Setting Aside Aversion And Ill-Will

These notes are intended to accompany and support the several meetings organized around reviewing the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, beginning with the Five Hindrances, and specifically investigating *vyapada* (vyah-pah-dah), *aversion and ill-will*. This hindrance operates as a contrast to the first hindrance, *kamacchanda* (kah-mah-chahn-dah), *sense desire*, which was reviewed and posted July 7, 2021*. Aversion* is an emotionally potent pulling-away from an unpleasant feeling, while *ill-will* is an aggressive reaction to the experience. In the case of sense desire, there is an attraction to and enmeshment with pleasant experience.

One could make a rational argument that aversion is the most fundamental drive for living beings; even a single-cell organism will withdraw from a toxic stimulus. It is also the case that that same organism will move toward a potential nutrient, which is necessary for survival. I believe fear is a primary function—if our ancestors were so preoccupied with eating wild berries that the approach of a predator was not noticed that individual wouldn’t contribute to the gene pool of the next generation!

Here is the relevant quote from the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse:

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects? Here a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances. And how does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances? Here, there being ill-will in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is ill-will in me’; or there being no ill-will in him, he understands: ‘There is no ill-will in me’; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen ill-will, and how there comes to be the abandonment of arisen ill-will; and how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned ill-will.

This is the classical rendering of vyapada. In more contemporary psychological concepts, we can view it as a form of dissociation from unpleasantness in regard to one’s self-identity, a form of self-loathing. Dissociation is a contemporary psychological term that describes how we tend to redirect attention unconsciously in order to avoid unpleasant feelings. We can distract attention through the actions of the hindrance of sense desire (The most radical example of this is addiction, through which a substance or behavior that is sensually pleasurable masks an underlying unpleasant feeling.), or through acting aggressively to displace attention away from fear or shame towards attacking what the mind has determined to be the cause of the unpleasant feelings. The attacking can be overt, that is, physically attacking, perhaps another being, an inanimate object or even our own self-image. The attacking might be covert, through passive/aggressive behaviors (such as “forgetting” to do something or “losing” something important to someone else), or through avoiding self-care interventions because of intolerance to discomfort.

As was mentioned in the previous talk about sense desire, the Buddha described metaphors regarding Aversion and Ill-Will, suggesting that the experience is like trying to look into a clear pond, but discovering that the water is boiling so much the view is distorted. The other metaphor compares this hindrance to having a fever, the heat of which hinders an undistorted view of self.

Physiologically, the neural pathways that activate aversion and ill-will are functionally the same as with sense desire, located in the mid-brain area called the limbic system. These neural structures include the amygdala, hippocampus, and nucleus accumbens. The amygdala provides an emotionally reactive impulse that is avoidant regarding unpleasant feelings, coordinated with the action of the hippocampus, which communicates between the amygdala and the parts of the brain called the association cortex, where memories are stored. The combined interactions between these two stimulate the nucleus accumbens, which functions to initiate behaviors in response to what the mind fabricates. A different area of the brain called the preorbital cortex, in the forehead, provides a regulatory impulse that “travels upstream” to the initiating nucleus accumbens and either supports the behaviors or reduces and perhaps stops the behaviors. In the case of aversion and ill-will, the preorbital cortex allows the unpleasant feeling to work through the situation without rejecting/withdrawing or aggressive behaviors.

HOW DOES MINDFULNESS OR LOVINGKINDNESS PRACTICE SET ASIDE AVERSION AND ILL-WILL?

Here are some recommended antidotes for this hindrance:

* It is suggested that living an ethical, healthy and balanced life will create the environmental circumstances that support a minimal exposure to lifestyle issues that stimulate aversion and ill-will.
* It is helpful to intentionally investigate the aversive reactions experienced with minor events that involve unpleasant feelings, such as an itch—Note how the mind create a self that resists and rejects the unpleasant urgency and then make a commitment to not scratch the itch. This simple practice is harmless (although the mind might insist that scratching that itch is the most important issue!). Riding out the impulse to react empowers the “signal strength” of neural activity from the preorbital cortex to the nucleus accumbens, while also creating stored memories that the hippocampus can access that “reframes” the event in such a way that other, perhaps more consequential unpleasant experiences will not activate aversion and ill-will but, instead, cultivate equanimity.
* Another intervention that is useful, especially regarding ill-will, is the practice of lovingkindness and compassion. To be successful with this effort, the practice of lovingkindness meditation replaces the hostile reaction with benevolent intention, perhaps accompanied by an internal narrative that acknowledges “I am witnessing suffering—how can I bring compassion to this experience?”.