**THE UNWHOLESOME MIND CONDITIONERS**

This essay continues the exploration of the Satipatthana Sutta, focusing this time on the cetasikas, “conditioners associated with the mind”. Previously, the universal and occasional conditioners were explained. To review the system, when a stimulus activates a “sense door”, for example light entering the eye, the universal mind conditioners are activated--**contact** is initiated, along with **feeling, perception, volition/intention, concentration, vitality** and **attention**. Under appropriate mental circumstances the occasional cetasikas are activated--attention goes to a focal point, **vitakka**, which sustains attention, **vicara**, enough for perception to operate, and commits to the perception, involving **determination**. **Energy/effort**, **enthusiasm** and the **will-do-do** may be included in the forming aggregation of mind conditioners. At this point, the process is primed by prior experience (karma) and may be associated with either wholesome or unwholesome conditioners.

The way this is described conveys the assumption that the process is linear, that is, *contact*, followed by *feeling*, then *perception*, then *attention*, etc. This is not the case. These processes arise and pass away multiple times a second through successive moments of unified co-operative “selfing”, and the dynamic process builds a sort of neural “momentum”. During careful observation of the process through mindfulness practices, it is possible to actually be aware of this dynamic process in the formative stages through an insight called “arising and passing away”. Using the categorical analysis that the cetasikas lists provide conceptually, when mindfulness and other wholesome factors are skillfully applied, it becomes possible to investigate and discover that the emerging awareness doesn’t have to be identified as “me”, or, by projection, “you”, or “the world”. Unfortunately, when the Unwholesome Conditioners are dominant, the ability to be directly aware of arising and passing away is prevented, and this cultivates the pervasive operation of *dukkha*, that is, *distress* and *confusion*.

Having qualified the process as non-linear, the next phase to discuss involves the interactions of what are called the “unwholesome cetasikas”.

And what is the unwholesome?

Killing living beings is unwholesome;

Taking what is not given is unwholesome;

misconduct in sensual pleasures is unwholesome;

False speech is unwholesome;

Malicious speech is unwholesome;

Harsh speech is unwholesome;

Gossip is unwholesome;

Covetousness is unwholesome;

Ill will is unwholesome;

Wrong view is unwholesome.

And what is the root of the unwholesome?

Greed is a root of the unwholesome;

Hate is a root of the unwholesome;

Delusion is a root of the unwholesome.

Majjhima Nikaya #9

There are 14 unwholesome mind conditioners, and *the first 4 occur in any moment of unwholesome self-organization:*

**UNIVERSAL UNWHOLESOME MIND CONDITIONERS**

The first four of the unwholesome mind conditioners shape each moment of consciousness that manifests as dukkha, in co-operation with the universal malleable mind conditioners, and when circumstances are appropriate, the occasional malleable mind conditioners.

**IGNORANCE,** often also termed **DELUSION**, is the foremost characteristic that leads to suffering. The Pali word for ignorance is *avijja* (ah-vee-jah), and literally means *to not know*. Ignorance, in this application, is *ignoring the effects of greed and aversion*, associated with *inattentiveness to the natural process of impermanence*, *the fabricated nature of egocentric thoughts*, and *heedlessness regarding how poor choices in the past led to prior suffering*. Functionally, it is the inability to notice the moment-by-moment arising and passing away of self-state organizations with detached awareness. *Sati*, the Pali word most frequently translated as “mindfulness”, is the fundamental counterpart for overcoming ignorance. Sati literally is translated as “non-forgetfulness”, and regarding overcoming ignorance, it means to not forget that life experience is constantly variable, that there is no core, essential ego to be defended or gratified, and there is no value in allowing greed and aversion to play a part in self- organizing processes. Ignorance can be understood as complementary to the Christian concept of *sin*, which literally translates as *missing the mark*, related to a Greek term relevant to archery practice.

**SHAMELESSNESS** is a disregard for personal integrity regarding ethical issues. The Pali word is *ahirika* (ah-hih-ree-kah), and is the antithesis of *hiri*, one of the universal wholesome mind conditioners, which can be understood as *having a conscience*. It is the absence of a conscience and of personal integrity. One of the ways the Buddhist commentaries describe this conditioner is “that conditioner which creates behavior that would provoke sorrow and compassion in the mind of a wise person”. *This operates in every moment of selfing and represents the epitome of self-absorption.* Much of what we do that is moral is fabricated in order to be seen as a good person, without really understanding the lack of personality integrity involved. *One test of having a conscience involves doing something with integrity without anyone else knowing, even if there is an unappealing personal consequence.*

**RECKLESSNESS** is pretending that karma isn’t real. The Pali word is *anottappa*, literally *the absence of one of the universal wholesome mind conditioners, ottappa*. Unskillful choices, fabricated through ignorance combined with either greed or hatred, produce maladaptive results, that is, dissatisfaction, distress and confusion. Another way to describe this is reflected in a phrase often heard in Alcoholics Anonymous: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results”.

**RESTLESSNESS** is the innate nature of the human nervous system. The Pali word is *uddhacca* (ooh-dah-chah). Our minds are hard-wired to check out novel stimuli to assess “friend or foe, food or poison?” as a “default system”, and this lacks the ability to stabilize attention. A metaphor for this is “monkey mind”:

“Just as a monkey, making its way through the forest or the jungle,

grasps a branch; and releasing it he grasps another:

So also that which is called mind, or brain or consciousness

arises in one way and ceases in another—day and night!”

*Samyutta Nikaya* 22:61

The wholesome counterpart of restlessness is samadhi, the unified cooperation of mind conditioners. Samadhi can occur associated with either wholesome or unwholesome mind conditioners. When samadhi is cooperative with wholesome mind conditioners it is considered Right Concentration and fosters the process of Awakening.

In the progression towards ultimate awakening, Nirvana, restlessness in the mind is considered one of the last obstacles to be overcome. This doesn’t mean that someone who has had the experience of nirvana can’t function. What it does mean that the mind is free from any unwholesome distractions in terms of how the personality operates.

The next category of unwholesome mind conditioners may or may not be part of any self-state aggregation process.

**UNWHOLESOME OCCASIONAL MIND CONDITIONERS**

**DESIRE** is often termed **ATTACHMENT**. I prefer the word “**ENCHANTMENT**”, as this seems to describe my subjective experience. The Pali word is *lobha*, which can also be denoted as the following: *Raga* (greed), *abhijja* (covetousness) and *tanha* (craving). It is one of the core elements of dukkha, along with aversion/ill-will and ignorance. It’s important to understand that this mind conditioner can be associated with either pleasant or unpleasant experiences. The mind conditioners can orient attitudes and behaviors either approaching/blending with the pleasantness, or avoiding/separating from the unpleasantness. The mind operates in such a way because avoiding potential threats takes priority over approaching potential pleasures, in most cases. However, because of the influence of anottappa and ahirika, a person often reacts impulsively without regard for the consequences of unskillfulness.

This mind conditioner is one of the five hindrances to concentration and tranquility. One of the ways this hindrance is described is comparing a state of mind to a pool of water. When the water is undisturbed it is clear, providing an undistorted view, revealing what is under the water. With desire, the water is dyed, and the color distorts the view and obscures the true nature of what is submerged.

In modern neuroscientific terms, this process is the manifestation of the way perception and association operate. When a visual stimulus activates the optic nerve systems, part of the signal is directed to an initial assessment process in the middle of the brain, while the remaining signal goes for further, more elaborate processing, to the back of the brain, then the part of the brain that stores memories. This creates a very small “lapse” in processing between the mid-brain and the association cortex; the initial assessment is completed a fraction of a second before the memory process is completed. The brain “blends” the two processes, and during the blending, the memory process begins to take priority over new stimulation.

What this means is that the process very quickly becomes biased toward what memory imposes, and *because of Wrong View (see below), a sense of self-organization around what the mind imagines is happening takes over. This is what I call enchantment.* The task of mindfulness (a wholesome mind conditioner) is to monitor the “selfing” process and use breath awareness (or another body sensation) and investigation of the process of self-organizing to interrupt the aggregation of the mind conditioners, avoiding enchantment.

**WRONG VIEW** is very closely associated with desire/attachment. The Pali word is *ditthi* (dee-tee), and literally means *misunderstanding reality*. It is strongly bonded with Ignorance (see above) and misinterprets the reality of the moment, identifying the product of the Five Aggregates process as an accurate and reliable rendering of reality, defined as belonging to “I, me or mine”. Wrong View also identifies with the misperception that greed, jealousy, hatred and envy, lying, stealing, and aggression are good strategies for living.

**CONCEIT** is often termed **COMPARING** or **JUDGING MIND**. The Pali word is *mana* (mah-nah), and emphasizes self-referencing, such as “I am better than you”, or “I am worse than you”. It supports the delusional sense of separateness and duality--“I am separate from the universe”. We often think of conceit as self-aggrandizing, as it often is, but it can also occur when the selfing story demands self-loathing. It is interesting to note that the origin of the word conceit in the English language occurs in the 14th century, C.E., meaning “A thought or notion conceived in the mind”.

**AVERSION** and **ILL-WILL** is the experience of contracting away from unpleasant feeling, perhaps accompanied by aggression. The Pali word is *dosa* (doh-sah), and literally describes the above-described experience. It is the antithesis of lobha. The unpleasant feeling can be either physical or mental. In the physical sense, the

mind seeks to avoid or eradicate pain; in the mental sense, the mind recoils from a thought, disappointment or frustration. In the second case, it is not uncommon for aversion to occur when a strong attachment to someone or some expectation is thwarted, in which case desire quickly shifts to aversion. When this happens, the aversion often manifests as ill-will, that is, aggression against either oneself or against whomever seems to have thwarted the expectation.

It represents another of the five aversions. In using the image related to dosa, the pond is boiling hot; the bursting bubbles distort clarity, and anyone who reaches into the pool gets burned painfully. A Chinese proverb states “When one harbors anger and resentment, it is like carrying a burning coal that one wishes to throw at the person who caused the anger.” The antidote for aversion and ill-will is lovingkindness, compassion, generosity and equanimity: “When one harbors lovingkindness, it is like carrying a fragrant flower”.

**ENVY** is the mind conditioner that emerges out of a comparing mind (see above). The Pali word is *issa* (ee-sah). It is also associated with the mind conditioner called Wrong View (see above) and often is associated with dosa--aversion and ill-will. It represents a view that whatever someone else has, materially, or in terms of accomplishment, is unfair. There’s an unaware assumption that what makes a person whole or makes life right is represented by something or someone outside of oneself. The antidote for envy is generosity, related to “sympathetic joy”, the ability to celebrate someone else’s happiness whether it is to one’s advantage or not.

**STINGINESS,** often termed **AVARICE,** is closely associated with desire. The Pali word is *macchariya* (mah-chah-ree-yah). It has similar characteristics to Envy regarding Mana--Comparing Mind and Ditthi--Wrong View. The unaware assumption is that happiness is quantifiable in terms of material things and prestige. “He who has the most toys wins” expresses this mind conditioner appropriately. The antidote for this conditioner is also generosity/sympathetic joy.

**REGRET** or **WORRY** is primarily associated with restlessness. The Pali word is *kukkuccha* (koo-koo-chah). In this way, the two represent another of the five hindrances, restlessness and worry. The word regret is meant to convey the tendency for some painful remembered experience to repeatedly track through the mind, a process called “rumination”. This rumination and the agitation that accompanies it characterizes the hindrance well. The pond analogy regarding the hindrance of restlessness and worry is when the surface is agitated by the wind—the waves distort what is beneath the surface.

The antidote is to have a clear conscience due to ethical behaviors, and to realize the deeper nature of impermanence and non-self. Impermanence in realizing that what is in the past is gone; non-self in realizing that the self who misbehaved or was in error was acting out of ignorance, and that the “new self” of this moment has the opportunity to change current behaviors and create a future that is conditioned by a clear conscience!

**SLOTH** is a mind conditioner representing too little energy in the body, and is experienced as heaviness, laziness, physical inertia and fatigue (usually not associated with too much physical activity, however). The Pali word is *thina* (tee-nah). The experience of sloth is typically associated with the next mind conditioner, torpor, and the two represent the hindrance of sloth and torpor; the pond analogy for this hindrance describes the water as filled with algae, which prevents seeing into the depths.

An antidote for sloth is being physically fit, not eating too much at a meal, along with getting adequate but not too much rest.

**TORPOR** is the companion mind conditioner to sloth. The Pali word is *middha* (mih-dah). It manifests as *mental fogginess, boredom, daydreaming, being “spacy”, inattentive, and mentally undisciplined*. If sloth represents too much sedation in the body, torpor represents too much tranquility in the mind. Paying attention seems to be too much trouble. Unfortunately, many unsophisticated meditation students misperceive torpor as a sign of tranquility, and it is not!

Mental alertness requires a balance between energy and tranquility, two of the seven awakening factors. Too much energy creates restlessness and too much tranquility creates sloth and torpor. This balancing involves the skillful application of mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena/conditioners, two more of the seven awakening factors.

An antidote for torpor is to cultivate aiming attention and sustaining attention, two of the “occasional” mind conditioners. This aiming and sustaining, combined with investigation, can focus on the breath, other body sensations or sounds in the environment. It can also be helpful to look at a bright light (but not so bright as to hurt the eyes!). Splashing cool water on the face also helps alert the mind.

**DOUBT** is another mind conditioner that appears in the category of the five hindrances. The Pali word is *vicikiccha* (vee-see-kee-chah). The pond analogy regards the water as clouded by suspended mud. This is not doubt about the weather and such, or appropriately applied critical analysis of a belief. It is a persistent state of indecision regarding alternatives: “Is this right or wrong?” “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do!” It includes the inability to commit to a particular action.

“The Atthasalini (II, Part IX, Chapter III, 259) defines [skeptical doubt] as follows:. . . It has shifting about as characteristic, mental wavering as function, indecision or uncertainty in grasp as manifestation, unsystematic thought (unwise attention) as proximate cause, and it should be regarded as a danger to attainment.” From “Cetasikas” by Nina van Gorkom, p. 149

The antidote for skeptical doubt is to increase the effort to investigate immediate experience. This is most likely to produce results by investigating the breath sensations, or, if that fails, to investigate any other prominent physical sensation, even if it’s unpleasant. It is also suggested to consult with someone who is knowledgeable about the doctrine or the practice.