasāyātmikā*) or irresolute (*avyavasāyātmikā*). The irresolute *buddhi* is many branched and without an end. Resolute *buddhi* is single (2.41). When the mind-state (*cetas*) is set at peace (*prasanna*) and *buddhi* quickly becomes stable, hence happy (2.65). For one who is not trained in *yoga* there is neither (stable) *buddhi* nor mind-development (*bhāvanā*) (2.66).
- (7) *Buddhi* perceives (*buddhigrāhya*) the ultimate bliss which is beyond the senses (*atīndriya*).
- (8) *Buddhi* is something that some people have, while others do not (7.10, 4.18).
- (9) *Buddhi* is something that becomes divided when the ignorant are exposed to differing opinions (3.26). (8) means ‘wisdom, good judgment, intelligence’, while (9) means simply ‘mind, opinion’—the two senses must be distinguished.
- (10) *Buddhi* is a cognitive entity, hence a mode of thought, hence the systematic exposition of a mode of thought. It might be translated as ‘lore’ in this context (2.39).

From these contextual usages an overall definition of *buddhi* emerges. It is cognitive, is the seat of truth and error, and knows supersensible entities. In contrast to *manas*, it is remote from the senses, which reach it through *manas*. It is not the ultimate Self or the soul but merely a psychic entity. It is purposive, capable of being either steadily goal-directed or wavering and dispersed. It can be detached from the senses and directed toward the *ātman* (soul, spirit). It can be trained to enter yogic trances. Just as it is the highest seat of delusion, it is the faculty that gets beyond delusion.

Clearly, “consciousness” is not an adequate translation for *buddhi* as it is used in the *Gītā*. “Intelligence” is not right, because it suggests innate mental capability rather than simply a faculty or a function. “Intellect” is much better, particularly when understood in its medieval and etymological sense as the choosing, deciding, and goal-seeking function. But *buddhi* is also affective and purposive, so that intellect is still too narrow a term. It is not quite clear in the *Gītā* just how emotive states are related to *buddhi*, but desire and anger are said to “cover” or “veil” it. It is also said that they “cover” the *manas* and the *indriyas*, which may mean that the emotions affect the entire psyche and not just one level of it.

The basic problem is that the traditional Western concept of the mind is divided into vertical columns, with reason, will, emotion all on the same level and all placed above sensation, sense-perception, etc., whereas the Indian diagram is divided horizontally into ranks not into columns. Thus we

might translate *manas* as “surface mind” or “lower mind,” *buddhi* as “deep mind” or “higher mind,” and *ātman* as “soul, spirit.” Reason, will, emotion, cognition, judgment, decision—all are comprised in the meaning of *buddhi*, and none is singled out to the exclusion of the others. It is not that this psychology ignores these phenomena—it simply does not accord them each an exclusive area on its map of the psyche.

The next text to examine is the *Sāṃkhyakārikās*. The definition of *buddhi* is: “*Buddhi* is *adhyavasāya* (ascertainment, determination). Its sublime forms are virtue, knowledge, dispassion and mastery; its forms in delusion are the opposite” (*S.K.23*).

The defining property of *buddhi* is *adhyavasāya*, a cognate of *vyavasāya* (resolution) which is said in the *Gītā* to characterize some *buddhi* but not all. The commentaries do not agree as to the exact meaning of *adhyavasāya*. The *Sāṃkhyatattvakaumudī* says that it consists in the proposition “this should be done,” that is, *buddhi* has a normative function and is the arbiter of duty and decision. It also says that *buddhi* distinguishes things according to their similarities and dissimilarities, which would make it an intellectual function. The Gauḍapāda Commentary says that the characteristic function of *buddhi* is to make the propositions, for example, this is a pot, this is a piece of cloth, etc. This amounts to saying that it is an intellectual function and agrees with the second role attributed to *buddhi* by the *STK*—it is by similarities and differences that one identifies the class (*jāti*) to which entities belong. The *STK* uses the term *vinīścaya* (ascertainment, determination) for the first function, and *vyavacchedaka* (discriminating, distinguishing) for the second.

The word *buddhi* is comparatively rare in early Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, for example, the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. In contrast, it occurs about eighty times in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, a text composed around the fourth century A.D. This *sūtra* is written for the most part in classical Sanskrit rather than Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. It exhibits many stylistic features of brāhmaṇical literary Sanskrit, and its vocabulary abounds in technical terms taken from Sāṃkhya-Yoga, for example, *abhiniveśa* (addiction), *vikalpa* (thought-construction), *yoga*, *yogin*, and so forth. *Buddhi* is evidently another of these borrowings from brāhmaṇical usage. At first glance, though, it seems to vary more widely in meaning that it does in the *Gītā* or in Sāṃkhya texts. It does not appear to designate any one component in the psyche chart. Here we may examine the contextual meanings, to see whether some clear meaning underlies the varied usages.

- (1) *Buddhi* is the knowing subject, over against the object known (*buddhi-bodhavya*).

This equals *jñāna*—*jñeya*, the knowing and the known. Here *buddhi*

- is synonymous with the *vijñāna* (consciousness) that knows objects (no. 1).
- (2) A realization, cognition or mind-state in general. In this sense *buddhi* equals *citta* (thought, mind), and is somewhat wider in meaning than *vijñāna*, whose senses it includes (no. 2).
 - (3) A recognizing or identifying process, which is often mistaken, which misidentifies. In this role, *buddhi* is responsible for the illusory element (*parikalpita*) in experience. Thus here, as in the *Gītā*, *buddhi* is the seat of right and wrong cognition (no. 9). This kind of *buddhi* goes into abeyance during enlightenment (no. 12).
 - (4) The function that makes thought constructions, that fabricates fantasies and invents objectivities, *vikalpa-buddhi*, *buddhi-vaikalpa*. This is synonymous with *vikalpaka-jñāna*, constructional knowledge, something similar to synthetic knowledge. This function is assigned to *manas* in classical Sāṅkhya (no. 6).
 - (5) Reason, a process of reaching a conclusion. The expression “*anumāna-buddhi*” occurs (60.15), and may be translated as “inferential reasoning.” In some contexts, “judgment” is a suitable translation for *buddhi* in this usage (no. 7). *Buddhi* sometimes means “right knowing” over against “delusion” (*mohana*) (no. 10,167.10). In one instance (207.10, no. 11), it means a conclusion, an ascertainment (*niścaya*, as in Sāṅkhya).
 - (6) In the compound *vidagdha-buddhi*, “clever intelligence, clever wits,” the term has a general, nontechnical sense (no. 4).
 - (7) The most frequent usage of *buddhi* in the *Laṅkāvatāra* is as the instrument for realizing truth, particularly higher truth. Here it is a synonym for *prajñā* “intuition, insight, wisdom.” Its function is *viveka*, “discrimination,” the operation of separating the true from the false. It is called *svabuddhi* “own or intrinsic *buddhi*” a couple of times (no. 3).

It is apparent from this catalog of contextual meanings that *buddhi* is of two kinds, that which truly sees and that which does not. The *Laṅkāvatāra* states this distinction, saying: “There are two kinds of *buddhi*,—*buddhi* which discerns, and *buddhi* which sets up addiction to the apprehension of thought-construction characteristics. *Buddhi* which discerns is that by which the character of the own-being of things is discerned from which the four *lemmas* (being, non-being, both being and non-being, neither being nor non-being) are absent and are not perceived” (122.1–3ff.).

“The *buddhi* which sets up addiction to the apprehension of thought-construction characteristics is that through addiction to apprehension of thought-construction marks by the mind-stuff (*citta*) the characteristics of the great elements, and inferential reasoning arise” (122.15).

This is not quite the same as the resolute and irresolute *buddhi* of the *Gītā*, though it is in fact the distinction between the pure, right-knowing *buddhi* and the deluded *buddhi* which the *Gītā* expresses. Similarly, the Sāṃkhya system distinguishes *buddhi* which sees the truth from *buddhi* under the spell of delusion.

It is noteworthy that the element of judgment is extremely weak in the usage of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, and that in no way could *buddhi* be rendered as “will.” Right and wrong here are conceived of as truth and error rather than as choices motivated by volition. Insofar as actions do not result from right knowledge they represent the ripening of *vāsanās* (habit-impressions from the past) or *bījas* (seeds of previous deeds). Furthermore, consciousness is conceived as dynamic in itself, so that there is no need to have a special faculty to motivate it. When the seeds ripen, consciousness (*vijñāna*) evolves, and objective entities illusorily appear.

On the whole, *buddhi* in the *Laṅkāvatāra* either replaces *vijñāna* or stands for some cognitive function of *vijñāna*. This is quite natural, since in early literature the two are already synonyms. We may ask why the word *buddhi* rather than *vijñāna* came to be used at this time. One possible answer is that *vijñāna* had become rather static in the Abhidharma systems and no longer had the dynamic quality that it had once possessed. Another reason may be that *vijñāna* is used so often in a strictly technical sense, as a member of the set of eight *vijñānas*, that it was convenient to use *buddhi* when one did not wish to specify which of the eight *vijñānas* was intended. A general term for the cognizing, recognizing faculty was needed, one that transcended the distinctions which *vijñāna* immediately calls to mind. Last, and perhaps most important, the Yogācāra School to which the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* belongs had close relations with the Hindu Sāṃkhya and Yoga schools, from whom they borrowed heavily, and with whom they engaged in the sort of acrid polemics that are only possible within the bounds of close intellectual kinship.

English distinguishes knowledge from wisdom, ignorance from folly, and what we know we should do from what we will to do. An unspoken assumption running throughout classical Indian thought is that if you really know something is right, you will have no impediments to doing it. Similarly, if you do not want to do something, you will be impeded from realizing fully that you should do it. Thus knowledge and decision are part of one and the same process, namely *vinīścaya*, decision or ascertainment. True knowledge carries with it conviction, and to the extent that we are not convinced we do not really know. The remedy for unknowing is study and practice—study to remove intellectual obstacles (*jñeya-āvaraṇa*), and practice to remove emotional obstacles (*kleśa-āvaraṇa*). Both of these require progressive consolidation of the deeper mind, the *buddhi*, which must be progressively purified of its “coverings” of passion and ignorance. This is essentially a process of education and

training. In the Buddhist and Hindu psychologies, morality, education, and psychotherapy are not assigned to separate components of the psyche—morality to the will, education to the intellect, and psychotherapy to the emotions—which appears to be the current Western division of labor. In social terms, morality would be assigned to religious institutions, education to the schools, and psychotherapy to a branch of the medical profession. The will has proved to be particularly intractable to improve when it is dealt with as a separate entity, and our theologies have consequently reflected ethical pessimism. We can, of course, criticize classical India for not keeping the functions of the priest, the teacher, and the healer more strictly apart. But it may well be that we will arrive in due course at a unitary approach to the deeper mind, that we will welcome the lack of distinction between the volitional, the intellectual, and the emotional which is expressed by the word *buddhi*.