**THE SELFING PROCESS**

We tend to think of the self as a thing, such as when someone talks about his or her ego. This is one of the major obstacles blocking insight into the absence of and enduring, autonomous self. I’ve been using the term *selfing* for several years now, and apparently others have as well. What we call ego is more clearly understood as an *ongoing, dynamic sorting process*. We are constantly bombarded with stimulation through the 5 sense doors—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and the array of sensations experienced in the body such as temperature, pressure, pain, hunger, lust and so on. This is what Buddhist psychology terms *rupa*, form. Then there is the mind, that is the function of the brain that analyzes, plans and manifests the selfing process; this is called *nama*.

The mind functions on many levels and the interactions and coordination between the different neural systems is extremely complex. Each operation for processing the sense doors can be located in different areas of the brain, and other neural pathways connect these processing centers interactively. In considering the processing of embodied sensations, the peripheral nervous system is also involved. Considering the emotional system, the various hormonal glands situated outside of the brain are also involved. There is even current research suggesting that the term “gut feeling” has some validity—the rich mix of biological organisms as they interact with the lining of the gut can have significant influence on mood and may even be associated with clinical depression!

Culadasa, in his book “The Mind Illuminated”, suggests the functioning of the mind and consciousness can be compared to the Board of Directors of a corporation. Each nama/rupa process “has a chair at the table” in terms of what we become consciously aware of and act on. These various sub-minds “submits reports onto the table” of consciousness; the “report” that has the most impact on conscious behavior and influences behavioral responses in a situation. The internal narrative process “gives voice to” the “consensus decisions” of the interactive parts and prepares the body for action.

Without trying to reproduce Culadasa’s concepts, here’s what I suggest for consideration:

* When stimulation occurs simultaneously in each of the sense doors, it is initially processed cognitively by the amygdala, a cluster of neurons in the midbrain, operating interactively with another cluster next to it, the hippocampus. These two cooperatively make a quick assessment—*friend or foe, food or poison*?
* This initial impulse is primarily a feeling that is primarily instinctual, with minimal reference to prior experience. The urgency of the feeling can be strong or weak. It starts the process of preparing to respond to the initial assessment through another cluster of neurons, the nucleus accumbens, that functions to prepare the body for responding.
* A cluster of neurons disperses the initial feeling to the areas of the brain that call up memories that have some similarity in terms of the initial impression. The memories that have strong emotional elements are easily stimulated in terms of the friend or foe process. Additionally, memories that have a strong familiarity, such as how to get to a particular address can also be stimulated; such memories are habits. However, the emotionally potent memories are generally more compelling and will “jump to the head of the line” in terms of identification, planning, narrative and in forming responses.
* This process happens in a small fraction of a second, and the process is being fed a stream of impulses, each of which is felt, assessed associated with prior memories and sets up behavioral options multiple times a second.
* This quickly forms a stream of associations throughout the brain and body, creating craving and clinging when the mind is not able to quickly assess and modify potential responses. Current research suggests that within a second or so of mental processing that lacks mindfulness, the associated memories cohere into identifying a “self” that must be defended or gratified, even though new data may counter the conclusion the mind has jumped to. We are literally making life up as it happens, somewhat comparable to improvisational theater!

Considering Culadasa’s boardroom metaphor, the various sub-mind processes of the senses, the sub-minds of the amygdala/hippocampus/nucleus accumbens operations, the sub-minds of differing memory traces in the association cortex, and the sub-mind of the prefrontal cortex (which provides a coordinating and regulating function) are all trying to gain attention and reactions in conscious awareness, vying for supremacy. Self-state conflicts arise—I may intend to mindfully observe the breath, but a strong signal from the “pain in the knee” sub-mind overrides attention to the breath. This is accompanied by an internal narrative demand to move the body to alleviate the pain. Likewise, the sub-mind process associated with the ideal meditator is in conflict with the sub-mind that insists that ending the meditation period takes priority. (Read pages 205-212 in The Mind Illuminated).

There is a crucial concept in Buddhist psychology called *paticca samuppada*, typically translated as *dependent origination*. I prefer the term *contingent provisional emergence* as more useful (Look it up through Google.). This concept demonstrates how moments of selfing form, come to fulfillment and then dissipate, multiple times a second. The concept informs us that the ability to be mindful of the feeling tone, (The quality of urgent impulse to either want or not want an experience) combined with the ability to investigate the characteristics of the forming self-state organization and determine if it is wholesome or unwholesome, then let go of the unwholesome and foster the wholesome, is the essence of the Noble Eightfold Path.

In terms of the Mind-System described by Culadasa, the goal of practice is to create a stable, powerfully mindful “protocol consensus” among the various sub-minds that monitors and regulates the processing of discriminating mind functions towards realizing liberation from craving and clinging. This process reveals that the duality that is created by the narrative and discriminating sub-minds is a false premise. Here is a quote from page 211 of the book:

“The basic, enduring sense of “self”, of a separate doer of deeds and experiencer of events, is nothing more than a useful but fictional construct of the narrating mind, reified by the discriminating mind. In other words, the “little man in the machine,” the soul looking out at the world through the windows of the eyes, and the person sitting in the audience of the mind’s “theater,” are all just illusions. The discriminating mind expands on the nebulous narrative “I” until it solidifies into a more overt, concrete idea of and ego-Self endowed with specific traits. The discriminating mind imputes independent self-existence to this Self, imagining that it’s a single, enduring and separate entity”

The mind conditioners that enable this profound insight are called sambojjhanga, the Seven Awakening Factors: Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy/Right Effort/Persistence, Joy, Tranquility, Concentration and Equanimity/Balance. In terms of Culadasa’s concepts, these beneficial qualities inform and activate the conscious mind and its executive function, monitoring and modulating the signals that are stimulated by the various sub-minds, most particularly those within the thinking and emotional sub-minds. They will be discussed more thoroughly during the next Dharma talk.