INVESTIGATING MENTAL PHENOMENA

The second of the seven Awakening Factors is *Dhamma Vicaya*. In an article posted at the Insight Meditation Center, insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/investigation/, Gil Fronsdal has this to say about this factor:

“The Buddhist term for investigation is dhamma vicaya. Vicaya has the connotation of making distinctions or sorting. The notion of sorting can be likened to the pre-modern way of sorting grain. After harvesting, farmers separated the chaff from the grain, the bran from the kernel, and the good grain from the rest. In a similar way, Dhamma vicaya refers to distinguishing between what is conducive to the development of our practice and what is not. We can use our intelligence to be discerning about our experience, to abandon the unwholesome and to cultivate the wholesome.”

The term I use for this factor is *investigating mental phenomena*. A key capability for cultivating the process of Awakening is a sorting of the other functions also operating in the mind. We talk about ego as if it is a noun, “my ego”, or, more objectively, “the ego”—it is not a thing, but rather is a process. When unprocessed stimuli enter into the brain, different systems simultaneously operate to create meaning.

For example, when you read the word “apple”, the visual stimulus starts being processed, producing an understanding, perhaps even a mental image of an apple. That seems simple and straightforward, but several different “sortings” occur rather quickly. Most people would associate the word with a pleasant feeling tone, perhaps a yearning for the taste. Most people would associate the apple with the color red, but some apples are green, so that might pop up as a mental image. I don’t particularly like the taste of a Granny Smith apple, too tart, so my feeling tone might include an exception, that is, if the memory of tartness was strong and repelling, the green image would take precedence. I might say that if the apple is green, I don’t want it. However, some green apples are delicious to my taste, such as Crispin.

This description is meant to convey insight about how “my” preferences are formed, and can be applied to a multitude of opinions, beliefs, emotions and behaviors. The ego is a sorting process, but craving and clinging turns that process into what the Buddha “the thicket of views” and “the tyranny of I, me and mine”.

Dhamma Vicaya investigates the process as it is operating, real time, to discover how craving and clinging operate, making a sensation into a feeling, perception and identified “self” and then coordinate with the other Awakening Factors to deconstruct the craving and clinging. The Mindfulness Factor is aligned with the Investigation of Mental Phenomena Factor, setting the circumstance for the Energy Factor (Known as Right Effort) to either channel the energy of attention to the emerging self-state organization or away from it, depending on whether the potential organization is wholesome or unwholesome. This process is supported by the Awakening Factors of Joy (Enthusiastic Engagement), Tranquility, Concentration (Stability of Attention) and Equanimity (Balance of Energy and Attention)’

The cultivation of Dhamma Vicaya begins with the primary suggestion regarding mindfulness of breathing: Focusing attention at the beginning of the inbreath (called *vitakka* in Pali) and sustaining attention for the duration of the inbreath (called *vicara* in Pali). These two functions are cetasikas, functions of mental phenomena, that mature, with practice, into Dhamma Vicaya. As one’s mindfulness of breathing practice matures, the ability to direct attention to the breath and sustain that attention is enhanced by “zooming in” to investigate the more subtle sensations associated with the breathing cycle. This enhance attention increases the likelihood of remaining aware of the breath exclusively for extended periods of time and this cultivates samadhi/passadhi (samadhi is the Concentration Awakening Factor and passadhi is the Tranquility Awakening Factor).

As this process develops, the stability and tranquility of attention supports the practice of vipassana, which primarily operates as a function of Dhamma Vicaya.