UNDERSTANDING INTENTION

Recently the topic of karma was discussed, on January 10, 2018 and then posted. During that discussion, the congruence of karma and *cetana*, translated as *intention* or *volition*, was established. Cetana has a fundamental “universal” conditioning function in the mind, which means that every moment of awareness is conditioned by intention, along with other universal or circumstantial mind conditioners (google “cetasikas” for more information). Nina Van Gorkum in her definitive book entitled “Cetasikas” (page 49-50), has this to offer about cetana (the word *citta* refers to a circumstantial state of mind):

“The characteristic of cetana is coordinating. It coordinates the citta and the other cetasikas it accompanies on the object. Citta cognizes the object, it is the leader in knowing the object. The cetasikas which accompany citta share the same object, but they each have to fulfill their own task. For example, *phassa* contacts the object, *vedana* feels, experiences the “taste” of the object, and *sanna* “marks” and remembers the object. Cetana sees to it that the other dhammas it arises together with fulfill their tasks with regard to the object they all share”.

The author further states that an important function of cetana is motivational, that is, it not only organizes the various conditioning factors, it also fosters a “momentum”, which blends each state of mind moment towards manifestation, which can be towards action *or* inhibition.

Another traditional understanding of intentions comes from understanding the transition from a feeling about incoming sensations into the meaning-making processes of awareness. Mindfulness of feelings of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations just as phenomena before the internal narrative process takes over as craving and clinging can provide significant understanding of the nature of intention, experienced as the impulse towards action that immediately accompanies the raw, unprocessed feeling of an experience. This practice is part of the concept of paticca *samuppada*, dependent origination, within the discipline of Buddhist psychology (google “contingent provisional emergence Buddhism” for more information).

A neuroscientific understanding of intention is described in “The Mindful Brain”, a book by Daniel Siegel, a meditation teacher who’s training blends neuroscience and developmental psychology, on pp 177-179:

“Intentions create an integrated state of priming, a gearing up of our neural system to be in the mode of that specific intention: we can be ready to receive, to sense, to focus, to behave in a certain manner. Intention is not just about motor action. For example, if we have the intention to be open, our brains likely will create a priming of areas involved in the inflow of neural firing from the five senses, [and] interoception of the sixth sense [the mind]…

…William Freeman (2000) supported this view as he stated that “a way of making sense of emotion is to identify it with the intention to act in the near future, and then to note increasing levels of the complexity of contextualization. Most basically, emotion is outward movement. It is the stretch forth of intentionality…” (p.214). He addressed the neural dimensions of this emotion/intention correlation, stating: “the frontal lobe refines and elaborates the predictions of future states and possible outcomes toward which intentional action is directed. The dorsal and lateral areas of the frontal lobe are concerned with logic and reasoning in prediction. The medial and ventral areas are concerned with social skills and the capacity for deep interpersonal relationships. These contributions can be summarized as foresight and insight (Freeman, 2000, p.225)”

In the same book, Siegel suggests that the more capable a person becomes in monitoring and managing intentions internally, the more likely it that person’s ability to accurately interpret another person’s intentions. Since we are inherently social creatures, this ability is quite beneficial, and is an important component of what Daniel Goleman describes in his book “Emotional Intelligence”: the ability to understand and relate to another’s mental processes, along with the ability to effectively negotiate one’s needs in relationships.

HOW CAN I CULTIVATE MINDFULNESS OF INTENTIONS?

In a moment of *wholesome* self-state organization, the cetasika of mindfulness is included, as mindfulness is listed as one of the cetasikas present in any wholesome self-state organizing process. This inclusion supports awareness of the function of intentionality *as it is occurring*. The practice of mindfully noting intentionality is fostered through the initial application of two to other important cetasikas, *vitakka* and *vicara*. Vitakka is the orientation of attention to a focal point, and vicara involves sustaining attention on that focal point. One of the primary training instructions regarding mindfulness of breathing meditation is to mindfully and intentionally bring attention to the beginning of the inbreath (vitakka) and sustain that focal attention on the changing sensational nature of the inbreath (vicara), then repeat that operation for the outbreath.

Intention is universally operating, whether the emerging self-state organization is wholesome or not. When mindfulness is not coordinated with intention, dukkha is the result. Mindfully bringing attention to the breath through vitakka and vicara manifests wholesome self-state organization. Persisting in deciding mindfully to attend to the breath strengthens the emergence and activation of beneficial self-state organization. This is one of the valuable results that comes from formal mindfulness of breathing meditation. The neural interconnections associated with aiming and sustaining mindfully will generalize to also being mindful when attention is diverted other mental phenomena and the ability to disregard the distraction literally changes the way one’s consciousness operates.

As one’s practice of this process matures, the ability to mindfully track the channels of attention can operate more effectively whether going back to the breath or not. In this way, the ability to combine the intention to be mindful and the intention to monitor the aiming and sustaining process generalizes, that is, becomes available and useful when not formally practicing mindfulness of breathing meditation. Of course, cultivating the ability to intentionally “check in” with breath sensations during the day helps in the generalizing process as well.

On retreat, there is support for cultivating mindful attention in an ongoing way, from waking to bedtime. Mindful walking, eating, bathing, etc. One develops an increasingly detailed awareness of emerging thoughts and impulses towards action, and can become much more specifically aware of intentionality. Of course, this can be accomplished during daily life routines as well. One suggestion is to place little prompting cards in one’s environment, such as “be mindful” or “present moment”; these can help integrate mindfulness of intentions more thoroughly into life experience.