The Dharma And Political Conflict

The theme that has been prevalent in the last several week’s discussions is the stress we are confronted with in these unprecedented times. Due to several converging dynamic systemic problems, that is, consumerism, ecological upheaval, increasingly high population levels and the surge of migration due to drought, flood and warfare, and the proliferation of almost instantaneous media reporting around the world (whether it is “fake news” or not), political systems are significantly challenged.

Being confronted with the impact of daily news coverage, whether immediate or indirectly through the stress-induced behaviors of others, is evident. This is dukkha, the distress and confusion of contemporary life. I gave a series of talks in the summer of 2016 in the context of the developing political stressors of the national election cycle; perhaps it may be useful to review some of the concepts that were presented then considering current events.

First, let me review some research regarding the psychological terms of conservatism and liberalism. When these terms are presented, we normally categorize them as political, and of course they are. However, *a person can be psychologically conservative as a political liberal and a political conservative can be psychologically liberal*! There are several factors that have been suggested by research to contribute to this phenomenon.

One of the factors is negativity bias, which is the biologically driven orientation of one’s attention towards perceived threats, whether they are realistic or not. Early in one’s ongoing assessment of incoming stimuli is the reaction of the amygdala, a cluster of neurons whose main function is to assess for potential threat. Previously in human history this had relevance in determining whether one’s life was threatened (This is still true in war zones and catastrophic disasters). Most current threats are associated with social and financial status (For example, the fear that immigrants steal jobs; the reality is that most lost jobs are due to automation or shifting manufacturing to another locale, or that all republicans want to do is hoard their money and to starve poor people). This leads to awareness that fear is the most primary emotion—that is, fear is a more potent driver of perceptions and actions than desire, unless there is an immediate, present threat to survival. This fear biases one’s judgment and leads to another key factor, confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias emerges from the neurological processes through which prior experience provides potential identification for incoming stimuli. If the amygdala assesses potential threat, a closely associated neural complex, the hippocampus, creates associations with similar prior events. *Social science research suggests that the identification process is to a large extent predetermined, particularly when the association with prior experience is made more potent by negativity bias.*

The characteristics of confirmation bias and negativity bias creates a distortion that adversely affects one’s judgment in ways that promote conflict, regardless of political affiliation. Here are excerpts from a Wikipedia article differentiating differences between liberal and conservative traits from a psychological perspective:

“Recent research points at substantial differences in the cognitive styles of liberals and conservatives on psychological measures. For example, **conservatives respond to threatening situations with more aggression than do liberals. Similarly, conservatives are more sensitive to threatening facial expressions.** Jost and colleagues posed that political orientation is associated with psychological processes for managing fear and uncertainty…

…**Students who reported more 'conservative' political views tended to have larger amygdalae, a structure in the**

**temporal lobes that performs a primary role in the processing and memory of emotions. In addition, they found**

**clusters in which gray matter volume was significantly associated with conservativism in the left insula and the right entorhinal cortex. There is evidence that conservatives are more sensitive to disgust and the insula is involved in the feeling of disgust.** On the other hand, more **'liberal' students tended to have a larger volume of grey matter in the anterior cingulate cortex, a structure of the brain associated with monitoring uncertainty and handling conflicting information. It is consistent with previous research suggesting that individuals with a larger ACC have a higher capacity to tolerate uncertainty and conflicts,** allowing them to accept more liberal views…

…In an interview with LiveScience, Ryota Kanai said, “**It’s very unlikely that actual political orientation is directly encoded in these brain regions”, and that, “more work is needed to determine how these brain structures mediate the formation of political attitude.” Kanai and colleagues added that it is necessary to conduct a longitudinal study to determine whether the changes in brain structure that we observed lead to changes in political behavior or whether political attitudes and behavior instead result in changes of brain structure**….” downloaded from Wikipedia June 27, 2016

As part of the Wiki quote reports, it’s inappropriate to categorize liberalism and conservatism in such simplistic terms. It’s possible that preexisting neural pathways orient towards political affiliation, or that political indoctrination has a conditioning effect on neural pathways. What I find interesting is the research on how Buddhist meditation practices, both mindfulness and lovingkindness, affect the areas of the brain described in the above quoted research.

Research indicates that the anterior cingulate cortex becomes more functionally effective as the result of mindfulness of breathing meditation, which supports greater capacity for resolving conflicting information and tolerating ambiguity (that is, minimizing cognitive rigidity), both of which functions are considered to be liberal traits. Mindfulness practice also enhances the effectiveness of the prefrontal cortex, the function of which is to regulate emotional urgency (craving). Research suggests that conservative traits are more reactive to disgust and to unexpected novelty in the environment, and more prone to respond aggressively, either verbally or behaviorally. The amygdala, the neural area most activated by fear, is shown to be more dynamically functioning for individuals who can be described as trait conservative. More potent activation of the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex reduces the aggression and allows more flexible, adaptive thoughts and actions when confronted with ambiguous and complex social dynamics. Research suggests the overactivation/hypersensitivity of the amygdala is modified beneficially through mindfulness and lovingkindness meditation practice.

To summarize, it seems that regular practice of mindfulness meditation, combined with the benevolent intentions manifested in Buddhist ethics, cultivates a more liberal approach to socially complex and emotionally challenging circumstances. As a result, there is less of a tendency towards cognitive rigidity and hostility, more liberality, regarding the political and social complexities of our era. This can provide a way to negotiate political differences in non-aggressive ways, whether the adversaries are registered democrats, republicans, libertarians or independent of a political party affiliation.