Working With Aversion

The topic for this talk focuses on what has been termed the “aversion cetasikas”, the clusters of mind conditioning factors that cause the mind to try to avoid, contain or eradicate associated mind conditioners that have an unpleasant feeling quality: aversion, envy, stinginess and regret. These are considered to be “particular” or “occasional” cetasikas because their operation depends upon whether certain conditions are present or not. Each of these will always be associated with the “universal unwholesome cetasikas”: delusion/ignorance, shamelessness, recklessness and restlessness (The notes for that evening’s review are archived under the title “The Universal Unwholesome Mind Conditioners August 19, 2020). The universal unwholesome cetasikas are involved in the shaping of every moment afflicted with distress and confusion—dukkha—in subjective experience. Here is a review of each of these cetasikas:

**Aversion**: The Pali word here is *dosa* (doe-sah), and can be translated as *aversion, ill-will, anger, rejection, fear* or *hatred*. The common element of the various manifestations of dosa is to subjectively create a separation from a mental formation that is unpleasant in its feeling tone. It is important to understand that dosa is a mental phenomenon, and that the mind creates the aversion—the feeling is not a self, but just an instinctual phenomena that establishes a “bridge” between unprocessed unpleasant physical feeling and the selfing process that is created by the operation of the cetasikas.

There are two aspects of dosa I want to clarify: The first is the quality of “pushing away” the unpleasant feelings and supportive thoughts; the second is the potential aggression that can accompany it. The aggression can be focused outwardly or with a focus on the internal self that has arisen in response to aversion, for example, becoming angry at my own behavior after making a mistake.

Another manifestation of dosa is fear or anxiety and is stimulated by the deeply held belief that we all have that there is a self that must endure and be satisfied. Pride can create a fragility that we fear and therefore become vulnerable to lashing out at others who we believe are judging us unfavorably. Much hatred and aggression stems from fear.

Dosa is always accompanied by *moha* (mow-hah), *delusion*, which is the fundamental misperception that the self is enduring and independent of external conditions—in this case a self that is threatened by social disrespect, for example.

How can dosa be effectively identified and disregarded? Here is a relevant section from the Second Foundation of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of Feelings, translated by Thanissaro:

…he remains focused internally on feelings in & of themselves, or externally on feelings in & of themselves, or both internally & externally on feelings in & of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to feelings, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to feelings, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to feelings. Or his mindfulness that 'There are feelings' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on feelings in & of themselves.

This passage is understood to describe feelings as impersonal, a phenomenon that occurs in us all— “…in & of themselves…Or his mindfulness that ‘There are feelings’ is maintained to extent of knowledge and remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world…” Knowledge that the *feeling is not enduring or indicative of a self*, and *remembrance of the importance of mindfully noting and depersonalizing the event* are crucial in this process. The terms *independent* and *unsustained* also refer to the impersonal characteristics of experience, the goal of vipassana practice, that is, insight into the three characteristics: anicca, the transient nature of subjective experience, dukkha, the consequence of craving and clinging and anatta, the absence of an enduring and autonomous self.

Dosa is an instinctual response to unpleasant feelings—even a single-cell amoeba will withdraw from a toxic substance if it can—our experience of unpleasantness is accompanied by a cognitive function that creates a distinction from the unpleasantness as a descriptive process that makes the feeling seem to be a property of something that is separate, such as a loud sound or highly humid temperatures in the Florida summertime—the reaction of the mind is the focus of attention, which causes reactivity in rejecting the sound or the heat. We also react to unpleasant bodily sensations such as pain, hunger or even the unpleasant tension that occurs when our expectations aren’t matched by what actually occurs. It is very important to be mindful of that distinction and disregard the “I can’t stand it” story and learn how to work with the pain, hunger or disappointment/frustration when things turn out against our expectations.

An important Buddhist concept is *namarupa* (nah-mah-roo-pah)—*nama* refers to *what the mind creates* relative to *rupa*, the *raw, unprocessed sensations* that stimulate what the mind creates. When contemplating dosa, a mental phenomenon, a fundamental antidote is found in specifically and persistently investigating the sensations associated with breathing in and out, particularly noting the beginning of the in-breath and the beginning of the out-breath. Attention to the neutral sensation of breathing interrupts the “bridging” of feeling from whatever unpleasant physical sensation is occurring that is noticeably different from the breath sensations to the beginning of how the mind makes meaning/creates a self in regard to the unpleasant sensation.

Another antidote for aversion is *metta* (meh-tah), *lovingkindness*, and *karuna* (kah-roo-nah), *compassion*. In this approach the focus of attention involves developing a mental process that includes awareness that dosa is distressful and confusing and intentionally creating a story that accepts the frailties of the human experience that can manifest as harshness and aggression and then contemplates generating kindness regarding the emerging subjective experience. This different internal contemplation brings with it a release of unpleasant feeling instead of the ongoing tension of pushing against the experience. This does not suggest being compliant with the aggression or injustice of external circumstances; rather, it supports a response that is intended to bring clarity to the mind, opening up opportunities for more creative responses and interventions that are harmless or minimally so, if possible.

**Envy**: The Pali word for *envy* is *issa* (ee-sah), and this is synonymous with *jealousy*. It is always associated with dosa, as the mind creates a story that negatively reacts to another person’s success or happiness. One of the characteristics of dosa is a sense of isolation from that which is pleasant. There is a sense that “My self is not complete or is deprived when someone else is successful and happy”. One of the consequences of issa can be robbery and another can be gossip. This condition is produced by *ditthi* (dee-tee), *wrong view*, along with *ahirika* (ah-he-ree-kah), *shamelessness*, and *anottappa* (ah-no-tah-pah), *recklessness* is also involved; the supportive condition for these to operate is *uddhacca* (ooh-dah-chah), *restlessness*. Wrong view conditions the self to feel diminished by another’s happiness, which creates the conditions for a lack of conscience and disregard for the negative consequences of jealousy and envy. The underlying restlessness of the untrained mind creates a vulnerability to distress and confusion. These mind conditioning factors are all reviewed during the talk entitled “Universal Unwholesome Cetasikas”, archived in the website Orlandoinsightmeditation.org.

An antidote for issa is *mudita* (moo-dee-tah), *sympathetic joy*, one of the Wholesome Cetasikas, to be reviewed during a future talk. Mudita is one of the factors that are associated with metta, lovingkindness. It is characterized by a feeling of joy at another’s success, whether it is to your benefit or not. If the other person’s success or happiness is created by unwholesomeness on their part, then the appropriate response is karuna, compassion.

**Stinginess**: The Pali term for this mind conditioning category is *macchariya* (mah-chah-ree-yah); it is closely associated with *miserliness* and *hoarding*. One of the commercial consequences of our consumeristic culture is the prevalence of storage units around the area, and this is a mild form of hoarding. In its function it has the same effect as envy in that a person’s identity is organized around what she or he owns and “At the end, whoever has the most toys wins!” This is also another circumstantial cause regarding the increasing disparity of wealth around the world, particularly noticeable in American society. It’s not just that wealth brings economic and political power--it also creates a sense of “personality power” and as a consequence sharing resources is considered a weakness, a threat to one’s self-image.

The antidote for macchariya is *dana* (dah-nah), *generosity*, which I regard as a manifestation of mudita, sympathetic joy—it feels good to be generous to others and, in its best form, doesn’t require being acknowledged for one’s generosity.

**Regret**: The Pali term for this mind conditioning category is *kukkucca* (koo-koo-chah), also translated as *worry* and  *remorse,* this is a mind conditioned by wrong view, shamelessness, recklessness and restlessness, associated with aversion. This is not the same as worrying about whether you remembered to lock the door but rather a sense of disturbance regarding some action that may have been the result of greed, hatred or ignorance.

One of the five hindrances is uddhacca kukkucca, restlessness and remorse. The antidote for this manifestation of distress and confusion is *samadhi/passadhi* (sah-mah-dee pah-sah-dee), *concentration/tranquility,* which stabilizes attention to reduce restlessness, combined with *sila* (see-lah), *virtue*, the antidote for remorse or worry. Virtue is one of the categories of the Noble Eightfold Path and includes Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, organized around honesty and non-harming.