CHAPTER FIVE

THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE SAGE:
SEARLE AND THE SIXTH PATRIARCH ON THE
BRAIN AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Robert E. Allinson

At first blush it would appear that there is very little in common between Searle and the Sixth Patriarch. Searle, a leading analytic philosopher, views consciousness as an emergent feature of the brain. In various formulation of this thesis, Searle states:

...mental states are both caused by the operations of the brain and realized in the structure of the brain (and the rest of the central nervous system).1

Mental phenomena are caused by neurophysiological processes in the brain and are themselves features of the brain.2

The Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, discusses consciousness in a different way, with a view to pointing individuals toward the achievement of a special state of understanding that involves a spiritual liberation:

When sentient beings realize the Essence of Mind, they are Buddhas. If a Buddha is under delusion in his Essence of Mind, he is then an ordinary being.3

Searle analyzes the concepts of brain and consciousness in a way to attempt to show the connection between them. Hui Neng refers to mind or consciousness (he does not directly discuss the brain) in order to free the subject knower from a state of unliberated consciousness. The concept of a liberated consciousness in the writings of the Sixth Patriarch represents a higher level of consciousness than a non-liberated

---

consciousness. This parallels Searle’s concept that consciousness is a higher level development except that in the case of the Sixth Patriarch, it is a higher level of consciousness that is realized and not a higher level of brain functioning.

Let us attempt to delve more deeply into the differences between these two thinkers. In the case of Searle, the different understanding of consciousness that we would achieve is a sense that will eliminate the concept of a floating consciousness. Consciousness will be understood to be a biological functioning of the brain. It will not be a separate entity at all. We will have reduced our concept of consciousness. Consciousness will be understood to be a feature of the brain.

What exactly does it mean to say that consciousness is a feature of the brain? I know what it means for my nose to be a feature of my face. It is a visible part of my face and it has a specific function. It has a special location. It does something. It also possesses weight, colour and shape. It can be touched. It can be smelled. Consciousness, on the other hand, if we take as an illustration of consciousness the content of my thought that I am tired, this thought that I am tired does not possess weight, color, shape, and so on. If Searle were putting forth a mind-brain identity thesis, then we could presumably identify consciousness with parts of the brain and then it would possess the kind of qualities that my nose possesses. I do not think he is presenting a mind-brain identity thesis unless he means that consciousness is identical with the higher levels of brain processes. When I say my nose is a feature of my face, I do not only mean that my nose functions in order to smell. I also mean that it has a long shape and sticks out from my face and is above my mouth and so on. Searle does not want to say that the mind is only the functioning of the brain. He seems to say that the mind is the result of the functioning of the brain and a feature of the brain.

My nose is feature of my face but is not the result of the functioning of my face. At some points, as we shall see below, he identifies the mind with firing of neurons. But this would not differentiate the mind from my nose. I can correlate my smelling with the firing of certain neurons. But when I say my nose is a feature of my face, I am not referring to the firing of certain neurons. If my mind is a feature in this sense it might be best to describe the mind as an internal part of the brain at a time when that internal part is functioning in a special way. The mind is the activity or functioning of certain brain parts. It is both the brain and the result of the brain in the sense that it is the neurons and the firing of the neurons. But this is not quite it, either. For it is