WHOLESOME MIND CONDITIONERS, PART ONE

When I began to study and practice mindfulness meditation, I was at a low point in my life. As my practice developed over the years, my life circumstances improved. Of course, it’s impossible to clearly mark where and how the improvements occurred; I would like to think that mindfulness practice contributed significantly to the positive changes. The last few years, what I’ve been telling folks about my 37+ years of mindfulness practice that *“During the first several years of practice mindfulness allowed me to fend off the demons; since then, I’ve been feeding the angels!”*

Functionally, I believe that as I’ve developed more skills and applied them more frequently, integrating the formal meditation practice into daily life routines, the unwholesome mind conditioners have significantly diminished in potency and believability, while the wholesome conditioners have been more in the forefront in the fabrication of my thoughts and actions. I believe that this progression is what Buddhism has described as “Awakening”.

For a long time, I thought Awakening is a singular event, a spiritual “dividing line”, marked by the first experience of the unconditioned, Nirvana. I don’t perceive Awakening this way lately. Of course, the first encounter with the extraordinary experience of Nirvana is important. I believe what the Buddha taught is a process that is its own reward, and that life experience benefits from training the mind to not be “enchanted” by the internal narratives that emerge into awareness. Understanding the mind conditioners as they operate fosters the “disenchantment” process.

In previous essays, I described the universal mind conditioners, the particular/occasional mind conditioners and the unwholesome mind conditioners. The universal and particular/occasional conditioners are ethically neutral, that is, they play a role in shaping moments of self-awareness, but their influence is subsidiary to either the unwholesome/unethical or the wholesome/ethical conditioners.

The root causes of dukkha, the Buddhist term for suffering or dissatisfaction (I prefer the terms *distress and confusion*), emerge in awareness under the influence of the unwholesome conditioners. This sort of experience represents the demons mentioned above. The wholesome conditioners are the antidote for the unwholesome conditioners, and they represent the angels mentioned above. Unwholesome conditioners dominate the typical human experience, in a sense as the “default mode”, manifesting in the untrained mind. Awakening involves the intentional cultivation of the wholesome conditioners.

I also emphasize that the reason for being well informed about the individual conditioners is to provide focus points for “deconstructing” the misperception of an enduring, “in-control” self, thereby fostering disenchantment. By cultivating mindfulness, a wholesome conditioner, in coordination with other wholesome conditioners, the trained mind can actually experience the operation of a particular mind conditioner the moment it is activated!. *This is the essence of vipassana/insight practice*.

This is the essential focus of the section of the Anapanasati Sutta that is the target of our latest discussion. Here is the relevant quote from the Sutta, translated by Thanissaro:

He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication.'[4](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/#n-4) He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.'

Later in the Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are described in the context of mindfulness of breathing:

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Here is a listing of the first nine wholesome mind conditioners with brief comments about their characteristics and functions. The first seven of these conditioners participate in every formation of a moment of wholesome self-organization and are therefore termed Universal Wholesome Mind Conditioners. These are combined with the Universal Mind Conditioners: *Feeling, Perception, Contact, Volition, Concentration, Vitality* and *Attention*. The Occasional Mind Conditioners most likely to participate in these wholesome selfing moments are: *Moving Attention to an Object (vitakka), Sustaining Attention on the Object (vicara), Determination, Energy, Enthusiasm* and *Zeal*.

**CONFIDENCE**: Also termed **FAITH**, is certainty about the benefits of virtue, wisdom and meditative training. It is not based on hearsay and is grounded in actual results. It can only accumulate gradually, through skillful, persistent and consistent practice. The result of this accumulation is the ability to be unshakable regarding applying the acquired skills and the benefit of the outcome, despite the opinions of others.

**MINDFULNESS**: The Pali word *sati* is usually translated as mindfulness. This is probably the most important of the mind conditioners. Originally, sati meant being non-forgetful, particularly as regards accurately remembering the Vedas, the holy scriptures of the Brahmins. The Buddha used this term to describe the process of vipassana, (insight into impermanence, non-self and the suffering that arises as a consequence of craving and clinging) and is functionally synonymous with sati. It monitors and supports regulation of all the other mental factors. The Buddha compared this mind conditioning factor to the chief minister of a king, whose job was to monitor the performance of the various components of the government. As the first of the seven factors of awakening, its primary function is to support Investigation of Mental Phenomena and Wholesome Effort, i.e., present moment awareness of the arising of wholesome consciousness and the non-arising of unwholesome consciousness.

**MORAL SHAME**: This is the antidote for the unwholesome mind conditioner of *shamelessness*. It includes modesty, humility, conscientiousness, and scrupulousness. It prevents regret and remorse. It is present at any moment when virtue is applied.

**FEAR OF BLAME**: This is the antidote for the unwholesome mind conditioner of *recklessness*. We are all inherently social creatures, and unwholesomeness creates distrust and disharmony. This factor focuses on the intentional cultivation of virtue so that social support is readily available for Awakening.

**NON-ATTACHMENT**: This mind conditioner is considered a fundamental root factor for Awakening, along with Non-Aversion and Wholesome Understanding. Classically, it is like "…being detached, like a drop of water on a lotus leaf…" It is the cause of generosity and manifests the realization of non-self. The cultivation of samadhi/passadhi (concentration/tranquility) creates a “buffer” of emotional nonreactivity that supports the practice of vipassana and the development of the Seven Awakening Factors.

**NON-AVERSION**: This is another of the "beautiful root factors". Its manifestation is lovingkindness. It has the characteristic of gentleness, inclusiveness, tolerance and patience. Non-aversion is not affection, which is sentimental attachment to an object of attention.

**EQUANIMITY**: There are two Pali words associated with equanimity: *upekkha* and *tatramajjhatata*. *Upekkha* is translated as *non-preferential awareness*, and *tatramajjhatata* is translated as *balance in the functioning of consciousness and that which is reflected in consciousness*. Equanimity is the result of balancing energy so there’s not too much causing agitation and restlessness, or too little causing sloth and torpor. It also involves balancing cognition, providing enough detached investigation to interrupt cognitive rigidity, without becoming too skeptical or scattered in function. It is the seventh of the seven awakening factors.

The next essay, entitled “WHOLESOME MIND CONDITIONERS, PART 2”, explores the remaining ten wholesome mind conditioners.