MINDFUL DECISION MAKING

During a Dharma talk on December 7, 2020 entitled "Mindful Consumerism”, a formula for decision making was briefly described as the Four Clear Comprehensions, which can be found in Buddhist commentaries, as described in “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness” by U Silananda, on page 52:

“There are four kinds of clear comprehension mentioned in the commentaries. One is the “clear comprehension of what is of benefit.” The second is the “clear comprehension of what is suitable.” The third is the “clear comprehension of the meditator’s domain” and the fourth is the “clear comprehension of non-delusion.”

This book was the first I read that reviewed, more than thirty years ago, with great benefit, and that concept appealed to me then and still does. The formula has applications beyond its original intentions, which are in reference to one’s spiritual practice; it can also be usefully applied to more mundane lifestyle-management concerns. This consideration is especially important during the Christmas season, which currently has little spiritual underpinnings and is organized in such a way as to maximize consumption, with minimal consideration of consequences, financial, social or environmental.

In Pali, the Four Clear Comprehensions are *sati sampajanna* (sah-tee sahm-pah-jahn-yah). *Sati* is translated as *mindfulness*, or, perhaps more usefully, *present moment process awareness*. Sampajanna is described in the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism in this way:

"…clear comprehension," "circumspection," "introspection"; a term that is closely related to, and often appears in compound with, mindfulness. In descriptions of the practice of developing meditative absorption [sati] refers to the factor of mindfulness that ties the mind to the object, while [sampajanna] is the factor that observes the mind to determine whether it has strayed from its object.”

We can consider the cultivation of sati sampajanna to be the precursor to the first two of the Seven Awakening Factors, *sati* and *dhamma vicaya* (dah-mah vih-chah-yah)—*dhamma* translates as *mental phenomena* and *vicaya* as *analytic investigation*. The primary goal of Buddhist liberation practice involves progressively insightful observation of how the “selfing process” forms, with the ultimate goal being direct experience of Nirvana, the lack of a subject/object duality, unconditioned in any way.

The intentions guiding this talk is to describe the usefulness of these concepts to effectively cultivate a lifestyle that is minimally impacted by consumer conditioning, bringing a mundane process of decision making that is personally, socially and environmentally responsible, and creates the conditions for deeper experiences of liberation from dukkha (doo-kah), distress and confusion.

Consider the elements of the above quotes in more detail:

“CLEAR COMPREHENSION OF WHAT IS OF BENEFIT” has obvious applications. I have reworded it as “IS THIS A WORTHY GOAL OR VALUE TO REALIZE?” Our daily choices are organized around accomplishing a particular task or valuing a course of action. The goals or values can be trivial or quite consequential regarding their impact. In the context of consumerism, it is important to investigate and evaluate a particular investment of money or effort—a “cost/benefit analysis” prior to any action. During the talk on mindful consumerism, I emphasized how the pervasive indoctrination we are all subjected to is often unquestioned, simply and often immediately acted on. We can investigate why it seems necessary to purchase a particular item. When I was a child, my preferences for gifts I received was often conditioned by peer pressure, which, in turn, was conditioned culturally through advertising. As an adult, I can cultivate an alert, detached investigation of my motives regarding a particular purchase of belief, combined with self-discipline. Prioritizing can still affect the consuming choices we make, either in terms of whether we actually need a particular item of clothing, or even a particularly stylish brand, irrespective of its quality or the negative impact that producing that item might have on the environment. This sort of restraint also has implications for the values we prioritize.

“CLEAR COMPREHENSION OF WHAT IS SUITABLE” can be rephrased as “WHAT IS THE MOST SUITABLE WAY TO REALIZE THE GOAL OR VALUE?” This application of the formula involves determining the most effective approach to achieving the goal, and might involve certain tools, resources, skills, etc. Regarding the cultivation of sati sampajanna, we want to be aware of the “best fit” in a situation. For example, normally the best way to leave a room is to go to the door and open it—however, what is the best approach when you have your hands full; should you make more than one trip? Can you put an object down on a convenient table while you open the door? Considering further, it might be more effective to ask someone to open the door for you. Of course, the first consideration would be deciding whether moving the items from the room is really the most beneficial application of your time, depending on your schedule. Regarding consumer choices, would there be benefit from researching an item before leaving the house, to determine which stores have it at the best price? In terms of values, what would be the most compassionate response to an invitation to attend a holiday party that has significant potential for a negative consequence?

“CLEAR COMPREHENSION OF THE MEDITATOR’S DOMAIN” involves the ability to maintain an attitude of mindfulness during the whole process. Here is a quote from the Satipatthana Sutta that is directly related to this consideration:

"Furthermore, when walking, the monk discerns, 'I am walking.' When standing, he discerns, 'I am standing.' When sitting, he discerns, 'I am sitting.' When lying down, he discerns, 'I am lying down.' Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it.

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally... unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.

"Furthermore, when going forward & returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward & looking away... when bending & extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe & his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, & savoring... when urinating & defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert.”

The basic practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation provides ongoing training for maintaining persistent “process awareness”, and this process is “the meditator’s domain”. I have found it useful for contemplating how I want to live my life on a daily basis as well as regarding long-term considerations. I began using this formula decades ago, with the goal being to create and sustain a “householder” lifestyle that fosters a wholesome marriage, good health, financial stability and environmental responsibility, which are the represented by the fourth clear comprehension:

“CLEAR COMPREHENSION OF NON-DELUSION”, which ultimately refers to resolving the distress and confusion of everyday life, preparatory for deconstructing the delusion that there is an enduring, autonomous self. The premise is that our sense of self is constructed on the framework of prior conditioning. The most basic conditioning is reinforced by a lifetime of interactive experience of the world, a duality that creates an object-observer process that has great survival and social value, but ultimately is unreliable because the world is much more complex and dynamically changing than any mental fabrication can possibly master. On a mundane, householder level, however, we can create a lifestyle that is adaptive and responsive in wholesome ways to our environment, with specific relevance regarding the consumer lifestyle we live in.

Sati sampajanna is not linear in application, but holistic. Each of the four elements influences the others. We can use mindfulness of breathing to cultivate a stabilizing point of reference that is available in an ongoing way for discerning how our intentions are being shaped through prior conditioning—karma—to keep evaluating a goal; it might be that, as the process of determining a suitable means develops, the value of the goal diminishes enough to reconsider that goal and shift to another. It might be that as we mindfully investigate the suitable means, we realized that some modifications are required, a different approach perhaps. It is also important to discern whether the time and effort necessary to achieve the goal interferes with more spiritual endeavors—we have been strongly conditioned to “lock in” to a particular pattern of consumer behavior, regarding media time, which interferes with the opportunity to practice mindfulness meditation.

I invite you to give a gift to your self during this holiday season: an increased ability to live a more wholesome life, less dominated by consumerism with the regular practice of mindfulness meditation. This can become a new year’s resolution!