Reviewing Mindfulness Of The Mind

The Third Foundation of Mindfulness is *Cittanupassana* (chee-tah-noo-pah-sah-nah), traditionally translated as M*indfulness of the Mind*. Here is the passage from Nyanamoli’s translation, as found in Analayo’s “Satipatthana—The Direct Path To Realization”:

Contemplation of the Mind-State

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. He understands mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate, and mind unaffected by hate. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. He understands contracted mind as contracted mind, and distracted mind as distracted mind. He understands exalted mind as exalted mind and unexalted mind as unexalted mind. He understands surpassed mind as surpassed mind, and unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind. He understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind, and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind. He understands liberated mind as liberated mind, and unliberated mind as unliberated mind.

“In this way he abides contemplating mind as mind internally, or he abides contemplating mind as mind externally, or he abides contemplating mind as mind both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in mind its arising factors, or he abides contemplating in mind its vanishing factors, or he abides contemplating in mind both its arising and vanishing factors. Or else mindfulness that ‘there is a mind’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind as mind.

To quickly review, a mind affected by *lust, hate* and *delusion* characterizes three basic mind-states that must be categorically dissolved to promote Awakening. A *contracted* mind is rigid, and this characteristic significantly reduces one’s ability to practice vipassana effectively; similarly, a *distracted* mind is also not effective for the practice of vipassana. Once these obstacles are sufficiently set aside, the ability to clearly know whether a mind is *exalted* or *unexalted,* that is, the extent to which one’s awareness is operating at a higher degree of stability and disenchantment (free from craving and clinging), or not. The degree to which the mind has reached its full potential for liberation or not is reflected through the terms *surpassed* or *unsurpassed*. A *concentrated* mind traditionally refers to the degree that the mind has achieved jhana states or not; however, many contemporary teachers regard a mind that is unperturbed by the Five Hindrances is sufficiently prepared for achieving the state of being *liberated*; in this case concentration is represented by the Concentration Awakening Factor, which signifies the stability and cooperation among the Seven Awakening Factors.

The understanding that weaves all these characteristics of the mind together is actually the practice of vipassana, direct knowledge of how the mind is reflecting that which is fabricated, in terms of the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness.

The word *citta* is translated as *mind*, but this a nuanced understanding. There are three different terms in the Pali lexicon for the mind or consciousness: *citta, vinnana* and *manas*. Citta is understood to relate to the subjective experience we all live within. Here is what is stated about citta in Wikipedia:

'Citta' primarily represents one's mindset, or state of mind. It is the term used to refer to the quality of mental processes as a whole… The complex causal nexus of volitions (or intentions) which one experiences continuously conditions one's thoughts, speech, and actions. One's state of mind at any given time reflects that complex; thus, the causal origin of actions, speech, and thoughts is sometimes associated with the state of mind (citta), in a manner of speaking… Generally speaking, a person will operate with a collection of changing mindsets, and some will occur regularly. While these mindsets determine the personality, they are not in control of themselves, but fluctuate and alternate. There is thus the need for the meditative integration of personality to provide a greater, more wholesome consistency.

Buddhist psychology lists 52 cetasikas, various conditioning functions that are “a collection of changing mindsets…that determine the personality…not in control of themselves but fluctuate and alternate”. The word *cetasika* (cheh-tah-see-kah) refers to *those functions that operate within the cittas*.

*Vinnana* is similar to citta in its characteristics regarding consciousness but seems rather to refer to the *types of mental constructs, such as seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, tasting consciousness, bodily consciousness, and mental consciousness*. *Manas* seems to refer to a person’s underlying mental subconsciousness, the deeply embedded “I am-ness”, the self-identity that must be defended or gratified.

To summarize, *citta* represents the volitional dynamics of consciousness, how the mind flows subjectively, while *vinnana* represents the categorical bases of sensory processes, and *manas* is the self-identity base of cognitive awareness. The ability to differentiate these while meditating is not important; I include them to clarify any further reading—*the most important understanding is about citta, particularly the subjective experience that is fabricating the selfing story*.

Citta can be considered as having the same function as a motion picture screen, which has no opinion, but simply reflects that which is projected onto it. The problem with this consideration is that the screen is material and stationary, and this makes it possible to understand citta as representing a self, which is not the case. *Consciousness is not the least bit material but is a very complex and dynamically changing interaction between multiple areas of the brain, processing different sensory categories and operating simultaneously at differing scales of complexity.* These multiple areas are processing different stimuli generated by the world simultaneously—visual, auditory, etc., producing a constant flow of subjective experience. There is no identifiable area in the brain/body continuum that can be considered to be the primary determinant of consciousness.

THE MIND AND COMPLEXITY THEORY

The congruity of insights between the centuries-old subjective wisdom of Buddhism and the developments of contemporary neuroscience is remarkable and a fundamental support for confidence in Buddhist concepts and practices. One of these current scientific disciplines is called *complexity theory*. Here is a brief description of complex systems from Wikipedia:

A complex system is a [system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/System) composed of many components which may [interact](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interaction) with each other. Examples of complex systems are Earth's global [climate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate), [organisms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisms), the [human brain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_brain), infrastructure such as a power grid, transportation or communication systems, social and economic organizations (like [cities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cities)), an [ecosystem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecosystem), a living [cell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cell_(biology)), and ultimately the entire [universe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universe).

Closely related to complexity is a mathematical concept called *chaos theory*, which proposes (according to Wikipedia):

Chaos theory is a branch of [mathematics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathematics) focusing on the study of *chaos* — [dynamical systems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dynamical_system) whose apparently random states of disorder and irregularities are actually governed by underlying patterns and deterministic laws that are highly sensitive to [initial conditions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Initial_conditions). Chaos theory is an interdisciplinary theory stating that, within the apparent randomness of [chaotic complex systems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaotic_complex_system), there are underlying patterns, interconnectedness, constant [feedback loops](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feedback_loops), repetition, [self-similarity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-similarity), [fractals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fractals), and [self-organization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-organization).

Chaos theory also includes a concept called a *strange attractor* (once again from Wikipedia): “… *the attractors that arise from chaotic systems, known as* [*strange attractors*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strange_attractor)*, have great detail and complexity*.” A strange attractor in terms of the mind is an initiating perception such as a sound, that stimulates the auditory processes of the brain. There is a term for this initiating stimulus in Buddhist psychology—*nimitta* (nih-mih-tah)—which is a “*seed moment*”, from which a perceptual/cognitive process rapidly develops, called *papanca* (pah-pahn-chah); this process provides a flood of 17 “thought moments”, the coming together of which represents a moment of becoming or birth in the Buddhist dependent origination concept. Another term from chaos theory and strange attractor dynamics is *emergence*, which basically proposes that, *when the circumstances of a complex interactive process are sufficiently interactive, a phenomenal organization emerges, manifesting as long as the complexity of the circumstances allows, then collapses and reforms around another strange attractor*. I believe this propositional view is a powerful way to understand *paticca samuppada* (pah-tee-chah sah-moo-pah-dah), typically translated as *dependent origination*; I propose a translation of *contingent provisional emergence*, reflecting the dynamic aspects of the concepts and setting aside any notion of a unique origination phenomenon.

The experience of selfing is dynamic, obviously, but within this process is the very strongly held misperception that there is an enduring observer, witness, or actor. How does this misperception work? In his collaborative book, “The Mind Illuminated”, Culadasa uses various contemporary neuropsychological concepts and jargon as an alternative way to describe what the more arcane Buddhist terminology proposes. He calls how the self develops the “Mind System”, and within this system certain terms are useful: The mind is subdivided into conscious and unconscious dimensions, with the unconscious being the larger domain. Within the unconscious are sub-minds, representing seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, somatosensory and discriminating processes. The discriminating mind is subdivided into a thinking/emotional function and a narrating function—the thinking/emotional provides a process that associates memories with emotions, and the narrating function binds them together in an ongoing way. All these sub-minds are arrayed within the unconscious, and our subjective experience is represented by the conscious mind process. Stimulation is transferred amongst the various sub-minds through brief moments of peripheral conscious awareness (referencing the thought moments concept described above), primarily through the narrating sub-mind, which “binds” the various stimulus streams, through the actions of the thinking/emotional sub-mind activities, which sort through the various stimulus streams, prioritizing which of them to disregard and which to integrate. This creates an ongoing sense of a self in the world.

Here is an example provided in “The Mind Illuminated”, on p. 207, paraphrased for this talk: The visual process is stimulated by a form, and, at the same time, there is a sound that can be perceived in proximity to the visual stimulus. This goes through the functions of the discriminating thinking/emotional sub-mind, labelling the visual stimulus as a pleasing redwing blackbird, and the sound, processed by a different sub-mind, conforms to this association. Simultaneous stimulations provided by environmental circumstances are determined by different areas of the brain to not require focused attention, and the visual and auditory stimuli are then bound together with the narrating sub-mind function which is even more basic, deciding that there is a separate and enduring witness to this process, a self, and, by projection, a witnessed world that is separate from that self.

Obviously, this sorting process is quite complex and constantly changing, and from this process the sense of self-and-other emerges. The “object” changes, and so does the “self that experiences the object”. There is no enduring/autonomous self that is directing or witnessing this process—the processes of lust, hate and delusion are potentiated through a lifetime of repetition of these patterns that we call a personality.

Another approach to understanding how the mind “binds” these moments involves what we call the eidetic (eye-deh-tick) process. When you look at a candle for a minute or so and then close your eyes, an eidetic after-image seems to float in a dark background for a period of time, and then fades. Functionally, the optical processes in the brain are strongly activated by the light of the candle. There is no “on-off switch” in the brain—the neurons just keep firing, although with a different color. Eventually, this neural activity fades out because the initial stimulation has ceased, and those neurons stop firing. When you substitute an internal narrative for the light stimulus from the candle, the same sort of “afterglow” process nudges the thoughts along through the binding consciousness, until the stream of narrative activation/self-identification is interrupted, after which the thought/self changes to another complex neural dynamic.

The purpose of contemplating the Third Foundation of Mindfulness, Cittanupassana, is to directly know the transitory and impersonal nature of how the mind operates. When contemplated along with the other Foundations, the process of liberation from lust, hate and delusion is eventually deconstructed, and life becomes a more enriching experience.