THE IMPORTANCE OF INTENTION

One of the most important concepts in Buddhism is cetana, typically translated as intention or volition. It is one of the universal cetasikas, the conditioning factors influencing self-state organizing processes. The functioning of cetana is synonymous with karma (kamma in Pali). Cetana has the fundamental function of organizing various conditional responses to stimuli, initializing the formation of transient self-state organizations, preparing for enactment. Here is a quote that clarifies this process:

Cetana...is the mental factor that is concerned with the actualization of a goal, that is, the conative or volitional aspect of cognition. Thus it is rendered volition. The Commentaries explain that cetana organizes its associated mental factors in acting upon the object. Its characteristic is the state of willing, its function is to accumulate (kamma), and its manifestation is coordination. Its proximate cause is the associated states. Just as a chief pupil recites his own lesson and also makes the other pupils recite their own lessons, so when volition starts to work on its object, it sets the associated states to do their tasks as well. Volition is the most significant mental factor in generating kamma, since it is volition that determines the ethical quality of the action. (Bodhi, *a Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, pg. 80*)

In the *Atthasalini*, a text of the Pali Canon, this is found:

There is no such thing as volition in the four planes of existence without the characteristic of coordinating; all volition has it. But the function of 'willing' is only in moral (kusala) and immoral (akusala) states...It has directing as manifestation. It arises directing associated states, like the chief disciple, the chief carpenter, etc. who fulfil their own and others' duties (*I, Part IV, Chapter I, 111*)

Modern neuroscientific research points to two different categorical functions regarding intention: involuntary and voluntary. The involuntary mode is instinctual, and is considered a “bottom-up” function. An example would be the involuntary aspect of breathing in and out. The voluntary mode is conditioned and is considered a “top-down” function. An example would be the intentional regulation of the breath, such as practiced with yogic breathing or playing a wind instrument.

The practice of mindfulness of breathing generally doesn’t involve conscious control of the breath; *rather it emphasizes the intention to persistently observe the sensations of breathing during a normal cycle of breathing in and out*. There two manifestations of intention here: the involuntary *physical* intention to breath, and the voluntary *mental* intention to mindfully investigate the sensations associated with breathing. We intend to notice the onset of the in-breath and continue to intentionally monitor the changing sensations associated with the remainder of the in-breath, then repeat this intentional observation for the out-breath. This focuses attention on the relatively simple phenomena that occur physically, rather than the more complex phenomena of thinking*. With repeated diligent practice, we develop the ability to intentionally investigate any additional mental phenomena that occur during the process of breathing.*

In the book “The Mind Illuminated”, Culadasa discusses intentionality, beginning on page 196:

In one form or another, intention drives everything we feel, think, say, and do. Intention even determines what goes on in our mind, including what we pay attention to and ignore. Whenever more than one course of action is possible—which is almost always—the decisions we make and our ensuing actions are determined by our intentions.

He develops the concept of “sub-minds” that represent the functions of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, somatosensory experiences and the ability to think, which occur in different areas of the brain, outside of conscious awareness. The involuntary and voluntary modes of functioning mentioned above apply to these processes, which are called in Buddhist psychology “the six sense bases”. Each of these processes involves the functioning of intention—visual intention, hearing intention, etc.

Intentions “compete for attention”—that is, which energetic, coordinated impulse emerging from the sense bases will emerge into conscious awareness, and what subsequent intentions regarding that awareness will be generated? The example of the sound of a barking dog was mentioned in a previous talk. The sound, as raw data stimulating the auditory processes, activates a perceptual process, which “singles out” that sound; this is the initial operation of intention, associating the sound with prior exposure to similar stimuli. The next level of intentionality links the perceived “dog barking” with the emotional feeling processes and associated memories stored in the “discriminating mind” sub-mind, the ability to think, evaluated by emotional potencies associated with the memories. If the memories are pleasant, attention will have an attractive tone; if the memories are unpleasant, attention will have and aversive tone, and if the memories have no pleasant or unpleasant associations, it is unlikely that the dog barking will generate any strong impulse for ongoing attention. The pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings each are coordinated through the process of intentionality.

The cultivation of mindful investigation that begins with intentionally attending to breath sensations unifies the coordinated interactions between the different sense bases/sub-minds. The result of this coordination is the ongoing flow of stable attention and tranquility, samadhi/passadhi. There is minimal “competition” between the sub-minds for predominance, so the effects of craving and clinging are minimal. This creates a different functionality of intention—the energy that would normally be expended as a result of the sub-mind conflicts is freed up, available to intentionally investigate how the mind actually operates, that is, investigating the process of self-state organization rather than the incidental content of experience. The process of responding to the stimulus of the dog bark sound would be understood, *not as a demand for ongoing attention and reaction by a frightened or delighted self, but as a phenomenon of nature*. This is the practice of vipassana!