

Consciousness

What is consciousness??

Well we all say that we are conscious. But what do we mean by being conscious?? Is there a definition for consciousness!! Philosophers and scientists have been pondering over this issue for hundreds of years in fact thousands of years. Even as we read this, there are many researches taking place on this subject. Yet there is no definite answer to the question. But if we are to talk about it we need to know what we are talking about, otherwise there will not be a focal point and the entire exercise will be futile.

So let us focus on the widely understood meaning of consciousness, which is awareness. When I say awareness I mean one's ability of recognising and understanding their own existence, which is called "The Self". Hence we could simplify this by saying "Self Awareness". If we analyse our self, we can see that each and every action, feeling and emotions are being observed by our self and within our self. We can understand that there is an observer within each and every one of us observing every single action and feeling responsible for making decisions. This function of observing or in other words "The Observer" or the "decision maker" is known as consciousness. Most commonly referred to as "I" in our day to day life. Another better way of explaining this is through sleep, when we say we sleep, what do we mean by that!! Which part of us goes to sleep!!, when we are in deep sleep the self awareness does not exist. When we come out of deep sleep it becomes active. Therefore we are safe to say that the consciousness goes to sleep. So the aspect which goes to sleep is considered as consciousness and we continue...

How does this consciousness come in to existence?? Where is it? Is it in the brain or outside the brain? Is it a product of the brain or not!! Or has it got anything to do with the brain at all!! These are the kind of questions which have been baffling the mankind for ages.

Many have tried to find the answer, but no success yet. The only success we had in this issue is that we managed to successfully divide ourselves in to two groups of opponents. One claims that the consciousness is a brain activity (rational view) and the other claims that the consciousness has nothing to do with the brain and it is completely an independent entity on its own (spiritual view). It is fair to say that there is a third group also which does not claim that consciousness is neither a part of brain nor it is an independent entity. In fact they are not bothered about this issue at all. They continue with life regardless, and they wouldn't give a thought to this concept during their life time at all. Many of us could relate to this third group. However let us now focus on the two opposed views.

Consciousness through Rationality & Science:

People who use rationality believe that consciousness has everything to do with the brain. They use scientific methods to come to such conclusion. As we all know the brain is an organ which is made of cells. Scientists believe that the brain has about hundred billion neurons, each and every one is one way or another responsible for each and every actions and functions of ours. There are many researches taking place to identify the inner workings of the brain. So far many different parts of the

brain have been identified as being responsible for different functions and activities of us. Yet no discoveries have been made as to the areas responsible for consciousness or the inner workings as to this issue of consciousness has been understood. But if we observe ourselves properly and apply rationality we could see that an intuition leads us to believe that consciousness has something to do with the brain. And this is exactly what the science world is trying to discover.

We all use the word "I", when we refer to our self we use this word. But what do we mean by this!! Do we refer to the body as I or something else!! We may not be able to exactly define what we mean by this but we can be certain that we partly mean our body too. The body becomes a component of this word "I" and the other component being the subjective experience of the body and mind. So we all believe that we have a body. When we say that this is my body we mean that we are within our own body and not in someone else's body. When we refer to the parts of our body such as leg, arm, eye...etc...we are surely aware of the fact that it does not belong to someone else. So the identity of one's self remains within their own body.

I was recently listening to some lectures of Professor S.Ramachandran (Director of the centre for brain & cognition, University of California) who is a well-recognised, one of the most influential person in the world of neuro science. Let me quote some of his findings here,

Phantom Limb:

A phantom limb is a condition in which a person feels the sensation that the amputated arm or leg being still there after being amputated. These people experience exactly the same pain and almost all other sensations which they use to feel before the amputation but physically they do not have that part of their body any longer. So what is happening here!! These people are not delusional. They are completely aware of the fact that the particular part of their body is no longer there by looking at themselves. They remember their operation, therefore they remember that they no longer have that part. Yet they feel the sensation of that part being still attached to them. So let's focus here, by seeing, the visual part of the brain understands that the arm or leg is not there, by remembering the operation the memory part of the brain understands that the arm or the leg is not there, but the sensational experience part of the brain still feels that the particular part of the body still exists. Now let us apply the concept of "I" here and ask the question on their behalf, Do I have the arm or not??, Do I have the leg or not??

Let us look into one more of his findings to understand this more clearly, a normal person with both arms is being subjected to test here. He is made to sit in front of a table and asked to place both his arms on the table, and then his left arm is blocked from his vision. A plastic arm is placed in front of him on the table, then synchronised stroking and tapping are applied to his left arm which is blocked from his vision and to the plastic arm which is in front of him. This stroking and tapping continues for a minute or two and suddenly the plastic arm is hit with an hammer and the person pulls his left arm away from the table with the intention of protecting it from being hit by the hammer. To take this experiment further the plastic arm was removed from the table and the synchronised stroking and tapping was applied to the table and the hidden left arm, after a while the table was hit with the hammer and the person still pulls his left arm away to protect it from being hit. So what happened here? He was made to feel that the plastic arm was part of his body, in fact he was made to believe

that the table was part of his body. His identity in other words his awareness of being himself was temporarily transferred to the table. He recognised the table as part of him. Hence the widely understood fact of the consciousness being the self awareness was transferred from place to place. The brain was fooled and therefore the self identification was also fooled too.

So from the above example can we come to any conclusion!!, I think so, it may not be a well founded foregone conclusion but it gives a strong suggestion that the consciousness is an activity of the brain. Even though it is not claimed as the conclusive fact by the science, the rationality definitely makes you lean that way. Does it not ?!.

These kinds of scientific experiments and application of rationality is what gives rise to the concept that the consciousness is part of the brain activity. In fact some say that the consciousness is a product of the brain. And it is believed to be an outcome of the complicated wiring and firing of the neurons in the brain.

In the foregoing part of this article we touched about the subject "I" which is the identification of the self also known as the consciousness. One component of this identification is the identity of the body which is recognised in the brain with the aid of our senses. The above experiments relates to this function. But the other component of this self identification is the subjective experience of the mind. Can this be tested by science? This is actually a difficult problem for the science to test. Because, in all scientific experiments a subject and an object is involved. The person who does or observes the test becomes the subject and the item or the person being tested becomes the object. Whereas in our case the experience of the self is a subjective matter, so how can this be tested as an object!! It's impossible. Hence the closest we can do is studying some one else's neuronal activities with regards to their feeling of the self. So let us bear this in mind.

As discussed above, if the consciousness is a activity or the product of the brain, is this the most important and superior function of the brain or is it a complete useless function which only creates all these confusion and complication!! Well there are some philosophical views which says that the consciousness is a delusion created in the mind by the brain activities. Can we all accept this!!, of course not, if we do not feel conscious then we cannot exist. As a matter of fact we will not feel the existence of anything if we do not feel conscious. Therefore the mere existence of our self becomes questionable. Hence we got to accept the fact that we are conscious and therefore it cannot be delusional. As the feeling of being conscious proves to be the most important function of our existence, it got to be the most if not one of the most important function of the brain. In fact it leads us to believe that it is the superior function of the brain. Is it not?!, Of course it is.

Now let's dig bit deeper, there are countless memories stored in the brain of each and every one of us. All our experience in life is stored there. And then we, (when I say we I am referring to the "conscious being" within us) revisit these memories and pick and choose whatever we want. In fact this is how we make choices. And the choices we make become our life. This is exactly the process of life we go through and that's how we all live our life. Hence the decision maker is the conscious being within us. Therefore the consciousness got to be the superior function. Coming to such conclusion seems reasonable and acceptable.

But on the other hand let's look into another simple scenario which we all would have experienced many times or at least once. Say you are sitting down to watch a movie or some program on TV, half

way through you are falling sleep. You wake up and realise that you have fallen to sleep, so you pick yourself and are determined to watch the rest of the movie, But again your brain shuts down and you are fallen to sleep. So what is happening here!!, your consciousness has decided to watch the movie, but your brain over rides the wish of the consciousness and makes you to go to sleep. So how could consciousness be a superior function!! It appears to be a very weak function. Is it not!!, so now, what is it? Is it an important superior function or a useless delusion!! I'm sure you are getting confused here. Are you? If so I am very happy, because it means that I am succeeding in my attempt which is making you think about this complicated subject. Yes this is how complicated our subject matter is. So far all the scientific experiments and rational thinking have paved way only to confusion and complication. Well, confusion is the first step towards clarity. So there is no harm in being confused about this as long as we keep working at it. However complicated it may be, but so far all what we have discussed indicates that the consciousness has something to do with the brain. Let us now look into it from a different perspective,....

Consciousness through Spirituality

So far we have viewed the concept of consciousness through the eyes of rationality now let us see it through spirituality. But before we go any further let us be clear of what spirituality is since it is widely misunderstood as religion now-a- days. Spirituality is the practice of philosophical thoughts whereas religion is ritualistic act. Since many thousands of years ago the mankind has been baffled with the metaphysical nature of the creation and the existence. Not only about the creation and existence of the human, but about the entire creation and existence of the universe. So they started thinking. And the compilation of their profound thoughts of that time were carried to the ordinary people through the religious practice of that time and place. Such as the Vedhanthas of Hindu religion and the practices of Zen, Buddhism and so on. As these thoughts were very profound in nature they were very difficult for an ordinary person to understand. Hence they were simplified through religious symbols and practices. But I would say as time went pass that attempt back fired. As it is the fundamental nature of human to be instantaneously controlled by the senses rather than intellect, they simply started following the religious rituals and failed to concentrate and understand the philosophical thoughts behind it. Not only that, they in fact went on to expand the rituals due to misconstrued concepts of those philosophies. And today it has led to so much of confusion and conflicts,hence the purpose has been completely nullified.so let us be clear about this and not focus on this. Our focus will be on the philosophical thoughts only. There are many different ancient philosophies, but the fundamental nature of all of those are in relation to the understanding of the metaphysics of us and the surrounding and to find a way to harmoniously live alongside everything.

So according the spiritual concept, the consciousness is an entity on its own. It has got nothing to do with the brain, it is not a product of the brain. In fact it is the utmost superior existence in the universe and everything else we see is the manifestation of this consciousness. This is exactly how it is defined in the vedantic philosophies (The consciousness is also referred to as the soul in the spiritual philosophies). Even in there you may see slight contradiction and differences and this is due to different schools of thoughts. One may say that the consciousness is one, and that is the superior and only permanent existence in the universe and everything else is the manifestation of this consciousness which are perishable. Whereas the other school of thought may divide the

consciousness into two. One being the supreme consciousness or the supreme soul (Paramathma) which is permanent and all the other living things are the secondary beings (Jeevathmas) and the aim of the secondary perishable beings is to reach the supreme consciousness and merge with it. These are the main two different views which are known as Advaita philosophy and Dvaita philosophy. As I mentioned earlier there are many different ancient philosophies which derive from different parts of the world, however I am quoting Vedanta philosophies as I am more familiar with it.

Now we turn our attention to proving the existence of this consciousness. How can we or rather the spirituality can prove the existence of consciousness as an independent entity!! Well the answer is, that it cannot be proven. Certain principles and concepts of spirituality cannot be proven by science. It relies on faith. In fact there is a lot of thinking involved in this process, rationality is also applied. But the ultimate acceptance of that process relies on faith. So the concept of consciousness cannot be objectified in order to prove the existence, but it is a subjective matter. It can only be understood, realised and practiced. So we can only research how this practice could help us live our lives. Therefore let us plunge into that.

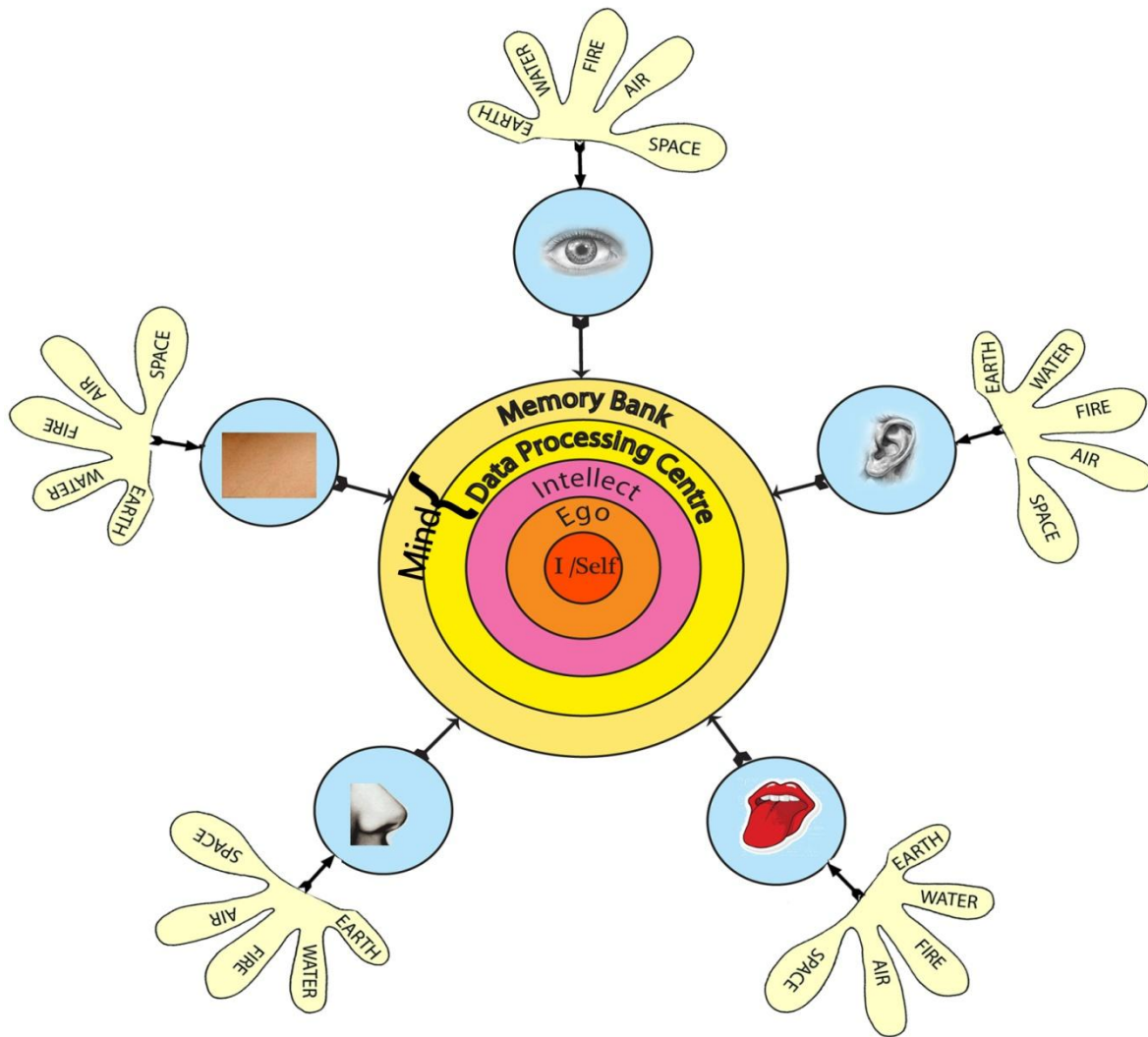
When we ask the question how this is going to help life, first of all we need to understand and define what life is, in English language the word "life" has two different meanings. One refers to the life forms or the living beings the opposite of which is death. Whereas the other refers to the act of living, which begins at the time of birth and continues till the moment of the last breath. In many other languages these two different aspects are identified in different words in order to explain the different meanings. But unfortunately in English there is only one word which is "life". So when we think of how the spiritual philosophy will help us to live our life, we concentrate on the second meaning of life which is the process or the act of living from the time of birth till death.

Almost every day all of us talk about life either in an appreciative manner or on a condemning manner. Very often we ask ourselves ' what is life??' frustratingly. But is there a definition for this life!. Maybe a few would have attempted to define and written about it, and there may be different opinions and views about it. However I would define it as follows and would like to explain it through the spiritual philosophy,

Life is an outcome of a data process when the data are collated from the universe by using the five senses of the human who is none other than the manifestation of the five elements which makes the universe itself.

Yes, this is exactly the technical process (if we may call it) which happens during any one's life. As we all know we are all part of the universe which is made of five elements which eventually breaks down to atoms and further. Therefore we humans are nothing but made of the same stuff which makes everything else. Then we have our five senses, as we all know our life is completely controlled by our senses. All our knowledge and experiences are within the limitation of our senses. So any information which comes to us from our surroundings through our five senses makes and shapes our life. Let me illustrate this through a diagram,

"WHO AM I"



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The definition mentioned above is exactly reflected here, The universe which surrounds us is made of the five elements, then we human collect information through our five senses from this surroundings. Once this happens the data process begins, first all the information we collect are stored in the brain. These stored information becomes choices in life, by processing all the information we make a choice, then that choice becomes our life with the aid of our intellect and ego.

Let us see this through a simple example, whilst in the womb itself we start collecting information from our surrounding with the aid of our senses, once born it increases, and when attained the school going age we are bombarded with plenty of information. Out of these information everybody makes different choices, let's say one makes the choice of becoming a doctor, and from that moment onwards the life of that person takes the route of what is needed to become a doctor and once become a doctor the journey continues further in that direction. This will include wearing a white coat, a stethoscope around the neck, going to the hospital every day, dealing with patients every day and so on. So in this long journey if you take a moment and think back, you will find that the life you have been leading is nothing but the choice what you made. This is exactly what happens to every single one of us. Whatever the choice we may make, whatever the paths we may take and where ever we may end up in our life they are all nothing but the choices we made from the information we collected through our senses from the surrounding.

Since the life shapes up as above, let's see the roll of the spiritual philosophy in it, Once the information is collected through the senses and passed to the brain, there onwards the process is divided into stages. The first stage of which is known as the function of the mind. At this level we are known to behave emotionally, we do react to the things we see, hear, taste and so on. At this level our actions are controlled by our senses. The concept of "I" awakens at this point and identifies itself as part of those emotions. Hence we make emotional decisions. Most of us find ourselves at this level of function most of the time. Since the decisions we make at this level are emotional we subject ourselves to feelings such as happiness and sadness. Hence the subject of "I" identifies itself with these feelings and feel either happy or sad all the time during the life. This practice is not acceptable to the spiritual philosophy, the idea of the philosophy is to elevate us from the clutch of these feelings and to help us lead a peaceful life.

In order to achieve that, it now moves on to the second stage which is called the act of intellect. At this level we do not react emotionally to the collected information. Rather the intellect comes into play. For the intellect to come into play we need more time for the information to sink in, and then for it to be analysed, weighed the pros and cons and then make a decision. The decisions made at this level are made with more clarity. Hence it is not subjected to feelings such as sadness or happiness. We tend to go beyond the clutch of such feelings and feel strength and steadiness in accepting the reality in life and be comfortable with it. At this point the concept of "I" identifies itself with the intellect. But according to the philosophy even this identification of the self with the intellect is not the final identification.

Hence we move on to the next level which is ego. This functionality actually exists in the previous two stages also. Ego is a very important function in every one of us. In a way that is the identity of the self. Without that identification nothing else can exist or nothing else can be identified. In order for us to identify or recognise something or someone else we first need to identify ourselves. Whether it is, the self's identification of itself with the emotions at the first stage or the identification with the intellect at the second stage, that remains the final identification of the self. In other words the self is known as ego. But we have a problem here, as we all know the ego is never considered to be a good aspect of life. Thousands of years this is what we were thought. Why is it?, if ego is the final resting place of the self, if none of us can exist without the existence of the ego, then why is it considered a bad omen!!.

Well according to the spiritual philosophy, the self's identification of itself with the ego always leads to a worldly, materialistically motivated life. And this is where all what we consider as problems lies. If we observe carefully we can understand that every single action of ourselves, however small it may be, it is always towards our survival in this world. So at this level, the self (ego) is attachment bound. Whether it is, emotionally or intellectually, but the self attaches itself to that given situation and action and identifies being part of it. It actually becomes the subject of the situation or action. And therefore it subjects itself to whatever the outcome. Hence we are all subjected to whatever life brings at us and lead our lives affected by it one way or another and fully attached to it. But the purpose of the spiritual philosophy is to release us from this clutch and elevate us to lead an unaffected, peaceful life. So how does it do that?

This is where it talks about the difference between subjective experience and objective experience. As I mentioned above the ego always identifies itself either with the body, mind or intellect or with more than one of these at any given time. Therefore the ego subjects itself to the experiences felt by the body, mind or the intellect. When such experience is pleasurable the ego identifies itself as being happy and when the experience is not pleasurable or falls below expectation it identifies itself as being sad or unhappy. As this becomes the day to day life the ego is caught in this vicious cycle of life and subjects itself to the subjective experiences of life. According to the spiritual philosophy, if the ego is to relieve itself from this cycle then it needs to stop subjecting itself to the subjective experiences. It simply has to become an observer of any such situation. When that happens all the experiences of life becomes objects. It is actually a clever way of dealing with the problems. Think for a moment, we experience a problem because we are there with the problem, if we are not there then we do not experience the problem. Is it not!!!.

If we all can bring ourselves to this level then we all can lead an unaffected peaceful life. This is actually a state of mind. In order to achieve this state of mind one has to work hard in the path of self-realisation. The quest of self-inquiry and the practice of meditation are very much recommended in order for one to achieve this state of mind. So far we have seen the ego as the identification of the self. But in this journey of self-realisation, first the ego has to realise that it is not the body, when this happens the body becomes an object and any such experience of the body becomes an objective experience. Then the ego has to realise that it is not the mind, when this happens it elevates itself from the subjective experiences of the mind. Then the ego has to realise that it is not even the intellect. When this happens the ego simply becomes an observer of the body, mind, and intellectual experience. At this stage the ego negates itself and disappears. When this happens **the real self reveals itself**. This becomes the final identification of the self. And the diagram illustrates this. When one achieves this state of mind, then it's called self-realisation. At this point the realisation becomes a glorified feeling, the self is not attached to any feelings or objects, it elevates itself beyond everything in the universe and becomes the universal feeling itself. This state is described in various words such as godly feeling, realisation of god, the realisation of bhramam or the **consciousness**. Yes, this state of the self is considered to be the **consciousness**. Since this feeling of consciousness is described as the ultimate feeling and such feeling lies above everything which exists in the universe and it is unaffected by any of the components of the universe, it is known to be an entity on its own and believed to be existing outside the faculty of the brain.

In whatever the name or way it may be described and understood, ultimately it paves a way for us to lead a calm, peaceful, unaffected life. The philosophy fulfils its purpose and achieves its goal.

So the rational and scientific argument of consciousness being an activity or a product of the brain and the spiritual believe of consciousness being an independent entity existing outside the brain is not reconciled. Will it ever be reconciled!! Can it be reconciled !!. The answer is don't know.

However I would like to make a humble suggestion and request to the scientific world, I am sure they are already thinking and probably have embarked on researching on my suggestion but if they are not then they should research the possibility of thoughts and memories existing outside the brain. For example when we speak, the sound generated in one's voice box is transformed into sound waves and travels through the space before reaching the other's ear. Such waves can be detected with right equipment and that is how today's communication is reaching unexpected milestones. Likewise, the activities of one's brain, when the neurons are at work creates an electromagnetic waves and if we can discover if such waves can exist outside the parameters of the brain and if so, if it can last for a long or an indefinite period and if our brain is capable of tapping into such source which influences the thoughts or on the contrary the field which exists outside is what influences and controls one's thought pattern then such finding may throw some light in reconciling the above issue. Let's hope that science will bring an answer to this thought.