Intention Creates the Self

Understanding and working with intentions is one of the most crucial goals on the Path towards Awakening. Intention as a function of the brain is also an important area of contemporary neuropsychological research. I *intend* to supplement the following comments from Buddhist scholars and teachers with information found in current neuropsych research papers.

The Pali word for *intention* is *cetana* (chey-tah-nah). Another translation is *volition*. Here is what Bhikkhu Bodhi writes about cetana:

“Cetana...is the mental factor that is concerned with the actualization of a goal, that is, the conative or volitional aspect of cognition. Thus it is rendered volition. The Commentaries explain that cetana organizes its associated mental factors in acting upon the object. Its characteristic is the state of willing, its function is to accumulate (kamma), and its manifestation is coordination. Its proximate cause is the associated states. Just as a chief pupil recites his own lesson and also makes the other pupils recite their own lessons, so when volition starts to work on its object, it sets the associated states to do their tasks as well. Volition is the most significant mental factor in generating kamma, since it is volition that determines the ethical quality of the action.” A comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, p. 80

Cetana is one of the Universal Cetasikas (cheh-tah-see-kahs), (mind conditioning functions), that is, it functions in every moment of self-experience in the manner described by Bodhi above. Understanding this conceptually is important, but, even more importantly, we must be persistent in directly and immediately noting how intentions guide the process of attention, identification and action.

Intentions coordinate identification and action according to the ethical influences of the other cetasikas in the process, which can be either wholesome or unwholesome—*this is why cetana is considered to be universal and ethically malleable*. In this regard, cetana plays a key role in the dynamic interactions described in the concept termed *paticca samuppada* (pah-tee-chah sah-moo-pah-dah), traditionally interpreted as *dependent origination*; my preference is to interpret the concept as *contingent provisional emergence* (Google this terminology to find the article I wrote and published on this topic). Intentions coordinate and motivate how the cetasikas “work” on feelings, vedana (vey-dah-nah), which are also universal cetasikas, whether those feelings are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Intentions coordinate and activate memories that are latent in consciousness, either wholesome or unwholesome in feeling tone, to create a sense of self-identification and action—many commentators on the Dharma equate cetana with karma, which is the law of cause and effect.

Contemporary neuropsychological research suggests that intentional activity involves a complex and dynamic interactive process among various neurological systems in the brain. The Default Mode Network (DMN), functions to be alert to novelty and is characterized by the normal rambling of the “selfing story”, which we ordinarily regard as “myself”. The Central Executive Network (CEN) provides an “on-off switch” function that fosters the continuation of a selfing story that either likes or dislikes what is emerging in consciousness and activates or deactivates a plan of action or inaction. The Network Valence (VN) provides a neurological intervening function regarding the emerging story line—friend or foe, food or poison? How important is this cognitive trend in the mind? The Salience Network (SN) functions to discern the relative value of an emerging self-identity—are these thoughts/this action a good or a bad idea?

Neuropsychological research suggests that intentions have two different areas of function—intentions associated with either identifying with or disregarding a belief, and intention to either take action or not in the context of the belief.

Research suggests that the deliberate and sustained cultivation of mindfulness, direct and dispassionate investigation of the emerging selfing story involve the intentional process of introspective awareness, while the practice of the Four Right Efforts involves an intention to manage affective responses to the emerging story along with the intention to either act or restrain from acting.

The interactions between the DFN, VN, SN, and CEN are more effectively monitored through mindfulness and investigation and regulated by Right Effort. There is no evidence that any one of these networks is “in charge” of identifying with a thought or initiating an action—it seems that that thoughts and actions are an emergent function of the interactions. The CEN is by definition the Central Executive Network, but the executive function is regulated in an ongoing way by stimulations coming from the other networks in a holistic manner. The CEN either amplifies or de amplifies the ongoing process, like the accelerator and brake in a car.

The ability to note the ongoing emergent interaction between a momentary experience of feeling and the intention associated with it is developed through mindful investigation and the renunciation of unwholesome conditioning factors to regulate our minds and behaviors just prior to the onset of craving and clinging, the primary causes of dukkha (doo-kah), which is the subjective experience of distress and confusion. Clear awareness of intention as it occurs and the ability to channel the energy of attention towards wholesome self-states is an essential element for nurturing the process of Awakening.

There are several effective ways to note and manage intentions, the most primary of which involves repeated, mindful recollection of the intention to clearly notice the beginning, middle and end of the in-breath and repeating that procedure for the totality of the out-breath. This persistent application of aware attention is emphasized in the Satipatthana Sutta (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah soo-tah) in the often-repeated refrain *atapi sati sampajanna* (ah-tah-pee sah-tee sahm-pah-jahn-yah), translated as *diligent, mindful, clearly knowing*. This is a primary training tactic, and the goal of the formal sitting practice is to be able to persistently and mindfully monitor and manage the relentless stream of intentions that occur during one’s daily routine to promote the process of Awakening. Again, it is important to note that there is an intention involved regarding cognition and an intention involving action—we can become aware of the emergence of a thought process, and *even if it is clearly known as unwholesome, we can note and effectively inhibit the intention to act on the thought*.

Here is how Joseph Goldstein writes about intention in the book “Mindfulness—A Practical Guide to Awakening” on page 187-188:

How can we begin seeing directly this crucial factor of volition? Although it is a common factor, arising in each moment, it is not always the predominant one. So it is best to begin noticing it before obvious physical movements. The body doesn’t move by itself; it moves because of a volition in the mind. We can see this every time we change posture or reach for something or turn as we’re moving about. These are movements that are not happening on their own. There is some energetic factor in the mind that wills the action.

We can notice this in various ways. We might get a forewarning of intention in the mind through being aware of a thought to do something. The thought, itself, is not the intention, but it can alert us that an intentional action may follow. As we observe this process carefully, we sometimes feel a certain gathering of energy in the mind—the impulse or command moment—that results in the hand reaching or the body turning. Sometimes we might not feel anything so tangible; rather we simply know, in the moment before acting, that we’re about to move—I call this the “about-to-moment.” All of these processes connect us with the factor of volition….

Although intentions are very quick and small, each one contains a huge power—that is, the power to bring about results, the power bears fruit.

Goldstein makes an important point—an intention forms almost instantaneously, with potentially life-changing consequences. It might seem impossible to adequately track and manage this sort of dynamic process, but it is doable, which I know from personal experience. Because our normal experiential mode is so locked into the fluidity of craving and clinging regarding what is arising and passing away, we don’t have much practice in “fragmenting” each subjective second into smaller “bits”, but it can be done, with sufficient atapi sati sampajanna—it is simply cultivating the intention to notice how often a thought “fragment” occurs in the context of what humanity has arbitrarily set as a second of time. For this example, consider that an average in-breath lasts perhaps a second or two and there are multiple intentions to maintain conscious awareness during the period of time during the in-breath. Carefully tracking that process can create direct awareness of intentions in such a way that, by comparison, it is possible to realize mindfully just how quickly moments of self-commentary occur in the context of that in-breath. Each of those moments of mindful investigation of the commentary includes an intention, and that can be noted. This leads to a deeper understanding of the transitory arising and disappearing of elements of the commentary.

I personally set an intention to notice the very beginning of the in-breath and then the out-breath before each sitting practice, as a way to establish a routine that makes noting intentions more frequently more likely for moments of self-experience not directly associated with the sensations of breathing. I also cultivate awareness of intentions through the practice of systematically scanning the sensations that are noticeable everywhere in the body. This also creates the circumstances that make it more possible to note with detached, investigative awareness the arising and passing away of thoughts.

Typically, this persistent and alert routine would be more fully developed during a residential retreat, which is organized to provide opportunities for integrating formal mindfulness practices with every other activity during the day.

Growth towards Awakening requires intimate awareness of the moment-by-moment activation of intentions, first towards redirecting the energy of attention away from dukkha and towards what I call “self-state integration”, which involves a wholesome personality structure and lifestyle. This sets the conditions for relinquishing the fundamental intention that creates the mistaken perception of and enduring self—this opens the door to realization of Nirvana.