Observing How The Mind Works

Over the many years of my studies and practice involving mindfulness meditation, I have found several commentaries and books that have been of benefit. These notes are intended to help me clarify and integrate the various views I encountered; I hope they are useful to whoever reads them.

In discussions of the previous weeks, we’ve reviewed why practicing is beneficial, strategies for cultivating and maintaining a consistent daily meditation practice, and how to integrate mindfulness skills developed with formal sitting practice into daily life routines. Last week’s discussion reviewed the benefits of a phrase often found in the Pali Canon: “Ardent, alert and mindful”. This refrain emphasizes the importance of a persistent, engaged investigation of the changing nature of internal processes, both sensory and cognitive, organized around mindfulness of breathing meditation.

The current topic suggests ways that certain conceptual understandings of how the mind operates will provide the most beneficial applications of ardency, supporting insights that liberate the mind from dukkha, that is, distress and confusion.

TRADITIONAL VIEW OF HOW THE MIND WORKS: Buddhist psychology suggests that the mind, that is, conscious awareness, can only exist in the process of reflecting sensory experience, including thoughts and moods, in ways similar to how a motion picture screen reflects the projection of the film. This view says there is no ongoing consciousness independent of what is reflected through it—related to the motion picture metaphor, that there is no screen prior to the projecting of the image. This contradicts the view prevalent during the time of the Buddha, that is, the mind is eternally a manifestation of Brahma, and current experience occurs as the result of the interaction between earlier experience (accumulated during previous lifetimes as karma) and current circumstances. A person’s karma and current circumstances emerge out of the will of Brahma, and the intended outcome of meditation practice is to purify the mind sufficiently that consciousness manifests an unsullied reflection of the will of Brahma; that purification provides liberation from dukkha. The Buddhist view suggests that what determines liberation is a person’s ethical purification, with ethics determined through Right Speech, Action and Livelihood rather than the will of a supernatural entity.

CURRENT VIEWS OF HOW THE MIND OPERATES: Modern views of the mind are being developed from scientific research rather than the will of a supernatural entity. This view is agnostic, that is, doesn’t necessarily support or dispute the existence of a supernatural entity. Instead, the focus of speculation is about how different areas of the nervous and endocrine systems manifest consciousness. This focus is often termed the “soft problem” of consciousness, that is, understanding the various functions of the brain and body as they are activated or inactivated. In this way, the area of the brain associated with a particular function of consciousness, for example, solving arithmetical problems, can be observed. The “hard problem” of consciousness remains, that is, does the body/mind process produce consciousness, or does consciousness simply require the functions of the body/mind to operate as a “receiver” of some as yet undiscovered phenomena that may or may not be supernatural.

John Yates, who’s used the name “Culadasa” in his so far only published book is “The Mind Illuminated”, has suggested some ways to understand how consciousness functions that I have found useful as guides during recent retreats.

CULADASA’S VIEWS: He makes a distinction between *focal attention* and *peripheral awareness*. I referred to this understanding in an earlier discussion, using the image of the cone-shaped form of light energy focused by a magnifying glass exposed to sunlight. The cone represents a coherent organization of light energy, with the most intense energy at the tip of the cone. That is comparable to how the energy of the mind operates during concentration practices. He calls this *focal attention*, which may be precisely and closely organized (the tip of the cone), or more broadly organized in other areas of the cone. The tip of the cone represents a highly concentrated mind, such as with jhana practice, or more broadly organized, as with vipassana practice. *Peripheral awareness* is just that—mental phenomena that are not in the cone of focused attention. One way to understand this is what happens during a stage production: a spotlight (focused attention) illuminates a single part of the stage—the areas of performance elsewhere are peripheral, that is, not spotlighted, so they aren’t the focus of attention. The focus of the spotlight can be tightly organized to illuminate a single player, or broadened to illuminate a group of players; in any case, the spotlight brings vivid (ardent, alert and mindful) attention to how the production proceeds. The mind can rapidly alternate focal attention from primary objects to peripheral objects—this is how we can recognized environmental circumstances without being distracted by them.

Another important concept that Culadasa presents involves the degrees of distraction and energy in the mind. He describes *gross distraction/forgetting* (The Buddhist hindrance of restlessness) and *strong dullness* (The Buddhist hindrance of sloth and torpor). The goals in the early stages mentioned in the book involve the ability to overcome gross distraction/forgetfulness and strong dullness. At more advanced stages, the obstacles are *subtle distraction* and *subtle dullness*.

*Gross distraction* represents: “When some mental or sensory object becomes the primary focus of attention and pushes the meditation object into the background but not out of awareness” (The Mind Illuminated, page 419). When the intention to stay focused on the primary object is sufficiently weakened by the attraction of the distraction, *forgetting* occurs and attention to the primary object is completely out of awareness until the meditator once again becomes “ardent, alert and mindful”, moving focused attention back to the primary object.

*Subtle distraction* represents: “Brief moments of attention to distractions in the background of peripheral awareness, while the meditation object continues as the primary focus” (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

*Strong dullness* equates with sloth and torpor: “A significant lack of mental energy that often manifests as drowsiness. In meditation, attention still clings to the breath, but the focus is very diffused and weak, and sensations are vaguely perceived…” (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

*Subtle dullness* is more difficult to identify: “A slight dullness that makes the meditation object less vivid and intense and causes peripheral awareness to fade. This type of dullness has a pleasant quality and is therefore easy to overlook”. (The Mind Illuminated, page 425).

## It is easy to misperceive subtle distraction as vipassana practice, particularly when co-occurring with subtle dullness. The antidote for these subtle hindrances is to cultivate the functions in the phrase “ardent, alert and mindful” persistently. (For more information on cultivating these functions, see the previously archived post “[Stages Of Breath Awareness January 18 2017](http://orlandoinsightmeditation.org/2017/stages-of-breath-awareness-january-18-2017/)”).

The result of the skillful overcoming of subtle distraction and subtle dullness is termed by Culadasa as *Samatha* [pronounced shah-mah-tah]: “A very special mental state achieved through the cultivation of stable attention and mindfulness. *Samatha* has five characteristics. The first is effortlessly stable attention (*samadhi*). The second is powerful mindfulness (*sati-sampajanna*), which means being fully conscious not only of the immediate objects of attention, but of everything else happening in the mind moment by moment. The last three characteristics are joy (*piti*), tranquility (*passadhi*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). (The Mind Illuminated, page 424). This is equivalent to the Buddhist term *upacara samadhi*, (*access concentration*). I typically refer to this quality of attention as *samadhi/passadhi*.

Next week’s discussion will focus on Culadasa’s concepts for the further development of samatha and vipassana.