Overcoming Dullness And Doubt

These notes review the remaining Unwholesome Cetasikas, categories of mind conditioners that manifest as dukkha, with a focus on sloth, torpor and doubt. These three categories are included in two of the five hindrances—sloth and torpor and skeptical doubt. Sloth and torpor affect the energy of attention; skeptical doubt affects the quality of attention. Here are the reviews of the cetasikas:

**Sloth**: The Pali word here is *thina* (tee-nah) and can be characterized as *sluggishness and inertia of attention* with regards to whatever you are trying to pay attention to. The quality of awareness is dull, heavy, and unresponsive. It can be associated with an overactive parasympathetic nervous system, the function of which is to balance the sympathetic system, which activates the body and mind. When these two neurological and hormonal systems are operating appropriately, the mind is calm and alert rather than overactive and hypervigilant. There are several possible causes for sloth to become dominant: When the body is too lethargic due to a lack of aerobic fitness, when the mind is overreacting to too much stimulation, or when the body’s resources are organized around digesting a recently eaten meal, particularly after ingesting carbohydrates.

**Torpor**: The Pali word here is *middha* (mih-dah) and can be characterized as *disengagement of the mind* with an object of attention. It can be considered a manifestation of boredom. When the mind is not alert (through sloth), it seems that whatever might be interesting enough to warrant attention doesn’t do so, and so there is a characteristic of undefined, drifting awareness that can be experienced as dreamlike and absent-minded. In this case, vitakka/vicara (vwee-tah-kah/vwee-chah-rah—yes, the syllable is vwee) is not activated and attention has a drifting and dreamlike characteristic.

**Sloth and Torpor**: Since these two characteristics are traditionally linked as one of the five hindrances, it can be useful to understand how they interact and support each other. First of all, there are two different comparisons or similes for sloth and torpor in the Buddhist commentaries: In the first, this quality of awareness is compared to a pond that is overgrown with algae, murky and opaque, severely limiting one’s ability to see what is under the surface. In the second, it is compared to being imprisoned in a room with no windows. Here is how sloth and torpor are described in the commentaries:

The compound “sloth-torpor” is sloth plus torpor; of which sloth has absence of, or opposition to striving as characteristic, destruction of energy as function, sinking of associated states as manifestation; torpor has unwieldiness as characteristic, closing the doors of consciousness as function, shrinking in taking the object, or drowsiness as manifestation; and both have unsystematic thought, in not arousing oneself from discontent and

laziness (or indulgence), as proximate cause.

In his book “The Mind Illuminated”, Culadasa (chew-luh-dah-sah), the author provides his views on this phenomenon, beginning on page 141: There are different levels of thina/middha: *subtle dullness,* which can be either stable or progressive, and *strong dullness*. Subtle dullness is the “default mode” of the untrained mind, pervasive and dominant even under normal circumstances. It can be compared to the sort of bored attention we experience when we are not stimulated by something external to consciousness, such as upbeat music, bright imagery, or plot development in a book or movie. It can be recognized often as daydreaming. It is often accompanied by distractibility. Strong dullness is often experienced when practicing meditation—the head nods, daydreams become more vivid and this sort of consciousness can often be accompanied by snoring!

The antidotes for thina/middha involve first recognizing that subtle dullness is present in awareness; if it isn’t quickly recognized, it can progress into more strongly active dullness. Oftentimes, simply noting dullness quickly and accurately, then disengaging attention from subtle dullness to breath/body sensations can raise energy in the mind, eliminating the hindrance. Another antidote can include focusing attention on some not-particularly-strong unpleasant sensation such as an itch or ache. Actively investigating the experience enlivens attention but requires a willingness to set aside the hindrance of aversion/ill-will. The gift of this sort of intervention will make the mind more alert and also cultivate equanimity. A third option is to intentionally move attention through the body with what is called a “body sweep” or “body scan” practice. The activity of deliberately investigating one area of attention, then another systematically can also alert the mind, whether there is any noticeable sensation elsewhere in the body or not (I assure you that there are sensations all over the surface of the body all the time, but they can be quite subtle and require disciplined, penetrating and investigative attention to come into awareness.).

It is often the case that you feel “tired” after a day’s work—I have that word in quotes because it is not truly fatigue unless you are engaged in some strong physical exercise. Sitting in a chair or car seat for extended periods of time and lacking aerobic fitness and toned core muscles creates a mental lethargy that we experience as being too tired to meditate. The antidote here involves finding ways to get more aerobic exercise into daily routines—walking for 30 minutes or so, briskly, can energize the mind. One of the traditional values of hatha yoga is to increase general muscle toning as a preparation for gnana yoga (nyah-nah yo-gah), wisdom yoga, which involves extensive meditation practice.

Regarding subtle dullness, that can be understood as what I call “cruise control”, a stability of attention that is physically comfortable. This can also be described as samadhi/passadhi (sah-mah-dee/pah-sah-dee), concentration/tranquility. This quality of peaceful, undistracted attention is beneficial, but doesn’t lead to greater insights regarding the three characteristics of subjective reality: impermanence, distress/confusion and the absence of an enduring, autonomous self. In fact, samadhi/passadhi is vulnerable to becoming routine and this subtle dullness can also become normalized.

Overcoming subtle dullness (Culadasa describes this as *stable subtle dullness* and explores the topic beginning on page 167 of the book.) In my own practice, I approach resolving this sort of consciousness by extensively practicing body sweep meditation, being sure to associate moving attention around the body with the sensations of breathing. As a result of my disciplined practice, I can maintain persistent awareness of the entire “buzz” of body sensations with an actively engaged investigative process of attention, and this sets the stage for deeper inquiry into the nature of the three characteristics.

**Doubt**: The Pali term for doubt is *vicikiccha* (vee-see-kih-chah), and it has the characteristic of *indecisiveness* regarding the technical aspects and benefits of practice and what is occurring in awareness. It is always accompanied by *avijja* (ah-vee-jah), *ignorance*, one of the Universal Unwholesome Cetasikas. There is a lack of determination and commitment, that is, being able to clearly investigate what is occurring in awareness. It has the characteristic of indecision—“Am I getting anything out of this?”, “Should I do \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_?”, or being mired in uncertainty, like being at a crossroads without being able to decide which way to go; of course, staying put is a form of decision, ironically.

The similes that are used in Buddhist commentary include comparing the quality of attention to a pond that has mud circulating in the water so you can’t see what is beneath the surface. The other simile compares doubt to being lost in a desert and immobilized with uncertainty as to which direction to take.

Of course, there is value in some skepticism, being willing to investigate what is occurring in the mind without jumping to conclusions. There is a phenomenon in psychology called “confirmation bias”, which operates to discount or ignore new information that might disprove something that you are already convinced of. One of the core capabilities of the Awakening process is “deconstructing” the conviction that there is a persisting self that operates autonomously in the world, and this deconstructing relies on a quality of wise uncertainty, to not take for granted what we have come to expect in life.

The antidote for doubt is to develop competency in investigating how the selfing process operates with a level of detached interest. The counter for vicikiccha is *saddha* (sah-dha), *confidence*, or *faith*, which will be the first of the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas. I have realized over the many years of my practice that I have confidence in the conceptual structures of Buddhist psychology and my increasing competency regarding investigating what happens in the selfing process.