

Indian philosophy and the value of transformative experiences

An interview with Monima Chadha

by Edvard Avilés and Matthieu Koroma

Cite as: Chadha, M., Avilés, E. & Koroma, M. (2021). Indian philosophy and the value of transformative experiences. An interview with Monima Chadha by Edvard Aviles and Matthieu Koroma. *ALIUS Bulletin*, 5, 29-38, <https://doi.org/10.34700/rn10-az29>

Monima Chadha

monima.chadha@monash.edu
Department of Philosophy and
Monash Centre for Consciousness
and Contemplative studies,
Monash University, Australia

Edvard Aviles

eda39@cornell.edu
Sage School of Philosophy,
Cornell University, USA

Matthieu Koroma

matthieu.koroma@uliege.be
Physiology of Cognition lab,
GIGA Consciousness,
University of Liege, Belgium

Abstract

In this interview, we engage in a cross-cultural discussion about the diversity of consciousness. Indian philosophy can seem quite cryptic and difficult to follow because it is a primary oral tradition. However, Monima Chadha has developed a series of work aiming at introducing the rich insights of Indian philosophy of mind into the western literature. Key aspects of metaphysical debates such as the nature of consciousness and the notion of no-self are framed in Indian philosophy as primarily guided by the aim to achieve enlightenment or liberation. Altered states of consciousness are considered as transformative experiences and meditation is highlighted as an additional resource in the Indian tradition to gain insight into the nature of consciousness.

keywords: *Indian philosophy, consciousness, meditation, transformative experiences, psychedelics, no-self*

You are an Associate Professor in Philosophy at Monash University (Melbourne, Australia). In your research, you discuss contemporary debates of philosophy of mind, including consciousness, through the lens of Buddhist and Hinduist philosophy. Would you say that your interest for Indian philosophy led you to your interest for the philosophy of mind or the reverse? Is there something in particular in the Indian philosophical corpus that sparked your interest?

I have always been intrigued by issues in philosophy of mind and language, so in a sense it was philosophy of mind that came first. My interest in Indian philosophy was sparked by the Buddhist no-self doctrine. Some Buddhists, *Abhidharma* philosophers in the northern Indian tradition, in particular, claim that the work of the self can be transferred to the mind. The self is an ontological dangler that does not do any causal work. I became interested in investigating this claim.

An important concern for a lot of traditions in Indian philosophy (both *Astika* and *Nastika* systems) has been the nature of consciousness. However, Indian philosophy has been totally overlooked in the standard curricula of the philosophy of mind despite the fact that a lot of the contemporary discussions are about consciousness. In fact, a typical course starts with Descartes and ends with discussions about Chalmers' philosophical zombies ignoring more than 4000 years of Indian reflections about consciousness. Do you have a diagnostic of why this is the case? How could Indian philosophy contribute in your opinion to our understanding of the mind and do you have any suggestions of Indian texts or readings to implement in the philosophy of mind curricula to overcome this gap?

I hesitate to recommend texts because the Indian tradition is primarily an oral tradition. So, the texts are quite cryptic and difficult to follow. For example, the famous *Nyaya* proof for the existence of the self in *Nyāya-sūtra* 1.1.10 states that "Desire, aversion, effort, pleasure, pain etc. are the inferential signs of the self". Then there is the whole corpus of the *Nyaya* commentaries on this sutra which itself contain many sophisticated arguments for the existence of the self. The other problem is that good translations of the primary texts have been few and far between. The situation is changing now. Books I would recommend readily for undergraduate curricula.

1. The *Nyāya-sūtra*: Selections with Early Commentaries trans. by Matthew Dasti and Stephen Phillips.
2. The Concealed Art of the Soul, by Jonardon Ganeri
3. Buddhism as Philosophy by Mark Siderits.

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Since the 90's there has been a rising interest in the neuroscience of consciousness. In the field, neurobiologists and psychologists usually operate with a cognitive concept of consciousness: consciousness is cognitive access (roughly: awareness). Some philosophers have objected to this framework that a cognitive concept of consciousness isn't enough, to solve the hard problem we need to target what's like to be in a certain state (roughly: experience) (Chalmers, 2007). Are there different conceptions of consciousness in the Indian tradition?

Our pre-theoretical concept of consciousness is a mongrel concept which calls for refinement if it is to do useful work for a theory of consciousness. Just like Block and Chalmers in the contemporary scene, the Indian philosophers also suggested many refinements and distinctions to be made within the concept of consciousness. But I don't think we can map them directly onto distinctions drawn in contemporary philosophy. This requires careful comparative work which is yet to be done. That said, I do think there are echoes of the phenomenal/cognitive distinction in the *Abhidharma* tradition in that the notions of feeling (*vedana*) and perceptual discrimination (*saṃjñā*) as components of consciousness, but I do not think this clearly maps onto the phenomenal/cognitive distinction.

A lot of people would agree with the claim that phenomenology makes life worth living. A good life is about -among other things- having good experiences. Similarly, prolonged experiences of suffering can undermine the value of our life. So, there seems to be an important connection between consciousness and value. One explanation of this connection is that experiences themselves have an intrinsic valenced dimension (experiences feel good, bad, pleasant, unpleasant, etc). Furthermore, both consciousness and suffering played an important role in some Indian doctrines, for example, the doctrine of *samsara* in the Upanishads and *duhka* in the first noble truth of Buddhism. However, with few exceptions (Kriegel, 2019) in contemporary philosophy of perception, the study of consciousness is focused on the sensory features of experience ignoring its valenced aspects.

What do Indian traditions have to say about the relationship between consciousness and value?

A primary concern that motivated most philosophers in ancient India was to find the best way forward in an individual person's quest for liberation from suffering. All living beings are trapped in the cycle of birth and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) which according to most classical Indian philosophers, is characterised by suffering. The highest goal of life is liberation (*mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*). Except the *Cārvāka* materialists who believed that death is the end and there is nothing like rebirth or liberation, all other philosophical schools believed in the possibility of liberation in this life or in future lifetimes. The ultimate aim of the classical Indian philosophy teachings is thus to help individual persons attain liberation or at least a better life in this life and future lifetimes. Most classical Indian philosophers agreed that our ignorance about “who we really are” is the source and the means to bringing an end to suffering. Thus, metaphysical debates about the nature of consciousness and the universe and our place in it are central to the classical Indian philosophical traditions, but only insofar as they suggest a route to liberation.

Current debates on consciousness tackle the possibility that consciousness is an illusion (Frankish, 2016). The notion of illusion has been deeply anchored in the Indian philosophical tradition, such as the concept of *maya*, the idea that the phenomenal world is illusory, being central for the Hinduist *Advaita* school. Do you see a way by which discussions in Indian philosophy on consciousness echo and differ from contemporary debates about the nature of consciousness?

You are right the notion of illusion gets much airtime in the *Advaita* Hindu tradition, but it has an equally important role in all other Indian traditions as well. This should come as no surprise, philosophers in all traditions have been interested in illusions in the discussions of perception, consciousness and ontology. The discussions in Indian philosophy differ because the primary aim guiding Indian philosophers is how to achieve enlightenment or

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liberation. This concern gives the Indian discussion of consciousness a different flavour, but in the end, this concern cannot be divorced from the nature of human beings and what they are capable of. So, the Indian philosophers are indirectly led to metaphysical and epistemological questions about the nature of the world and human beings within it. Keeping this primary aim in mind, we should consider what the Indian philosophers have to say about the mind and we will see many of the same questions being discussed in the classical Indian debates.

One of the most important doctrines in the Upanishads and the *Advaita Vedanta* is the identity between *Brahman* and *Atman* (self). A tendentious reading of this claim is that fundamental reality involves consciousness. Similar claims are found in unorthodox systems, like *Abhidharma* Buddhism. Furthermore, in the contemporary metaphysics of mind, Russellian Monists have championed the idea that fundamental reality involves consciousness (or proto-phenomenal properties) in a widespread manner (Goff, 2017). What are the main differences between *Vedanta's* panpsychism and *Abhidharma* panpsychism? Do any of these views have something to say about the combination problem for contemporary panpsychism?

Vedanta panpsychism is rooted in their monism: consciousness is the only reality. *Abhidharma* Buddhism accepts physical and mental atoms as part of the basic furniture of the universe. This, I think, is the most important difference. I am not sure what Vedantins have to say about the combination problem, but there is a new special volume of the *Monist* coming out in January 2022 which addresses Cosmopsychism (the holistic counterpart of panpsychism) and Indian philosophy might have more thoughtful responses to this issue. I have a paper forthcoming in that volume which suggests that the *Abhidharma* philosophers have various resources that they may use to respond to the group of problems that are called combination problems: the subject combination problem, the quality combination problem, etc.

You recently explained how *Abhidharma* Buddhism had a panprotopsychist account of reality based on the notion of *dharma* (Chadha, 2019). *Dharmas* can be described as particular qualities of existence and they can be aggregated into subjective experiences under the combined action of mental processes. Our attention has been brought on the suggestion that differences in metaphysical conception about consciousness may depend on practices, as you say:

“If we think that conscious states supervene on collections of present mental *dharmas* which are best thought of as proto-conscious or proto-intentional features as the result of logical analysis, then we favor the panprotopsychist option. Alternatively, if we hold that mental *dharmas* are potentially phenomenologically available as they can be discerned as such by experts who have mastered the art of mindfulness meditation, then we favour the panspsychist option.” (p.31).

Could you elaborate on how Buddhists have conceptualized the interrelation between understanding consciousness and experiencing conscious states? How can the experience of conscious states such as meditation change our ideas about the nature of consciousness?

This is a difficult question to answer because there is not one Buddhist view. There are many different Buddhist traditions, and they have different views about conscious states. I think that it is worth emphasising is that there is nothing like mind or consciousness, all there is, is a collection of mental states and conscious experiences. And again, there is not one kind of meditation but different meditation practices depending on the tradition. To take an example, in Vasubandhu’s seminal text the *Abhidharmakośabhasya*, mindfulness meditation is explained carefully as a stepwise progression. Mindfulness meditation has the aim of curbing thoughts that proliferate naturally because of the variety of external objects and karmic imprints. This aim is achieved by controlling the mind by focusing attention on breathing to eliminate mind-wandering. The initial aim of mindfulness meditation is to train the mind to fix attention on the complex phenomenon of breathing in order to analyze or break down the phenomenon into its most basic constituents (*dharmas*), so that the meditator discerns the real nature of conscious experiences. The process of meditation, however, reveals that the realization of the real nature of ultimate *dharmas* (impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and being not-self) results in an attitudinal and behavioural change. The knowledge of real nature of self and other objects leads to the cessation of all emotional attachments and desires.

Both neuroscientists and philosophers recognize the role of introspection and first-person data for a science of consciousness. What’s the role of introspection and first-person data to understand consciousness in the Indian traditions? Does the Indian philosophical legacy have something to contribute to the prospects of a scientific understanding of consciousness?

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Philosophers cannot afford to ignore first-person data and introspection if they want to understand the nature of consciousness. Indian philosophers have an additional resource in first-person data available in meditative experiences. The “special access” to one’s own conscious states available in conscious experiences is amenable to be investigated by third-person methods in neuroscience of consciousness. This has the potential to offer additional insights that might contribute to a scientific understanding of consciousness. But it needs a deeper understanding of the particular Indian tradition in question and the role that meditation practices are supposed to lead to intellectual and spiritual progress.

The practice of meditation (*dhyana*) is pervasive among the Indian philosophical tradition. Through meditation, altered states of consciousness can be attained through which fundamental insight about the nature of reality can be attained. In some traditions, this is known as '*samadhi*'. The very idea of *nirvana* also suggests something similarly. On the other hand, it is well-known that psychedelic drugs can induce states of *depersonalization* and more radically, *ego-dissolution*, in about 7% of trip reports of high-dosage intakes of *Psilocybe* mushrooms, LSD, Salvia, DMT, 5-MeO-DMT, ayahuasca and ketamine (Millière, 2017). Despite being rare, these experiences have been interpreted in relation to the Buddhist concept of no-self (*anatman*) by some early advocates of the use of psychedelics such as Timothy Leary or Aldous Huxley (Huxley, 1999; Leary et al., 1964). What role do altered states of consciousness play in Indian meditative practices? Do you think that we can interpret the lack of self in conscious experiences under psychedelics in the light of Buddhist philosophy?

I think it is better to describe the altered states of consciousness as transformative experiences. These experiences, at least in the Buddhist tradition are brought about by a variety of spiritual exercises. In keeping with the general Buddhist tradition Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośabhasya* notes that the spiritual path is an integrated system of *śīla* (moral conduct)-*samādhi* (meditation)-*prajñā* (wisdom or internalization of philosophical

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insights of the Abhidharma tradition). In the commentary that follows, Vasubandhu writes that whoever desires to see the truths should first of all guard morality (*śīla*), then they read the teachings on which the insight into the truths depends, and listen to their meaning, having listened they reflect on the teachings, and having reflected, they devote themselves to the cultivation of meditation. You can interpret the lack of self in conscious experiences under psychedelics in the light of Buddhist philosophy, but I think that would be unfair to the tradition. The experience of no self in meditation is not an isolated phenomenon, it is embedded within the spiritual exercises considered as a whole, including knowledge of Buddhist philosophical insights.

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In the Buddhist traditions, the notion of no-self has both metaphysical and practical aspects, as holding the self as a substance is considered not only as a false view about the reality but also as a source of suffering. How do Buddhist traditions explain the therapeutic effects that can be attributed to a change in our views about the self? Would you think that some aspects of Buddhist philosophy could be useful to anchor therapeutic effects of psychedelics by offering an understanding of the mental states being experienced and their significance?

Belief in a continuing self is the basis of our special concern for our own future self. We do put away money in superannuation rather than giving to charity? Because we care more about our future self than contemporary others, some of whom are suffering. The Buddhists do recognize that it is built-in precondition of our form of life that we have self-concern and special concern for our loved ones. That is why the Buddhists do not recommend

giving up on this self-concern or special concern for our loved ones. Rather they recommend extending similar concern to others. And they do not think that such an extension comes easy to us given our human nature: it has to be inculcated by extensive meditation practices. As Parfit puts it, the discovery of no self is liberating and consoling! Given what I've said in response to the last question, I don't think we can better understand the therapeutic effects of psychedelics by turning to Buddhist philosophy.

The *Abhidharma*-Buddhist metaphysics of persons has some important similarities to a 4D ontology of temporal parts (Sider, 2001), in particular, to a 'stage-theory' in which persons are momentary beings that strictly speaking don't persist through time (impermanence). The stage theory has important theoretical advantages in dealing with classical puzzles of the metaphysics of material objects. However, when the stage theory is applied to persons (Olson, 2007), it faces an immediate objection: diachronic features seem rather crucial in personal identity. Even if not for metaphysical reasons, some practical affairs seem essentially diachronic (e.g., norms of rationality, responsibility, and regret, etc). How do you think the *Abhidharma* theory of persons can deal with this problem?

The central normative goal of Buddhism is to ameliorate suffering and that guides its revision of descriptive metaphysics. The no-self and no-person metaphysics aims to produce a better structure that is motivated by the normative goal of eliminating, or at least reducing, suffering. Buddhist revisionary metaphysics is not aimed at capturing the structure the world really has, and a justification of our ordinary person-related practices. Rather it aims at providing a structure that aims to reduce suffering. The revised structure, in turn, entails a major reconsideration of our ordinary everyday person-related concerns and practices and interpersonal attitudes, such as moral responsibility, praise and blame, compensation, and social treatment.

ALIUS is most interested in the diversity of consciousness. This involves both discussing the diversity of conscious states and the diversity of disciplines or cultural outlooks that can inform a scientific understanding of the nature of consciousness. What are the challenges according to you in developing a cross-cultural discussion about consciousness and the mind? What is your approach to overcome these challenges?

One of the most important challenges is to draw the attention of mainstream

philosophers of mind and consciousness to pay serious attention to the classical Indian tradition and what it has to offer. There is not just the language barrier but also the misconception that Indian philosophy is mostly mystical mumbo-jumbo. Correcting that misconception is a hard task. So my approach has been trying to publish in mainstream journals rather than specialist Indian philosophy journals so that these materials have a chance of broader uptake. It is hard, but I think it is worth doing.

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