Dukkha As Mental Confusion

During the talk on July 31 I translated *dukkha* as *distress and confusion*, and that talk mostly focused on the experience of distress in our current cultural environment. During this talk I will emphasis the confusion that is an essential aspect of dukkha. We live in a culture that is negatively impacted by commercialism, most particularly advertising. We are also stressed by the unprecedented, intrusive nature of contemporary media. Additionally, we were raised by people, parents and other significant adults, who were adversely impacted by the increasingly complex and dynamically changing social norms during the 20th century, mentioned in the July 31st talk. These cultural circumstances create extraordinary stress on an individual’s self-image.

As I mentioned in previous talks, there are two levels of attainment in this practice: mundane and supramundane awakening. The focus of these talks is mundane awakening which can be understood as having a well-integrated and wholesome personality process. Future talks will home in on specific areas of exploration such as anxiety, depression, consumerism, addiction, relationships, work, etc. as specific focal points of discussion, with mindfulness of breathing and lovingkindness practices as the common theme for addressing the dukkha potential and cultivating mundane awakening.

One of the most important conceptual gifts of Buddhism is interdependence, a realization that our sense of self is intimately interactive with the environment, especially the social contacts we are exposed to throughout life. *There is no separate and enduring self*, a concept termed *anatta* by Buddhism. This fabricating process emerges into awareness as a mental phenomenon derived from prior experience, but we are conditioned to accept the mind’s version of reality as being fundamentally accurate—who we are and how the world is. Of course, this is impossible, but the discrepancy between what the mind creates and what actually happens is what creates the confusion. Buddhism calls this ongoing discrepancy *maya* and the repetitive nature of this process is called *samsara*.

In Buddhist terms, *distress* is described as *craving* (*tanha, an unquenchable thirst*) and *confusion* as *clinging* (*upadana, the enchantment with what the mind creates*), and this creates *dukkha*. A fundamental goal of Buddhist practice is to relinquish utterly any enchantment with the mind’s fabrication. Through the practice of noting the fundamentally physical nature of the breath, then noting the emerging, fabricated internal narrative I call the selfing story as a mental phenomenon and training attention to identify the phenomenon as not essentially real while redirecting attention back to the breath, the potency of upadana is drained away.

How does the enchantment of upadana operate? Self-awareness is extremely complex as a process. We are swamped with multiple streams of stimulation—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and the cascading array of internal sensory experiences including pressure, temperature, pain, etc. These streams can’t be comprehended except through a sorting process, through which stimuli which are perceived as not relevant are disregarded, while stimuli that are perceived as important are processed at a “higher level of resolution”, that is, conditioned by previously stored comparative memories. An important driver of this resolution process is whatever emotional potency seems the emerge during the process (This would be the craving aspect associated with what the mind fabricates, dependent upon prior memories).

Modern research suggests that the memory-driven parts of the process, along with the latency of whatever emotion is associated with the memory, becomes predominant, to some extent overriding or replacing whatever doesn’t fit into the preserved memory-driven process. This is called confirmation bias. Here is what Wikipedia has offered regarding this phenomenon:

**Confirmation bias** is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses. It is a type of [cognitive bias](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_bias) and a systematic error of [inductive reasoning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inductive_reasoning). People display this bias when they gather or remember information selectively, or when they interpret it in a [biased](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias) way. The effect is stronger for desired outcomes, [emotionally](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotion) charged issues, and for deeply entrenched-beliefs.

Cognitive bias is a tendency in the mind; mindfulness meditation focuses on the interpretive process without identifying with the biasing as certainly true and self-confirming. This raises the question “If mindfulness reveals the fabricating nature of the mental process as unreliable, not an enduring self, then what is left?” This leads to the Buddhist concept of *emptiness, sunyata* (*soon-yah-tah*). This term is often misunderstood. Emptiness isn’t like the space between galaxies or some sort of nihilism. *It is the stimulus stream before it is perceived and processed, before confirmation bias fabricates a self-identity and “the other”*. In other words, the potential for certainty at the beginning of the process of cognition is close to zero before perception kicks in. As stimuli are perceived and the sorting process begins, an element of probability develops associated with that perceptual and fabrication process—“It might be this, it might not be this…”--, and as the process continues, the defining process becomes more detailed and the level of certainty in the mind increases until what Buddhism calls “attachment to view” sets in, and the fabrication of a self and “the other” is complete (for a fraction of a second). This process reiterates multiple times per second and the different “separate” fabrications blend together (this blending is part of the mind’s fabrication process and is called a “binding moment of consciousness”).

The practice of mindfulness of breathing, when developed to its full potential, allows direct experiential confirmation of this binding moment of consciousness, sort of like being in a dark room illuminated several times per second by a strobe light. When this happens, the image of the arm moving seems to be a series of momentarily still images of the arm in different places in visual space. In Buddhist practice this awareness of the momentary appearing and disappearing of mind-moments as “arising and passing away”.

How does this relate to dealing with the stressful circumstances of contemporary life? It is not necessary to cultivate awareness of arising and passing away to be able to cope with life’s challenges. It is empowering to know conceptually that whatever we think is fabricated, and, with this understanding, to realize that thoughts aren’t inherently or inevitable true, including whatever we may believe about our self-identity. This realization is an essential component of cognitive therapy, an effective and well-researched way to address dukkha, that is, distress and confusion. Of course it doesn’t hurt to experience arising and passing away, as that deepens awareness that we are making up life as we go along, that no one has a firm grasp on reality, particularly regarding how the human mind operates as well as whatever social norms we create.

A few references were made during the talk. Here are the titles and authors referred to: “Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology” by Daniel J. Siegel and “The Mind Illuminated” by Culadasa (John Yates, PhD.). Siegel’s book describes a “plane of possibility”, which can be related to sunyata. Culadasa’s book talks of “sub-minds”, referred to in the talk as the different areas of the brain where visual, auditory, etc. processes occur before being processed into thoughts and self-identities in the association cortical areas of the brain.