The Virtue Cetasikas

As we continue to review the categories of mind conditioning function through which the sense of self is shaped, the topic for this talk is the two relevant Universal Wholesome Cetasikas, Moral Shame and Fear of Consequences. The Universal Wholesome Cetasikas are Confidence, Mindfulness (both reviewed during the talk of September 16), Moral Shame, Fear of Consequences, Non-Attachment, Non-Aversion and Equanimity.

**Moral Shame**: The Pali term for this cetasika is hiri (hih-ree) and is the opposite of a previously reviewed Universal Unwholesome Cetasika, ahirika. This is reflected in the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Intention is in the Wisdom Aggregate. The essence of this mind conditioning function is respecting the value of honesty, integrity, generosity, kindness, compassion, and tolerance—these characteristics are guiding principles in the dynamic process of shaping a self. The manifestation of these intentions are categorized as Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.

One of the defining characteristics of humanity is social cohesion and this relies on an innate function of the brain, empathy. We are social animals and a sense of trustworthiness is a core function for effective societal functioning. The complexities and conflicting influences of contemporary consumerism and the tensions that occur as society becomes multicultural and people are densely crowded in urban settings significantly challenges established ethical norms. We are bombarded with deliberately concocted disinformation, commercially and politically. In this sort of environment, it is important for individuals to adhere to principled integrity and carefully analytical investigation of our social interactions. We must learn ways to empathized and negotiate cultural conflicts skillfully as society undergoes rather radical stresses and long-term transformations, stimulated by the demands of the pandemic, global warming and digital forms of communication.

Contemporary research has identified different areas of the brain that can be described as “mirror neurons”. One cluster of neurons is activated so that we can mimic another person’s behavior, a fundamental requirement for effective social bonding. Another cluster of neurons are activated when stimulated as we are exposed to the pain of another. In one experiment, a person witnesses a video of another person being injured or humiliated and the parts in the brain of the witness that react are associated with the experience of an emotion congruent with that pain. An example for me is when I see a scene in a tv show that includes someone being hurt (Like America’s Funniest Videos when someone falls hard) or being humiliated (I couldn’t enjoy Frazier because the characters would often do quite foolish things); I tend to cringe and want to withdraw from witnessing these sorts of interactions, an aversive response.

The elements of virtue are found in parts of the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.

**Respect For Consequences**: The Pali term for this mind conditioning function is ottappa (owe-tah-pah) and is the opposite function to anottappa, recklessness. This cetasika cooperates with hiri, and, as a Universal Wholesome Cetasika, participates in the formation of any self-organization that is free from dukkha--distress and confusion. We can consider cultivating hiri as the development of Right Intention; the close alliance with ottappa can be considered as the development of Right Understanding. This could also be considered as synonymous in function with karma, the law of cause and effect. When a person behaves in unethical ways, there will be consequences—either that person will be chastised by wiser people, there will be a negative outcome sooner or later, or that personality structure will become distorted. These distortions will then guide future internal narratives and behaviors, creating internal conflicts and interpersonal distrust, manifestations of ahirika.

There is a saying found in the 12 step traditions such as Alcoholics Anonymous: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results.” How can the practice of mindfulness support Right Intention? The primary practice of carefully and quickly noting the emerging characteristics of a moment of selfing develops with a determination to notice the beginning of the in-breath persistently and quickly and then repeat this procedure for the out-breath. The parts of the brain’s neural networks that are associated with perception operate in coordination with whatever cognitive and emotional narratives that can potentially occur. With sufficient training it becomes possible to be able to distinguish the ethical characteristics and then persist in feeding attention to them. Alternatively, we can become skillful at noticing the potential forming of unethical characteristics and disregard them. This ability to detach from emerging unskillful thoughts develops from diligent noting of distractions from breath awareness and then redirecting attention back to the breath; this capability is also applicable to letting go of unethical characteristics to bring attention back to the breath.