While medicine may cure your body, it can’t in itself make you happy. Only with thorough understanding of the mind and its functions can disturbing thoughts and emotions be transcended. Buddhist Psychology teaches just this. You’ll find crucial ways to look at and understand anger and aversion and to develop your equanimity, patience, and love.

Author Geshe Tashi Tsering has rendered Tibetan Buddhism’s traditional exposition of the mind, its states, and the process of perception and cognition in the clearest of terms. Much more than philosophy, Buddhist Psychology is, in Geshe Tashi’s words, “a manual for living, relevant to everyday life.”

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Geshe Tashi Tsering was born in Tibet in 1958 and received his Geshe Lharam degree (analogous to a doctorate in divinity) from Sera Mey Monastery in India. For over a decade, he has been the guiding teacher of the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London and has been leading courses at other Buddhist centers worldwide.
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THE FOUNDATION of BUDDHIST THOUGHT

VOLUME 3

GESHE TASHI TSERING

FOREWORD BY LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE
EDITED BY GORDON MCDougall

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The Buddha’s message is universal. We all search for happiness but somehow fail to find it because we are looking for it in the wrong way. Only when we start cherishing others will true happiness grow within us. And so the Buddha’s essential teaching is one of compassion and ethics, combined with the wisdom that understands the nature of reality. The teachings of the Buddha contain everything needed to eliminate suffering and make life truly meaningful, and as such the teachings are not only relevant to today’s world, but vital.

This is the message my precious teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, gave to his Western students. His vision to present the Dharma in a way that is accessible and relevant to everyone continues and grows. His organization, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), now has centers all over the world, and Lama’s work is carried on by many of his students.

The Foundation of Buddhist Thought, developed by Geshe Tashi Tsering, is one of the core courses of the FPMT’s integrated education program. The essence of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy can be found within its six subjects. The Foundation of Buddhist Thought serves as a wonderful basis for further study in Buddhism, as well as a tool to transform our everyday lives.

Geshe Tashi has been the resident teacher at Jamyang Buddhist Centre, London, since 1994. He has been very beneficial in guiding
the students there and in many other centers where he teaches. Besides his profound knowledge—he is a Lharampa Geshe, the highest educational qualification within our tradition—his excellent English and his deep understanding of his Western students means that he can present the Dharma in a way that is both accessible and relevant. His wisdom, compassion, and humor are combined with a genuine gift as a teacher. You will see within the six books of the Foundation of Buddhist Thought series the same combination of profound understanding and heart advice that can guide beginner and experienced Dharma practitioner alike on the spiritual path.

Whether you read this book out of curiosity or as part of your spiritual journey, I sincerely hope that you find it beneficial and that it shows you a way to open your heart and develop your wisdom.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Spiritual Director
The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition
Not long ago, I received the news that my kind mother had contracted terminal cancer, and this news triggered some very difficult emotions. Even with all the Buddhist teachings and practices I had at my disposal to ease the pain and confusion, it seemed initially that nothing would help. I have been a monk most of my life, and I have practiced mind training and studied Buddhist psychology since I was a teenager, yet due to this deep connection with my mother, I was unable to see beyond my basic reactive emotions. The experience really drove home to me how powerful our states of mind are and how important it is to develop a resilient and healthy mental life.

It is perhaps a truism to note that in modern society, while we are becoming more prosperous and have more technology at our fingertips, these external means to happiness are useless if our minds are in distress. Physical well-being and the well-being of society rely deeply on psychological well-being. For thirty years I have been taught this, and I have come to believe it. But personal trauma really brought home for me how our happiness in this lifetime is utterly dependent on a healthy mind. And of course, the Buddhist tradition goes beyond this one brief lifetime and addresses the countless lifetimes of our mindstreams, aiming for happiness in all future lives until we are able to attain the complete cessation of suffering and our final goal, enlightenment.
Once I adjusted to the tragic news about my mother’s condition, I was able to implement the training and practices I had been taught, and I slowly found more balance and calm. Thus the second valuable lesson from this time was not only how powerful our emotional life is but also how effective mind training can be. Without a doubt, applying the Buddha’s teachings can bring about a calm and stable mind and see us through potentially damaging emotions. Despite the situation, the episode provided me a practical opportunity to test the efficacy of the theories that I have been passing on to others all my adult life. Within a monastic environment such as the one in which I was trained, it is easy to study and learn and accept without fully testing the teachings. For me, teaching in the West and encountering Western students extremely interested in therapeutic psychology has also stretched my understanding, but this particular experience revealed clearly the crucial importance of mental well-being.

This book is my attempt to make the very traditional exposition of the mind and its mental states more accessible and hopefully more useful to you. I have taken what follows from the three main sources of Buddhist mindscience that are studied in the monasteries in South India. They are: the Abhidharma texts that deal with Buddhist psychology; the Pramana texts on epistemology that address the development of understanding; and the Vajrayana, or tantric, texts that explore the esoteric understandings of the mind.

Buddhist masters, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, have said that without exploration of these three categories of the Buddhist literature, it is impossible to fully comprehend the Buddhist concept of mind. My main focus will be the first two of these areas of study, the Abhidharma and Pramana teachings. The Vajrayana teachings are very advanced and are largely beyond the scope of this book. Volume 6 in this series addresses the Vajrayana in greater depth. Similarly, although I will be looking at all the positive states of mind we can
develop, and in particular the advantages of altruism, I will not deal in depth with the so-called method aspect of the mind, which is the subject of the fourth book in this series.

The traditional Buddhist understanding of the mind is incredibly profound. In many ways the Western mindsciences are only starting to move toward what has been standard monastery textbook material for centuries. In fact, the rigorous presentation that has been passed down to us from the great masters is such that you might find this book a little academic. Believe me when I say, however, that this is a manual for living and is meant to be used as such. If you challenge what you read at every opportunity, analyzing and investigating from the point of view of your own experience, you will find much that is relevant and practical. The Buddhist teachings are intended to bring about a state of happiness and an end to suffering. The information contained in this book must be relevant to your everyday life, or it is of no use at all.

We all have some concept of the emotional and psychological aspects of our minds. With this book I hope to help you investigate more deeply what your mind is and how and why it functions as it does. I hope that you will come to see the primacy of the mind and how to take your first steps on the long road to mental peace and well-being. And by that I mean more than attaining a state of mere mental balance, but the full development of qualities such as patience, tolerance, lack of attachment, and so forth. Furthermore, seeing the ever-deeper levels of subtlety of the mind, I hope to demonstrate how immense and powerful the mind is. The goal of Buddhism is the elimination of all suffering, and for this the deepest levels of mind must be addressed and understood. By seeing the complete picture, we will then be able to devise a strategy to liberate ourselves from our problems. If we understand the mind, we can change it.

I sometimes feel that the only people interested in changing our minds are the advertising agencies, and it is clear to me that their
motivation is less than positive. Yet why is it that they alone seem to know the power of the mind and its points of vulnerability? I recently saw an ad for an insurance company on British television that opened with the image of a girl's face. The face began to age, from a teenager through adulthood to the face of a woman in her sixties. As I watched this, two things came to mind. The first was how cunning the advertisers are, playing on our fears and vulnerabilities—we identify with the woman physically aging on the screen, and it’s impossible not to feel that old age is waiting for us as well, and so it logically follows that we must spend money insuring our interests for those years. Second, the face in the commercial stops aging at around sixty. Had they continued to age the face much more, I think it would have defeated their purpose. The insurance company does not want us to have the full realization of the devastation that we will succumb to through time. Their aim is to scare us just enough to spend money but not so much that we give up hope!

In one way, however, I found this advertisement very beneficial, for it graphically reminds us that we all move inexorably toward old age. And just as the face slowly transforms from that of a teenager to that of a retired person, we can understand that the mind is ever-changing as well. Our mind of today will produce all of our future minds, and the way they manifest depends on how we direct our thoughts now. We have the power to influence our future.

To understand the mind and this potential, we need to learn from people who themselves have deep understanding. The masters who gave commentary on the subjects in this book were highly realized and gained their insights through studying the teachings of the Buddha. Even if you don’t consider yourself a Buddhist or have any interest in liberation or enlightenment, such a study of the mind as we see in this book may profoundly affect your thoughts and actions, and the way you live your life from this point forward.
Editor’s Preface

The scientific perspective permeates our thinking and defines our lives. I grew up deeply suspicious of the worship of technological progress and the “truths” expounded by scientists. When I first began delving into Buddhism, however, I realized that I nonetheless viewed everything through the lens of scientific reasoning.

The scientific emphasis on evidence and logic is part of the attraction that Tibetan Buddhism has for many Westerners. The Buddha said we should test his teachings as a goldsmith tests gold, and many of us would accept no less. One of the strengths of the Western system of education is that we are taught from a very young age to ask, “Why?” And yet, even though the logic of Buddhism attracts us, alone it would not hold us. As Geshe Tashi emphasizes in this book, Buddhism approaches reality through reason hand in hand with compassion, and the two cannot be separated. The wisdom perspective—the process of developing a sharp logical understanding of the nature of reality—must parallel the method perspective—the process of developing a good heart.

While this book focuses on logic, the intuitive, emotional perspective is not forgotten. And while this commentary is based on the various traditional texts that Geshe Tashi studied in his monastery, it is also grounded in his rare ability to adapt this ancient wisdom to the minds and needs of the twenty-first-century reader.
When I first met him in 1992, Geshe-la was staying at Nalanda Monastery in southern France, studying both the English language and the Western mind. From his very first contact with Westerners, he wanted to know us and understand us in order to see how best to bring us the very special message of the Buddhist teachings. Born in Purang, Tibet, in 1958, Geshe Tashi escaped to India with his parents one year later. He entered Sera Mey Monastic University at thirteen and spent the next sixteen years working for his Geshe degree, graduating as a Lharampa Geshe, the highest possible degree.

After a year at the Higher Tantric College (Gyuto), Geshe-la began his teaching career in Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, the principal monastery of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Geshe Tashi then moved to the Gandhi Foundation College in Nagpur, and it was at that time that the FPMT’s Spiritual Director, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, asked him to teach in the West. After two years at Nalanda Monastery in France, Geshe Tashi became in 1994 the resident teacher at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London.

Very early on in his teaching career at Jamyang he saw that the text-based, passive learning usually associated with Tibetan Buddhism often failed to engage the students in Western Dharma centers in a meaningful way. And so, incorporating Western pedagogic methods, he devised a two-year, six-module course to give his students a solid overview of Buddhism. The book you have in your hands is derived from the third course book of *The Foundation of Buddhist Thought*.

As with the other books in the series, many people have been involved with its development and I would like to thank them all. I would also like to offer my warmest thanks to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the head of the FPMT and the inspiration for the group of study programs to which *The Foundation of Buddhist Thought* belongs.
Mind in Buddhism

An Inner Science

In Tibetan Buddhism, the study of the mind is classified as an inner science. Psychology (the study of what the mind is) and epistemology (the study of how the mind functions) are understood to be crucial aspects of the spiritual path. Medicine and logic are outer sciences, and although considered very important, are accorded less prominence when compared to the inner sciences.

This is because everything the Buddha taught, and hence everything within the Buddhist canon, is meant to help us relieve suffering and achieve happiness, and that only happens through the mind. Medicine can cure the body, but that in itself cannot make us happy. According to Buddhism, even physical health is linked to mental states. Thus the real threats to our well-being are attachment, anger, and ignorance—the three fundamental deluded minds that lead to all other afflictions, both mental and physical. Only with thorough understanding of the mind and its functions can we hope to transcend the disturbing thoughts and emotions that plague us.

While the ultimate goal of studying the mind is complete freedom from suffering, we can also study the mind for more immediate therapeutic reasons. Investigating the mind by analyzing our thoughts, emotions, and so on is the first step to alleviating all manner of mental
illnesses. In his first teaching, the Buddha compares the stages of freeing the mind to recovery from an illness: if we don’t first recognize that we are ill, we won’t seek help. And if we don’t know the origin of our illness, we cannot choose the most effective therapy. The Buddha uses the framework of the four noble truths to formulate this insight: the first truth, the truth of suffering, is the illness. The second truth, the truth of the origin of suffering, refers to the cause of the illness. The third truth, the truth of cessation, is the understanding that a complete cure is possible. And the fourth truth, the truth of the path that leads to cessation, is the cure. The four noble truths encompass the entire spiritual path with all its many aspects, but we can apply them equally well to the nature of the mind. To transform the mind, we must see that it can be transformed, an understanding that can arise only out of true knowledge of its nature.

In Western psychotherapy, a patient is similarly led toward insight into his or her mental state in order to affect a cure. In this, the goals of Buddhism and Western psychotherapy overlap. But while there are many similarities, not all goals are shared. Assuming a commonality where fundamental differences exist can cause confusion.

According to books I have read and my discussions with psychoanalysts, the aim of psychoanalysis is to bring the various elements of the psyche—emotions, memories, and so forth—into harmony so that the person develops a greater cohesion of his sense of self. This is the final goal. In contrast, the aspiration in Buddhism is to rise above the very concept of self or “I.” Rather than harmonizing the disharmonious elements of the psyche so it becomes whole, and hence reifying the concept of the self, the goal according to the Buddhist teachings is to transcend the very concept of the self. This is clearly a big difference.

In its rejection of the notion of self, Buddhism is radical. Buddhism understands that no matter what we possess or how emotionally
balanced we might be, a sense of insecurity constantly inhabits our innermost being; that until this is addressed, it is very difficult for us to feel complete; and that the cause of all this is the false sense of self. We suffer because we misunderstand our mode of existence, and on the basis of that understanding we mistakenly infer the existence of an active, real “me.” This is not to say that we are just illusions or dreams, but that the central figure in the drama of our lives—the “I” we hold so dear—is a fantasy. This concept is very subtle, but if we are ever to transcend the limited and limiting worldview we hold, we must understand what actually constitutes the collection of body and mind that we call “I.” This is why Buddhist psychology places a strong emphasis on analysis.

Western psychoanalysis looks for specific causes to specific mental problems, but uses, from a Buddhist point of view, an unrealistically short timescale. Certainly the Western science of mind has evolved since Freud, but the assumption remains that a great deal of what is wrong with us can be traced back to our childhoods. That is not the Buddhist way. Buddhism does not consider the root cause of our problems to be an external agent of this life, but rather an internal agent developed over many lifetimes—the habitual tendencies of our own minds. Parenting and environment, of course, play a significant role in making us the people we are today, but Buddhism looks further.

It seems to me that Western psychoanalysis is a bit like Western medicine in taking a symptom-oriented approach, addressing specific complaints. Buddhism understands the various negative states of mind to be symptoms of a deeper malaise and tries to get to the root cause of the illness. The Buddhist approach is therefore more holistic. This approach is reflected in Tibetan medicine, which not only seeks to treat causes rather than symptoms, but also sees those root causes as closely linked to actions stemming from the mistaken view of the self (as self-existent), a view that Western psychoanalysis seeks to reinforce. The
latter discipline sees illness as a disharmony between the elements of the self; the former sees the entire notion of self as the illness.

While the significant parallels and fundamental differences between the Western and Buddhist approaches must be appreciated, it is important that neither totally dismiss the science of the other. I believe neuroscientists, for example, can gain a lot of knowledge from the ancient texts; they will find that the inner scientists of two thousand years ago, working only with their own subjective experiences of the mind, devised theories equal in sophistication and complexity to their own. Conversely, Buddhist practitioners can learn much from the modern science of the mind. The highly sophisticated experiments that determine the functions of the various parts of the brain are fascinating, extremely useful, and quite compatible with Buddhist ideas.

The Mind in Buddhist Texts

The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, frequently taught about mind, and all of the later Buddhist presentations of mind are based on the Buddha’s own words, the sutras. The sutras common to both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths Sutra, refer to the mind frequently, discussing its functions and teaching us how to purify our present deluded minds and transform them into wisdom, understanding, compassion, and so forth. Several sutras from the Mahayana tradition, such as the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra (Prajnaparamita Sutra), deal extensively with the mind and explain how our realizations can deepen so that we can understand not just conventional reality but also the ultimate reality of emptiness.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, the Vajrayana—the intricate esoteric teachings known commonly as tantra—was also directly taught by the Buddha. The tantras contain many teachings on the nature of
the mind, including explanations of how the subtle levels of the mind can manifest in various ways, and how they can be used to understand the ultimate nature of reality.

The collected words of the Buddha are divided into the three “baskets,” or *pitakas*: the *Vinaya Pitaka*, *Sutra Pitaka*, and *Abhidharma Pitaka*. Each basket, though related to the others, has a unique focus, and these emphases correspond to the three higher trainings of conduct, concentration, and wisdom. The *Vinaya* focuses on ethical conduct, especially the monastic and lay vows and the administration of monasteries. The *Sutra* Pitaka is the collection of the Buddha’s discourses, teachings that focus primarily on developing concentration. The *Abhidharma* Pitaka, written down around three hundred years after the Buddha’s death, is concerned largely with the development of wisdom or knowledge. The understanding of the mind falls into this last category, for how can we be ignorant of the mechanics of our mind and expect to understand the nature of reality?

The *Abhidharma* Pitaka includes some texts that were originally written in Pali, the language of the Theravada canon, and some that were originally written in Sanskrit, the language of the Mahayana canon. Although the seven major original Pali Abhidharma texts have survived (thanks to the great efforts of the people of the Buddhist countries of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand), the original Sanskrit texts did not survive. As the root texts have been lost, Tibetan monastics traditionally study the *Abhidharma* through two very important commentaries: the *Treasury of Valid Knowledge (Abhidharmakosha)* by Vasubandhu, a great Indian master from around the fifth century C.E., and the *Compendium of Valid Knowledge (Abhidharmasamuccaya)* by his brother Asanga.

The *Abhidharma* texts of Vasubandhu and Asanga focus on the mental events that occur within specific mindsets, the external verbal and physical manifestations that result from those mental events, and
the habitual thought patterns that lead either to wisdom and peace or to delusion and suffering. The analytical process of classifying mental states into wisdom minds and deluded minds sharpens our appreciation of what needs to be developed and what abandoned.

The Abhidharmakosha focuses almost entirely on the mind and its functions. It describes the various types of minds and explains how many can occur simultaneously. It is also an important work on analysis, reinforcing the concept that developing an analytical mind is essential to understanding the mind and to progressing on the road to wisdom. The Abhidharmakosha demonstrates that Buddhism is much more than just mindfulness and meditative concentration. We need to gain a true understanding of profound subjects, such as the four seals of Buddhism,2 and to integrate them into our lives at the very deepest level, and for that we need the analytical mind. This is the method that the Abhidharma describes.

The other group of texts concerned primarily with the mind is called Pramana. These are mainly epistemological texts that examine the way the mind works. The two Indian masters in this field are Dignaga (fifth century) and his indirect disciple Dharmakirti (seventh century). Although epistemological presentations of the mind were studied before these scholars’ time, it was Dignaga and Dharmakirti who established the tradition systematically. Thus they are considered the founders of Buddhist epistemology.

The texts they composed, such as Dignaga’s Compendium on Valid Perception (Pramanasamucchaya) and Dharmakirti’s commentary on it, Commentary on Valid Perception (Pramanavarttika), as well as the commentaries on these texts by later Tibetan masters, clarify the difference between perceptual and conceptual consciousnesses and define valid and mistaken minds. They also elucidate the epistemological aspect of the mind—how knowledge develops through the process of analysis and investigation.
Beyond the Abhidharma and Pramana sources, the mind is also studied within Mahayana treatises such as the Guide to a Bodhisattva’s Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara), composed by the great Indian master Shantideva, which meticulously explains how to cultivate great compassion, recognize and counteract anger, and develop qualities such as concentration, joyous effort, and wisdom.

Furthermore, the Vajrayana texts contain detailed descriptions of the various mental events that function on both the conscious and the unconscious levels—while awake, asleep, or dreaming, and during the process of death—and of how the mind moves from one life to the next. Through systematic examination of all these teachings, we can develop a complete picture of the mind.

While these texts are powerful tools in coming to understand the mind and its functions from as many angles as possible, the final realization of the nature of the mind can only arise through our own experience. The Buddha himself advised us not simply to accept his words literally but to examine them “as a goldsmith would test the quality of the gold.” Although Buddhist practitioners see the importance of the teachings of the Buddha and other great masters on such subjects, they will not accept them without undertaking their own investigation.

Reasoning and critical analysis are the means to achieve a profound understanding of the nature of the mind. Therefore, there is no contradiction in the various and sometimes differing explanations of the mind given by different masters over many centuries. Each master has taken the ideas of a previous one as a starting point and developed a deeper understanding based upon it.
Monastic Study of the Mind

Before starting on great texts such as the *Abhidharmakosha* or the *Pramanavarttika*, Tibetan students usually study a preliminary text, called an *entering* or *introductory* text, which condenses and categorizes the root text as an aid to memorization. In the case of the treatises on epistemology and psychology, the introductory text is known as *lorig*, “awareness (lo) and knowledge (rig).”

Psychology, generally speaking, is concerned with how the external environment is interpreted by the mind. As such, it is an analysis of the inner world of our experience. Without understanding our experience of the world in which we act and communicate, there is no way we can understand, for example, the first noble truth—the truth of suffering—the starting point of the spiritual journey.

Epistemology, in turn, is the study of knowledge: how we know what we know and how we can test its validity and refine our knowledge. As such, it goes beyond the mere analysis of everyday experience to a genuine understanding of wisdom.

According to Buddhism, epistemology and psychology go hand in hand. When the study of psychology is undertaken without the basis of epistemology and the methods of practice it suggests, there is a risk that it will remain a mere intellectual exercise and not bring real benefit.

The mind in Buddhism is often divided into two categories. The first is basic consciousness, or awareness, which just means our baseline capacity for subjective experience. This basic awareness is sometimes referred to as “mind.” The mind, however, undergoes constantly shifting mindstates, and these mental events are further divided into main “minds” and their associated “mental factors,” which we will examine in detail in chapter 2. The study of psychology in Buddhism often means the study of these minds and mental factors. Using English terms can sometimes be confusing, since the word *mind* is used...
in relation to all the various facets of conscious experience, but context usually makes clear which meaning is intended.

In the monastery, I studied mind and mental factors on three different occasions. In my third year I studied lorig as part of my first debate class. Because I was very young and unable to really understand the different minds, let alone experience them, I merely tried to memorize all the various definitions.

On the second occasion, I studied the mind and mental factors in Abhidharma studies, using Asanga’s *Abhidharmasamucchaya* and Vasubandu’s *Abhidharmakosha*, which go into much more detail than the introductory lorig texts. Because these two and their related commentaries offer extensive discussion of each mind and mental factor, they are traditionally taken on much later, some monasteries even leaving them to the very last years of study.

Running parallel to my study of the Abhidharma texts, I studied the mind and its functions from the epistemological point of view based on Dignaga’s *Pramanasamucchaya*, Dharmakirti’s *Pramanava-rttika*, and their many commentaries. These texts play a central role in the tradition of debate at the monasteries. All of the students spent two months every year on these texts from the time we started the serious study program until the completion of our geshe degrees—one month in our own monastery of Sera and the next month joining the monks of Ganden and Drepung monasteries to study and debate.

At times this education took the form of simple list learning—Tibetans love lists—and at others it was the keenest of analytical debating. But whatever the level or type of study, it was the study of the mind, and its goal was to eliminate our delusions and realize our potential to become buddhas.
Why Study the Mind?

According to Buddhism, we are nothing more than body and mind, and mind is the sole motivator of all our actions and the creator of all our happiness and suffering. It is therefore impossible to overemphasize the importance of mind in Buddhism. The body might be well fed, and the eyes might look upon beautiful sights, but it is the mind alone that translates this into happiness. Conversely, the body might have pain, and other people might pour abuse into our ears, but it is the mind alone that translates this into suffering.

Certainly, if we are angry we need to refrain from physically attacking or verbally abusing the person we are angry with, but such actions of body and speech are results of anger, not its causes, and so ultimately it is the angry mind we need to address.

Since you are reading this book, you must have some interest in the mind and its potential, so I’m sure you already have some idea of how important the mind is. We all know how important a good home, good food, good friends, a satisfying job, and other external factors are to our health, comfort, and general happiness. Most thoughtful people also recognize that external phenomena alone do not rule our lives. We need, however, to thoroughly investigate just how much influence the mind has. This book can give you a start. But if you are going to really transform your life from confusion and suffering to clarity and happiness, the knowledge gained through investigation must be deep, at a heart level. Knowledge must be transformed into practical experience.

Buddhism sees the mind as crucial whereas the body is relatively less important. Of course it is necessary to look after the body, and struggling to physically survive leaves no time to develop the mind; but within Buddhist literature there is the sense that if we look after the mind well, the body will be taken care of along the way. Nurturing our
own minds will also affect those around us; we will benefit family, friends, colleagues, and society in general. So benefiting all sentient beings, the goal of Mahayana Buddhism, begins with taking care of our own mind, which in turn begins with understanding it.

This is precisely what His Holiness the Dalai Lama says in a very interesting dialogue with Western scientists in 1991:

…There are two reasons why it is important to understand the nature of mind. One is because there is an intimate connection between mind and karma. The other is that our state of mind plays a crucial role in our experience of happiness and suffering.¹

We all want to be happy and free from suffering. That was the Buddha’s starting point and most important message in the four noble truths, through which he shows clearly that the final and complete end of suffering is possible. Although each Buddhist philosophical school has developed slightly different assertions about the mind, they all present the mind as the central player in our experience of happiness and suffering. This is true here and now, in the future, and in fact through all future lives until we free ourselves from suffering completely. So it is crucial for a Buddhist practitioner to understand the mind and then put that understanding into practice at the deepest possible level.

Furthermore, our understanding of the mind must extend to the crucial relationship between the mind and the external, material world. Failure to understand this relationship is at the very center of the worldwide environmental disaster that we are so close to experiencing. The internal workings of our mind—cognitive processes, emotions, and so on—relate intimately to how we react to our external environment. If I see happiness as a big car I might deny global
warming; If I see my happiness now as more important than my children’s happiness in thirty years’ time, I might pollute the planet as if there were no tomorrow.

Our inner and outer worlds couldn’t be more intimately connected, and to create true happiness for ourselves and others we need to shift from this current obsession with the material world into a more realistic relationship with our own minds. Learning about the mind goes far beyond studying lists and levels. It is crucial to see for ourselves how the mind reacts when it encounters the shapes and colors that make up the external world, and how it affects the external world. That is where happiness lies, for ourselves and others. That in fact is what the term *spiritual* actually means. Lama Yeshe says:

> I hope that you understand what the word “spiritual” really means. It means to search for, to investigate, the true nature of the mind. There’s nothing spiritual outside. My rosary isn’t spiritual; my robes aren’t spiritual. Spiritual means the mind, and spiritual people are those who seek its nature.⁴

**The Nature of Mind**

What is the cause of mind? No matter the level of subtlety of view, all Buddhist schools agree that only a previous moment of mind can cause the present moment of mind. This is fundamental. All phenomena, mental and material, come into existence due to causes and conditions, and the main substantial cause of mind is a previous moment of mind. If you have read the first book in this series, *The Four Noble Truths*, you will already be familiar with this concept.

Buddhism does not posit an ultimate creator as other religions do, but it must nevertheless give some explanation for the creation of
phenomena. That explanation is the principle of causality. Both mental and physical phenomena come into existence because they have a preceding continuum that acts as the cause. This moment of mind is caused by the preceding moment of mind. It is utterly nonphysical in nature. In fact, it is mere experience.

There are, of course, other factors involved. Buddhism talks about both substantial and secondary causes, and naturally we must remember that our state of mind is not divorced from what happens in our external world. A happy state of mind might be brought about by a nice word from a friend, or a good meal, but its substantial cause must be a preceding moment of mind. A good meal cannot turn into a mind.

This mere experience has two aspects: it is clear and knowing. Mind itself is actually defined in the teaching texts as that which is clear and knowing. We will look at this further below.

Furthermore, mind is not static, but a continuity of momentarily moving events that contain this element of experience. As noted above, we can talk about minds, which are the many mental events happening every second—emotions, thoughts, and so on—and mind, the fundamental base upon which those events occur. Within that continuity of mind are levels of subtlety, from the conscious gross mental events that we are aware of to the subtler unconscious events that underlie them and are the puppet masters that determine our surface lives. Even deeper is the core mind that underlies the whole of our existence. This is the fundamental level of mind that goes from life to life.

Mind Is Not Body

Whether the mind is separate from or a part of the body is a debate that has continued for centuries. Common sense tells us we have a body, which is physical, and a mind, which is not. One does the
actions and one does the thinking. Investigation into this dichotomy reveals that it is not so simple.

Western scientists exploring the mind have been severely hampered by the restraints of traditional scientific method, where the rules of evidence have been developed in relation to physical observations alone. Without a rigorous and consensual method for verifying the claims of consciousness research, theories about the nature of the mind over the last century have been widely divergent. These theories fall largely into two groups: those of the behaviorists and materialists, who assert there is no such thing as mind, and those who claim the mind and body are fundamentally different.

Behaviorists assert that what we see as mental processes are in fact energy transferences within the brain that are so complex they translate as rational thought, and that there is in fact no mind. Buddhism refutes this. There are many levels of understanding the mind according to Buddhist thought, but every one accepts that body is matter and mind is non-matter. This is a core tenet. There is nothing at all within matter—whether our brain, body parts, or external things—that can transmute into mind. The different levels of explanations of mind—from the practical descriptions in the sutra teachings to the most esoteric descriptions of highest yoga tantra—are all based on the assertion that mind is a different phenomenon from the material world.

According to Buddhism, the material world is composed of the four principal elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, and the four attributes that arise from these. These labels are not literal—our bodies do not consist of mud and fire!—but rather refer to the characteristics of solidity, liquidity, heat, and movement, respectively. The four attributes are the objects of four of our five sense objects: form, smell, taste, and tactile objects.

It is impossible, say the Buddhists, that these elements are the cause of mind. The main cause must be nonmaterial. This is what we need
to investigate and be absolutely clear about. Mind is mere experience—it is not matter; therefore its cause must be the same. This understanding pervades all of Buddhist literature. Mind can affect matter and vice versa, but the two are mutually exclusive. For if something is devoid of color, shape, or material dimension, it cannot at the same time be material.

That does not mean, however, that mind and body aren’t closely interconnected. The deeper we explore the nature of mind in Buddhist psychology, the more we see the interconnection of mind and body and that certain levels of mind depend heavily on both the function and existence of the physical nervous system. This interconnection is reflected at the deepest possible level, to the point where the division between mind and body can be blurred, especially in areas such as psychosomatic illness. Nonetheless it remains a fundamental belief of Buddhism that we are a combination of material form and nonmaterial mind, and that one cannot possibly replace or be transformed into the other.

Taking the example of the link between anger (mind) and ugliness (matter), it is fairly easy to see that the mental condition of anger can never transform into the physical condition of an ugly face. Anger can cause us to screw our face up and become ugly, but the mind itself can never become the face. However, the connection between mind and matter is even stronger than this. According to Buddhism, the anger we are experiencing now is the cause for us to have an ugly appearance in the future. To me that makes perfect sense. You can see it in people who have great anger; their whole physiognomy seems to have grown out of that anger. Even if it is not ugliness, according to Buddhism, the result of anger is a life in an awful environment, such as a war zone.

Many gross consciousnesses, such as our five sense consciousnesses, cannot function without our nervous system or brain. That is very
clear. In order for the eye consciousness to function as something that is clear and knowing, it depends on three conditions. One of those is the eye sense organ, a subtle material form existing within the actual eye organ. In the desire realm in which we live, our entire existence depends on and focuses on matter.

The reason Buddhism so firmly asserts that mind is not body is because the fundamental tenets of Buddhism revolve around the law of karma, or cause and effect. At death the body disappears. If mind and body were the same, what we think of as mind would also disappear. Without a continuum of mind, result could never follow cause; the chain would be broken. This is totally incompatible with the concept of karma. Buddhism asserts countless rebirths, and between death and the next rebirth there is an existence called the intermediate state, or bardo. The first moment of mind of this life is the result of the last moment of mind of the intermediate-state being. That mindstream can be traced back to the first moment as an intermediate-state being and, before that, to the last moment of mind of the previous life.

The mind that continues at death is not the most superficial level of mind, with its manifest concepts and emotions, but rather the very subtle mind—the core of our being that carries all the propensities that will ripen in future lives to determine the conditions of our existence and our future happiness and suffering.

**Mind Is Clear and Knowing**

So what is mind? Buddhist philosophical texts define the mind as clear and knowing. The clarity aspect of the mind, according to Geshe Rabten, refers to the “non-material, space-like nature of consciousness...completely devoid of colour, shape, or material dimension.” Space is also clear—without obstructions and not physical—but it does not have the ability to cognize. Only mind is both clear and has
the ability to reflect or know an object. Mind here is the mere event of knowing, sometimes called *rigpa* in Tibetan.

Mind can also be defined as a *subjective event that arises in dependence on the object that appears to it*. To be a subject, as this definition states, an object must be present. There can be no consciousness without an object of consciousness. This brings us to another fundamental aspect of mind. Mind is the actual process of knowing the object that appears to it. Mind is therefore not a static thing but a dynamic agent, a process of its clear and knowing nature. And it is not as if we must somehow create this clear and knowing nature. It already exists, operating constantly to cognize the world around us.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama describes the intrinsic connection between the clear and knowing aspects of the mind this way:

> [T]he knowing nature, or agency…is called mind and this is non-material…. Cognitive events possess the nature of knowing because of the fundamental nature of clarity that underlies all cognitive events. This is…the mind’s fundamental nature, the clear-light nature of mind.

What does it mean to say that “the fundamental clarity of mind underlies all cognitive events”? It means that our experience is fundamentally free of the physical conditions that give rise to it and of the transient mental states that arise and cease within our minds. It means the key to liberation is embedded within the very fabric of our conscious life.

How can we come to recognize this facet of mind? We can only know this when our own minds are freed from interaction with ordinary objects. To cut through to the actual nature of the mind and see it for what it is, we need to free our minds from interaction with the external and internal objects—images, smells, noises, thoughts, or
feelings—that usually crowd our consciousness. We can only see the screen behind the images when we turn the projector off. Once the rest are gone, the mind alone remains as the object of meditation. If we free ourselves from the limiting relationships with the external sense objects that usually occupy it, the mind naturally becomes aware of itself.

If we want to know about a book, we must take that book as our object of focus. We have to read it, touch it, look at the cover—do everything necessary to understand it. Mind is exactly the same. If we really want to know the nature of mind, we must make the mind itself the object of focus. We can do this.

A mind cannot exist independently, without an object. By its very nature, mind is the subject, the agent, the doer. Subject and object are interdependent—without one the other cannot exist. This is why if, through deep meditation, we free our minds from interaction with all external and internal objects, the subjective mind will naturally focus on itself as the object.

The meditative techniques to free our minds vary according to different schools and different levels of practice. Sensory experiences or the more insidious mental events taking place all the time—discursive thoughts, feelings, and so on—can well be objects of our meditation; these are minds but not the clear and luminous mind we are referring to here. The mind that is the object of meditation on the mind is the mere luminosity that is the base of all mental events. By learning to focus on the mind free of gross conceptualizations, we can touch this intrinsic freedom and thereby begin to cut the bonds of karma and afflictions.
Conclusion

The Dhammapada says:

Mind is the fore-runner of (all evil) conditions. Mind is chief; and they are mind-made. If, with an impure mind, one speaks or acts, then pain follows one even as the wheel, the hoof of the ox.

Mind is the fore-runner of (all good) conditions. Mind is chief; and they are mind-made. If, with a pure mind, one speaks or acts, then happiness follows one even as the shadow that never leaves.\textsuperscript{10}

Nothing good or bad happens to us unless our mind labels it such. The state of our mind alone determines happiness and unhappiness. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that if we can maintain a calm and peaceful mind, our external surroundings can only cause us limited disturbance.\textsuperscript{11} Notice that His Holiness does not say that once we have a calm mind, we will never be disturbed by external things. His Holiness presents a more realistic view. I think we can see this from observing our own life—when we feel contented and happy, annoyances such as late trains or arrogant colleagues hardly affect us at all, but at other times, when we are depressed or irritated, exactly the same circumstances make us furious with indignation or anger.

On this topic, Lama Yeshe says that we are able to discern for ourselves how our mental state determines our world, and not the other way around. He says:

The human mind is like a mirror. A mirror does not discriminate but simply reflects whatever’s before it, no matter whether
it’s horrible or wonderful. Similarly your mind takes on the aspect of your surroundings, and if you’re not aware of what’s going on, your mind can fill with garbage. Therefore, it is very important to be conscious of your surroundings and how they affect your mind.\textsuperscript{12}

If we wander through life unconsciously, simply reacting to whatever arises in our lives, our surroundings will have an immense influence on our mental well-being. But by beginning to understand the relationship between our minds and the objects they encounter, we can begin to use our minds to influence our surroundings instead.