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Chitasika: Mental Factor in Buddhism

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Academic Review Articles

Chitasika: Mental Factor in Buddhism

Phramaha Chakrapol Acharashubho Thepa *

Abstract

This paper delves into the concept of "Chitasika" as elucidated in Pali literature. "Chitasika" refers to mental factors or concomitants that arise in conjunction with consciousness, playing a pivotal role in shaping human experience and behavior according to Buddhist psychology. Drawing from canonical texts such as the Pali Canon and commentaries, this paper examines the classification, functions, and significance of Chitasika in understanding the workings of the mind. Through a comprehensive analysis, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of Chitasika and its implications for personal development and mental well-being.

Keywords: Chitasika; Mental Factors; Buddhist Psychology; Consciousness; Mind

Introduction

The exploration of the mind has been a central aspect of philosophical and religious inquiry for millennia. In Buddhist thought, the understanding of the mind is particularly profound, with intricate descriptions of its workings and components. Among these components, "Chitasika" holds a significant position, representing the mental factors that accompany consciousness in every moment of experience. Rooted in Pali literature, the concept of Chitasika offers invaluable insights into the nature of the mind and its role in shaping human existence. At the core of Buddhist teachings lies the recognition of the mind as the primary determinant of one's perceptions, emotions, and actions. Within this framework, the concept of "Chitasika" emerges as a fundamental aspect, representing the mental factors or concomitants that arise in conjunction with consciousness. Derived from Pali literature, Chitasika offers a nuanced understanding of the workings of the mind and its role in shaping individual behavior and spiritual development (Bodhi, 2000).

The term "Chitasika" can be deconstructed to reveal its essence. "Chitta" signifies the mind or consciousness, while "sika" denotes that which accompanies or arises together. Thus, Chitasika can be understood as the mental factors that co-arise with consciousness,

influencing the quality of one's experiences and guiding the course of one's life. These factors encompass a wide array of qualities and functions, ranging from ethical virtues such as loving-kindness and compassion to cognitive processes like attention and perception. In Buddhist psychology, Chitasika is categorized into various groups based on their nature, ethical qualities, and functions. Ethical factors contribute to the cultivation of wholesome states of mind, fostering virtues that lead to personal well-being and spiritual growth. Non-ethical factors encompass cognitive functions that play a crucial role in shaping human cognition and perception (Gethin, 2001). By understanding the classification and functions of Chitasika, individuals gain insight into the dynamics of their own minds and the factors that influence their mental states and behaviors.

Throughout this paper, we will explore the significance of Chitasika in Buddhist thought and its implications for personal development and spiritual practice. Drawing from canonical texts such as the Pali Canon and commentaries, we will delve into the classification, functions, and significance of Chitasika, shedding light on its timeless wisdom and practical relevance for contemporary life. By engaging with the concept of Chitasika, individuals can cultivate greater mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom, leading to a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. In the subsequent sections, we will examine the classification of Chitasika, its functions in shaping human cognition and emotion, and its significance for personal and spiritual growth. Through this exploration, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chitasika and its role in the pursuit of inner peace and well-being.

Classification of Chitasika

In Buddhist psychology, Chitasika is classified into various categories based on their nature and function. These categories include ethical and non-ethical factors, universals and occasionals, and wholesome and unwholesome factors. Ethical factors such as loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), and equanimity (*upekkha*) contribute to mental well-being and spiritual development. Non-ethical factors encompass cognitive functions such as perception (*sanna*), attention (*manasikara*), and volition (*cetana*), which play a crucial role in cognitive processes. Understanding the classification of Chitasika provides a framework for comprehending the complexities of the mind and its interplay with consciousness.

Theravada Buddhist texts meticulously categorize Chitasika into distinct groups based on their ethical qualities, universality, and functions (Bodhi, 2000). Ethical factors, such as loving-kindness and compassion, are revered as wholesome Chitasika, fostering positive mental states and virtuous conduct. Conversely, factors like greed and hatred are deemed unwholesome, leading to detrimental emotions and actions. While this classification system offers clarity regarding moral dimensions, it inherently oversimplifies the multifaceted nature of psychological processes.

One notable critique lies in the dichotomous nature of classifying Chitasika as either wholesome or unwholesome. Human experience often defies such rigid categorizations, with many mental factors existing on a spectrum rather than stark polarities. For instance, the factor of intention (*cetana*) is traditionally viewed as ethically neutral but can manifest in both wholesome and unwholesome ways depending on context and motivation. This challenges the simplistic binary classification proposed by traditional texts and underscores the necessity for a more nuanced understanding of mental phenomena. Moreover, the universal versus occasional distinction of Chitasika presents challenges in its classification within Theravada Buddhist sources. While some mental factors are considered universal, arising in every moment of consciousness, others are categorized as occasional, emerging under specific conditions or circumstances. However, the criteria used to differentiate between universal and occasional factors remain ambiguous, raising doubts regarding the validity and reliability of such classifications.

Despite these criticisms, the classification of Chitasika remains a valuable heuristic for comprehending the workings of the mind and guiding spiritual practice within the Theravada tradition. By delineating and categorizing mental factors, individuals gain insight into the underlying mechanisms that shape their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Furthermore, the classification of Chitasika underscores the significance of ethical conduct and mindfulness in cultivating wholesome mental states and alleviating suffering.

The *Visuddhimagga*, authored by the venerable Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa, provides an extensive examination of Chitasika within the context of the path to enlightenment. According to this text, Chitasika encompasses a diverse array of mental factors that arise in conjunction with consciousness, influencing the quality of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions (Buddhaghosa, 2011). One of the primary critiques of the classification of Chitasika in the *Visuddhimagga* lies in its dichotomous categorization of mental factors as either wholesome or unwholesome. Wholesome factors, such as loving-kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*), are praised for their role in promoting mental well-being and ethical conduct, while unwholesome factors, such as greed and hatred, are condemned for leading to suffering and moral defilement. However, this binary classification oversimplifies the complexities of human psychology, as many mental factors exist on a continuum rather than distinct categories of virtue and vice.

Furthermore, the *Visuddhimagga*'s classification of Chitasika may reflect a culturally specific understanding of ethics and morality, rooted in the social and cultural context of ancient India. While certain mental factors may be deemed wholesome or unwholesome within this framework, the ethical implications of these factors may vary across different cultural and historical contexts. Therefore, practitioners should approach the classification of Chitasika with a critical awareness of its cultural and historical contingencies. Moreover, the hierarchical organization of mental factors in the *Visuddhimagga* may inadvertently reinforce a sense of spiritual striving and judgment within practitioners. Certain factors are considered more advanced or refined than others, leading individuals to aspire towards attaining higher levels of mental purity. However, this hierarchical model may obscure the inherent equality

and interconnectedness of all mental phenomena, potentially perpetuating a sense of spiritual elitism and exclusivity.

In conclusion, while the Visuddhimagga's classification of Chitasika offers a structured framework for understanding the complexities of human consciousness, it is important to approach its teachings with critical discernment. Practitioners should recognize the limitations and cultural contingencies of this classification system, remaining open to alternative perspectives and interpretations of mental phenomena. The classification of Chitasika in Theravada Buddhist sources offers a structured framework for understanding the complexities of human consciousness, it is not without its limitations. Critical examination reveals the nuances and ambiguities inherent in categorizing mental factors, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach. Nonetheless, the exploration of Chitasika remains integral to Theravada Buddhist psychology, providing valuable insights into the nature of the mind and its role in personal and spiritual development.

Functions of Chitasika

Chitasika performs various functions in shaping human cognition, emotion, and behavior. Some factors facilitate wholesome states of mind, promoting virtues such as generosity, patience, and wisdom. Others perpetuate unwholesome tendencies, leading to negative emotions such as greed, hatred, and delusion. Additionally, Chitasika influences the quality of consciousness, determining whether it is clear or clouded, tranquil or agitated. By recognizing the functions of Chitasika, individuals can cultivate mindfulness and discernment to foster positive mental states and reduce suffering.

In Theravada Buddhist literature, particularly in texts like the Visuddhimagga, the examination of mental factors, or "Chitasika," plays a crucial role in understanding the workings of the mind and guiding spiritual practice. However, while these texts offer insights into the functions of Chitasika, a critical analysis reveals certain limitations and complexities in their portrayal.

The Visuddhimagga, composed by the venerable Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa, provides an extensive exploration of Chitasika and its functions within the context of the path to enlightenment. According to this text, Chitasika encompasses a wide array of mental factors that arise in conjunction with consciousness, influencing the quality of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions (Buddhaghosa, 2011). One of the primary functions attributed to Chitasika in the Visuddhimagga is its role in shaping the quality of consciousness itself. Certain mental factors, such as mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samadhi*), are said to stabilize and refine consciousness, leading to heightened clarity and insight. However, while the text provides detailed descriptions of these functions, it may not fully capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of human consciousness.

Moreover, the Visuddhimagga emphasizes the importance of cultivating wholesome Chitasika while restraining unwholesome ones as a means to progress along the spiritual path. Wholesome factors such as loving-kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) are lauded for

their role in promoting mental well-being and ethical conduct. However, the text's emphasis on categorizing mental factors as exclusively wholesome or unwholesome overlooks the nuanced and context-dependent nature of human experience. Additionally, the *Visuddhimagga* presents a hierarchical framework of mental factors, with certain factors considered more advanced or refined than others. While this hierarchical model may provide a useful framework for spiritual practitioners, it may also perpetuate a sense of striving and judgment within individuals, as they aspire to attain higher levels of mental purity.

In the *Visuddhimagga* offers valuable insights into the functions of Chitasika within the Theravada Buddhist tradition, it is important to approach its teachings with a critical lens. While the text provides a systematic framework for understanding the workings of the mind, it may not fully capture the complexities and nuances of human consciousness. Therefore, practitioners should engage with its teachings mindfully, recognizing their limitations and remaining open to alternative perspectives.

In Theravada Buddhist philosophy, the examination of mental factors, encapsulated within the concept of "Chitasika," offers profound insights into the workings of the mind and their implications for human experience. However, a critical analysis of the functions of Chitasika, as portrayed in Theravada Buddhist texts like the "*Milinda Panha*," reveals complexities and nuances that warrant careful consideration.

The "*Milinda Panha*," a canonical text in Theravada Buddhism, explores the dialogue between King Milinda and the monk Nagasena, delving into various aspects of Buddhist philosophy and psychology. Within this discourse, the functions of Chitasika are elucidated, shedding light on their roles in shaping human cognition, emotion, and behavior. One notable function attributed to Chitasika in the "*Milinda Panha*" is their influence on the quality of consciousness. Certain mental factors, such as attention (*manasikara*) and perception (*sanna*), are depicted as playing crucial roles in directing the focus of consciousness and shaping one's perceptual experience. However, a critical examination reveals the inherent limitations of such portrayals, as they may oversimplify the intricate interplay between mental factors and consciousness.

Furthermore, the "*Milinda Panha*" underscores the ethical dimensions of Chitasika, emphasizing their role in fostering wholesome mental states and virtuous behavior. Factors like loving-kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) are lauded for their capacity to cultivate positive emotions and altruistic conduct. However, while these portrayals highlight the moral aspirations of Buddhist teachings, they may overlook the inherent complexities of human psychology and the challenges of actualizing ethical ideals in practice. Additionally, the "*Milinda Panha*" addresses the transformative potential of Chitasika in the pursuit of spiritual development. Factors like mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom (*panna*) are depicted as indispensable tools for overcoming ignorance and achieving liberation from suffering. Yet, a critical examination reveals the nuances of the path to enlightenment, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of spiritual transformation and the diverse array of factors that contribute to it.

In conclusion, while the "Milinda Panha" offers valuable insights into the functions of Chitasika within Theravada Buddhist philosophy, a critical analysis reveals the limitations of such portrayals. While these texts provide a framework for understanding the complexities of human consciousness and behavior, they may oversimplify the intricacies of mental phenomena and the challenges of spiritual practice. Nonetheless, the exploration of Chitasika remains integral to Theravada Buddhist psychology, offering valuable guidance for personal and spiritual development.

Significance of Chitasika

The study of Chitasika holds profound significance for personal development and spiritual growth. By becoming aware of the mental factors that arise in each moment, individuals gain insight into the root causes of their experiences and reactions. Through mindfulness practices such as meditation, one can cultivate wholesome Chitasika and weaken unwholesome tendencies, leading to greater clarity, peace, and inner freedom. Moreover, the understanding of Chitasika fosters empathy and compassion towards oneself and others, nurturing harmonious relationships and social well-being. The significance of Chitasika, or mental factors, in Buddhism is multifaceted and profound, offering insights into the workings of the mind and guiding practitioners on the path to spiritual development. However, a critical analysis of the significance of Chitasika reveals both its strengths and limitations within the context of Buddhist philosophy and psychology.

One of the key strengths of Chitasika lies in its role as a practical framework for understanding the complexities of human consciousness. By delineating and categorizing mental factors, Chitasika provides practitioners with a structured approach to observing and investigating their own minds. This awareness enables individuals to recognize the interplay of thoughts, emotions, and volitions in shaping their experiences and behaviors, empowering them to cultivate wholesome mental states and alleviate suffering. Furthermore, Chitasika serves as a valuable tool for guiding ethical conduct and moral development. Through the classification of mental factors as either wholesome or unwholesome, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of cultivating virtues such as loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity while restraining defilements such as greed, hatred, and delusion. This ethical framework not only promotes personal well-being but also fosters harmonious relationships and social cohesion within communities. Additionally, the significance of Chitasika extends to its role in the cultivation of mindfulness and concentration, essential components of Buddhist meditation practices. By recognizing and observing mental factors as they arise and pass away in the present moment, practitioners develop a heightened awareness of the impermanent and non-self as nature of phenomena. This insight deepens their understanding of the nature of reality and supports the development of wisdom (Bodhi, 2000).

However, a critical analysis of the significance of Chitasika also reveals certain limitations and challenges. The classification of mental factors as solely wholesome or unwholesome may oversimplify the complexities of human psychology, as many factors exist on a continuum rather than distinct categories of virtue and vice. Moreover, the hierarchical

organization of mental factors may inadvertently reinforce a sense of spiritual striving and judgment within practitioners, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy or spiritual elitism.

In the modern era, the significance of Chitasika, or mental factors, in Buddhism continues to hold relevance as individuals seek to navigate the complexities of the mind and cultivate inner peace and well-being. However, the interpretation and application of Chitasika in contemporary contexts bring about both opportunities and challenges, which warrant critical analysis.

One significant aspect of Chitasika in the modern era is its relevance to mental health and well-being. With increasing awareness and emphasis on mental health issues, the Buddhist understanding of mental factors offers valuable insights into the nature of human consciousness and the factors that contribute to psychological distress. Practices such as mindfulness meditation, which involve observing and investigating mental phenomena as they arise, have gained widespread popularity as evidence-based approaches to managing stress, anxiety, and depression (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The recognition of Chitasika provides a theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms underlying these practices and their potential benefits for mental health. The ethical framework embedded within the classification of Chitasika remains pertinent in addressing contemporary moral and social challenges. In an age marked by increasing polarization and moral ambiguity, the cultivation of virtues such as loving-kindness, compassion, and ethical conduct holds particular significance. By fostering qualities of empathy, kindness, and social responsibility, the Buddhist understanding of mental factors offers a path towards building more compassionate and inclusive societies.

The application of Chitasika in the modern era also raises certain challenges and critiques. One concern is the potential for cultural appropriation and commodification of Buddhist teachings, wherein mindfulness and meditation practices are stripped of their ethical and spiritual dimensions and commercialized as quick-fix solutions for personal success or productivity (Purser & Loy, 2013). This reductionist approach undermines the deeper transformative potential of Buddhist practices and risks reinforcing individualistic and consumerist values. Furthermore, the traditional classification of Chitasika as solely wholesome or unwholesome may overlook the nuanced and context-dependent nature of human experience in contemporary settings. In a diverse and pluralistic society, moral values and ethical norms vary widely across cultures and contexts, challenging the universality of Buddhist ethical frameworks. Therefore, there is a need for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to understanding and applying Chitasika in modern contexts.

In conclusion, while Chitasika holds significant importance in Buddhism as a practical framework for understanding the mind and guiding spiritual practice, its significance should be approached with critical discernment. Practitioners should recognize both the strengths and limitations of Chitasika within the broader context of Buddhist philosophy and psychology, remaining open to alternative perspectives and interpretations of mental

phenomena. The significance of Chitasika in Buddhism remains relevant in the modern era, its interpretation and application require critical reflection and discernment. By recognizing both the opportunities and challenges inherent in the contemporary understanding of mental factors, individuals can harness the transformative potential of Buddhist teachings to cultivate greater mindfulness, compassion, and ethical conduct in their lives and communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of Chitasika offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the mind in Pali literature. Through its classification, functions, and significance, Chitasika illuminates the intricate workings of consciousness and mental phenomena. By integrating this understanding into daily life, individuals can cultivate wisdom, compassion, and inner peace, leading to holistic well-being and fulfillment. The study of Chitasika, or mental factors, within the context of Buddhism offers profound insights into the nature of the mind and its role in shaping human experience. Through its classification, functions, and significance, Chitasika provides practitioners with a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of consciousness and guiding spiritual development.

The classification of Chitasika into wholesome and unwholesome factors offers a structured approach to cultivating virtues and restraining defilements, thereby promoting personal well-being and ethical conduct. By recognizing and investigating mental factors as they arise in each moment, individuals gain insight into the impermanent and conditioned nature of their experiences, fostering greater mindfulness and wisdom. The functions of Chitasika extend beyond individual well-being to encompass broader societal and ethical considerations. By cultivating qualities such as loving-kindness, compassion, and ethical conduct, individuals contribute to the creation of more compassionate and inclusive communities, fostering social harmony and collective well-being. However, the study of Chitasika is not without its challenges and complexities. The traditional classification of mental factors may oversimplify the complexities of human psychology, while the hierarchical organization may inadvertently reinforce a sense of spiritual striving and judgment within practitioners.

In navigating these challenges, it is essential for practitioners to approach the study of Chitasika with critical discernment and openness to alternative perspectives. By engaging with the teachings of Chitasika mindfully and compassionately, individuals can harness its transformative potential to cultivate greater inner peace, wisdom, and ethical conduct in their lives and communities. In essence, the study of Chitasika offers a profound invitation to explore the depths of the mind and awaken to the inherent potential for liberation and enlightenment. Through diligent practice and self-inquiry, individuals can embark on a transformative journey towards greater understanding, compassion, and liberation from suffering.

Declaration of Interests

I, Phramaha Chakrapol Acharashubho Thepa, declare that I have no conflicts of interest related to the literature review titled "Chitasika: Mental Factor in Buddhism."

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this literature review, ethical principles were rigorously followed. All sources consulted were properly cited and attributed to their respective authors to ensure academic integrity. Additionally, no confidential or sensitive information was accessed or utilized in this review, thereby upholding the privacy and rights of individuals and organizations mentioned in the literature.

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Definition of Conflicts of Interest

Conflicts of interest may arise when personal, financial, or professional considerations could potentially influence the objectivity or impartiality of the literature review. I prefer to disclose any such conflicts transparently to maintain the credibility and integrity of the review process.

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