THE OCCASIONAL CETASIKAS

These notes continue the exploration of the categories of “mind conditioners”, with the remaining 6 “ethically variable” categories: ***moving attention to an object, sustaining attention on the object, determination, energy, enthusiasm*,** and ***will to do***. Another term used is “Particular Cetasikas”, because they are occasionally active due to particular conditions in the mental processes that fabricate a self.

The discussion last week, posted August 6, entitled “Universal Conditioning Functions”, focused on these cetasikas: ***contact, volition, focusing, vitality*** and ***attention***. These are all functions of mental processing present in each moment of consciousness. They are also “ethically variable”.

As was stated during the discussions regarding how the cetasikas function, it has been emphasized that they are cooperating, that is, operating simultaneously and are mutually influential. They are “ethically variable” in that the other co-occurring cetasikas fundamentally shape the outcome, that is, depending upon whether the other cetasikas are within the “wholesome” or “unwholesome” aggregates, which will be discussed in future talks. Here is a more in-depth exploration of each of the occasional cetasikas:

**MOVING ATTENTION TO AN OBJECT**: The Pali word for this cetasika is *vitakka*, (pronounced v*wee-tah-kah*); this function is crucial for cultivating the process of awakening. Coupled with *volition*, *attention* is *focused*, resulting from *contact* with a mental object. When teaching the practice of mindfulness of breathing, I interpret vitakka as “aiming attention at the sensation of breathing, at the rim of the nostrils”. Other terms used are “throwing” or “directing”. As an occasional cetasika, vitakka is not functioning when the mind is dull -- the hindrance of *sloth and torpor*.

**SUSTAINING ATTENTION ON THE OBJECT:** The Pali word here is *vicara* (pronounced v*wee-chah-rah*), and when this function is operating, it is associated with vitakka. The characteristic of vicara is to maintain the attention to the object that vitakka initiates. It also is cooperating with *volition, attention*, initiated by *contact* with a persistent *focus*. Its quality is that of unwavering in the mind. In various commentaries, vitakka and vicara are termed “applied thought and thinking”; I prefer not to use the word “thought”, as it is commonly associated with an internal narrative. When associated with unwholesome cetasikas, an internal narrative is certainly manifested. When applied to mindfulness of breathing, the sustained attention is on a non-verbal awareness, and any thoughts are regarded as distractions, followed by the intention to bring mindful awareness back to a primary focus on the sensation of breathing.

When vitakka and vicara are associated with wholesome cetasikas for sustained periods of time, the intrusive power of internal narrative is interrupted sufficiently to produce ongoing focus and tranquility, absent of the hindrances. This quality of attention is called *access concentration* (*upacara samadhi*, pronounced *ooh-pah-chah-rah sah-mah-dee*). This quality of attention cultivates *wise attention*, (*yoniso manasikara, yow-nee-so mah-na-see-kah-rah*, *wise attention*). The cultivation of vipassana involves developing proficiency in coordinating vitakka and vicara with wholesome conditioning factors. Eventually, vitakka and vicara mature into *investigation of mental phenomena* (*dhamma vicaya, dah-mah vee-chah-rah*) one of the seven factors of awakening, (sati sambojjhanga sah-tee sahm-bow-jahn-gah), *mindful clear comprehension,* a crucial capability for spiritual fulfillment.

**DETERMINATION:** The Pali word for this cetasika is *adhimokkha* (*ah-dee-mow-kah*). It can also be understood as *conviction, resolution* or *decisiveness*. It is the antidote for the hindrance of skeptical doubt.

Bhikkhu Bodhi explains:

The word adhimokkha means literally the releasing of the mind onto the object. Hence it has been rendered decision or resolution. It has the characteristic of conviction, the function of not groping, and manifestation as decisiveness. Its proximate cause is a thing to be convinced about. It is compared to a stone pillar owing to its unshakable resolve regarding the object. A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, p. 82

When the process of “selfing” is developing, there are a multitude of potential determinations for “completing” a momentary self-organization. This can be understood in a manner described by Daniel Siegel in his book entitled “Pocket Guide To Interpersonal Neurobiology” as the *plane of possibility*. The following description is my interpretation of his concept:

To begin with, as the raw, undeveloped sensory data stimulates various neural pathways, the plane of possibility is open, that is, undetermined. As the process of meaning-making continues and the various memory traces that have some similarity to the initial perceptions are activated, the plane of possibility becomes less open. Some memories are “good fits”, and the ones that aren’t are no longer activated, eliminated from the plane of possibility.

The process is very rapidly cycling new data through the plane of possibility, which modifies the emerging self-organizing function, but is increasingly biased in the direction of already conditioned, provisional possibilities (These already conditioned possibilities could be termed *karma*). Modern research suggests that self-organizing functions operate increasingly autonomously from new data input, that is, the mind disregards the new information, with preference for the potent memories over new possibilities. In modern psychological terms, this preferential process is called *confirmation bias*, which is resistant to analytical thinking. This biasing process reduces the plane of possibilities until, at the moment of conscious awareness, the emerging self-state organization approaches 100%. This self-organizing process repeats multiple times a second, culminating in the subjective experience of the self.

Adhimokkha represents this biasing process in the commitment to the emerging self-state as truly real, rather than a possibility that may or may not be accurate, adaptive or beneficial. This process will be elaborated regarding coordination with the other factors already named above later in these notes.

**ENERGY:** The Pali term her is *viriya*, (vihr-yah), typically translated as “*effort*” or “*persistence*”. Its manifestation as wholesome persistence is characterized as the Energy Awakening Factor. The word has the same root as the latin “virtue”, and originally meant manliness or heroic behavior. Viriya is an important cetasika, found in several contexts in the teachings.

***THE FOUR NOBLE EFFORTS***: While growing up, the Buddha was exposed to logical systems, and the description of viriya follows a logical form, which manifest as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, that is, Right Effort (in Pali *samma samaya*; samma means correct, and samaya is synonymous with viriya):

* The effort to be mindful of the *potential* channeling of energy into alliance with unwholesome cetasikas and deny that activity.
* The effort to be mindful of an *already activated* channeling of energy allied with unwholesome cetasikas and then redirect the flow of energy to a more wholesome alliance.
* The effort to be mindful of the *potential channeling* of energy into alliance with wholesome cetasikas and foster that activity.
* The effort to be mindful of *already activated* channeling of energy allied with wholesome cetasikas and support that flow of energy to greatest benefit.

Much of my teaching practice involves an attempt to understand Buddhist concepts and practices from a contemporary neuropsychological perspective. In that regard, I understand our personal experience to be the transformation of energy into information and action (thanks to Daniel Siegel for that idea!). We consume energy in the form of food and air, and this is transformed into our subjective experience in the body and the mind. Right Effort represents how this information is created and activated.

**ENTHUSIASM:** The Pali word for enthusiasm is *piti*, which is traditionally translated as *rapture*. The term rapture conveys a very excited and blissful condition, and the traditional application of this is in the experience of jhana, which is an altered process of being that is the result of very highly concentrated attention, sustained for long periods of time without interruption. I have experienced this form of consciousness, and it is quite exhilarating and seductive in the quality of pleasurable feeling.

As my meditation practice has matured over the years, my understanding of piti is more as a support for greater insight; the blissful manifestations are too distracting. Many modern commentators talk of how the experience of piti is supportive of *enthusiastic interest and engagement* for developing the process of insight into the nature of selfing. Piti is an antidote for sloth and torpor, manifesting as buoyancy in the way the mind transforms energy.

**WILL TO DO:** The Pali word here is *chanda* (chahn-dah), typically translated as *to take action*. I prefer *will to do*, as that seems to convey my understanding more clearly. As energy is transformed into information, there is a natural “momentum” that orients the manifested self-state organization towards activation. There may be physical action, but the function of chanda is primarily mental; we can experience a series of thoughts that have been activated without actually engaging in physical behaviors. When this will to do is affected by unwholesomeness, it manifests as impulsive or compulsive thoughts or actions.

In modern neuropsychological terms, there is a function in the brain that has been extensively researched, that is, the activation of the nucleus accumbens. The nucleus accumbens represents two clusters of the nuclei of neurons, one within the inner lining in each hemisphere, that are associated with activating rewarding behaviors, that is, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. The nucleus accumbens is strongly associated in brain function with the amygdala and hippocampus, both of which assess potential threats. The amygdala has been associated with feeling, another of the cetasikas; the hippocampus has been associated with perception, also one of the cetasikas. These two neural clusters of nuclei are located right next to the nucleus accumbens.

The nucleus accumbens has been researched because its function is strongly involved with addictive craving, either for substances or other rewarding behaviors such as eating, sex, and even shopping! In this way, I conceive of the interactions of the amygdala, hippocampus and nucleus accumbens as focal points for the Buddhist concepts of craving and clinging.

**COOPERATIVE FUNCTIONS OF THE UNIVERSAL AND OCCASIONAL CETASIKAS:**

Once again, it is important to keep in mind that these conditioning functions are co-occurring, that is, their functions are mutually influential. The value of the cetasikas in the process of awakening is providing conceptual ways to “deconstruct” self-organizing functions to the extent that they can be mindfully investigated. The appropriate cetasikas will be italicized to help in this understanding.

When a person is stimulated, the cascade of various stimuli could include seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and any body sensations. These signals pour into the brain’s processing areas, initiating ***feelings*** and ***perceptions*** in each category of sensing. These initial processes begin the transformation of the basic sense data into meaningful self-state organizations. These primary stimulations activate parts of the brain that are cognitive, that is, aren’t associated with the senses, but with creating meaningful understanding and actions. This initiates the selfing process. Along with feeling and perception, there is activation through ***contact***, along with an organizing ***volitional*** process. The stimulation between the neurons in the various areas of the brain has ***vitality***, and promotes the coming together of ***focus*** and ***attention***. These are the “universal cetasikas”.

The “occasional” or “particular cetasikas” may or may not be operating in any given moment of selfing. The ***bringing attention to an object*** and ***sustaining attention on an object*** won’t be operating when associated with unwholesome cetasikas such as ignorance or sloth and torpor. Those cetasikas would be functioning when cooperating with unwholesome cetasikas such as desire or aversion. They are very important when associated with wholesome cetasikas such as mindfulness, and aiming and sustaining the activation of wholesome self-state organizations is Right Effort (the cetasika of ***energy***). The momentary vitality of neural transmission, when repeated, represents effort, which may or may not be associated with wholesome or unwholesome cetasikas.

***Determination*** involves the manifested coherence of a self-state organization. This is similar to focused attention, but instead emphasizes the sense of commitment or conviction that this self-state organization is “complete” at least for that moment. That moment also includes ***attention, enthusiasm*** and the ***will to do***. It is important to be aware that determination, attention and will to do can be allied with either wholesome or unwholesome cetasikas.

I hope this simplifies explanation is as helpful you in reading it as it has for me in preparing these notes.