

Present being¹

We live in two worlds, so to speak: the world of our physical senses and the world of our mind, a sense-world and a mental world.² The two, of course, work together, in that the mind or consciousness always precedes a sense-experience if we are to sense anything at all. This is famously stated in the very first two verses of the Dhammapada:

The mind precedes all mental states;
the mind is supreme; mind-made are they:
if, with a defiled mind, one speaks or acts,
suffering follows one like a wheel that dogs a draught ox's foot. (Dh 1)

The mind precedes all mental states;
the mind is supreme; mind-made are they:
if, with a pure mind, one speaks or acts,
happiness follows one like a shadow that leaves not. (Dh 2)

Notice here it is said that the mind precedes each action, whether we speak or act. In other words, the mind comes first, then we act (or not). Here “mind” (*mano*) is our intention, which can be unwholesome or wholesome. It is unwholesome (*akusala*) if it is rooted in greed, hate or delusion. It is wholesome (*kusala*) if it is rooted in non-greed (charity), non-hate (lovingkindness) or non-delusion (wisdom).³

An important element of the mind here is that of habituality. This is a simple way of talking about karma. We are creatures of habit, and in significant ways we (if we are unawakened) tend to have no real control over how we think, speak or act, even though we commit them intentionally. Recall how when we are caught in a loop of negative emotion (such as anger, envy, lust, or fear), we are helplessly sucked into its dark maelstrom.

However, we can minimize, even prevent, the unwholesome quality (or “roots” (*mūla*) as they are called) from inciting and tainting our actions. To do this, we need to be mindful. By “mindful” here, in simple terms, means that we observe or understand conditionality, that our actions have consequences. We remember this nature of things from past experiences, so that we are able to apply our mind more decisively and wholesomely this time. The more mindful we are (recalling conditionality of actions), the more self-control we have and the more habitually wholesome our actions become. In short, the wholesome mind precedes our actions.

The world of physical senses is our experiences that arise in the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. This is our world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. It is how we see and shape our environment and interact with others. These physical senses begin developing from our birth, but their functions are fixed: they neither grow nor change.⁴ The eye sees, the ear hears, the nose smells, the tongue tastes and the body feels.⁵

¹ This reflection is inspired by a learned and thoughtful email from Tai Yock Pin (Dec 2012) in response to “Time and being” (R273) 130102: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/R273-130102-Time-Being-RB65.pdf>

² See “Can I help?” (R321) 131204: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R321-131204-Can-I-help-238.pdf>

³ See *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.8a (4.5): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8a-Khandha-5-Vinnana-piya.pdf>

⁴ Our physical senses, however, deteriorate with age, so that they are unable to function optimally.

⁵ On the Buddhist view of synaesthesia, see SD 29.3 (2): http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.3-Unnabha-Brahmana-S-s48.42-piya.doc_temp.pdf

Of course, this is a simplistic way of talking. Indeed, without the mind, none of these sense-experiences would occur. These senses are simply tools of the mind.⁶ None of the senses “think,” only the mind thinks, so to speak. All the senses are in the present, that is, when we are awake.

The physical senses do not function, not fully anyway, when we are asleep. The mind, however, continues to function, such as during our dreams. During dreamless states, the conscious mind rests, and the subconscious or “life-continuum” (*bhavaṅga*) takes over. This is what keeps us alive until we wake up, when normal consciousness resumes.⁷

Our physical senses can only act in the present moment. In other words, each of our five physical senses acts in time and is shaped and controlled by time. The mind, on the other hand, can be anywhere, in any of the physical senses or even outside of them. In fact, the mind has a consciousness of its own, known as “mind-consciousness.” Each of the physical senses, when it is active, has its own consciousness, too, that is, the eye-consciousness, the ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, and so on.⁸

In a manner of speaking, although we are, in some way, conscious of our sense-experiences, they occur without thinking. Thinking, an activity of the mind, can occur without the intervention of any of the senses (although it often does). When we are thinking, especially in deep thought, we cannot sense things. As such, those who think a lot, and deeply, too, are often seen and said to be “absent-minded”: they are not present to their other senses. They are, as it were, caught up in their minds.

However, with mindfulness, we can be present in our sense-experiences. Thus, we act and speak mindfully. We come to a very interesting notion here. When we are fully “involved” in our actions or speech, without the influence of the mind, or mind-consciousness to be exact (which here is a memory or mental projection), then we are fully in the present, where the action is, so to speak.

When this is properly done, that is, free from at least greed and hate (some level of delusion will always be present in an unawakened mind), we “feel” (fully experience) the action and the moment. However, when delusion, too, is absent, such as during a moment of deep insight, the change can be remarkable. Indeed, we have many accounts of such life-changing and awakening moments in the suttas and commentaries, such as those of Aṅgulimāla,⁹ of Bāhiya Dāruciriya,¹⁰ and of Paṭācārā.¹¹

In such awakening moments, however, although initiated by listening (as in the cases of Aṅgulimāla and Bāhiya) or by seeing (in the case of Paṭācārā), the mind quickly frees itself from the physical senses, becomes profoundly mindful or fully focussed upon itself (to attain

⁶ Early Buddhism does not locate the mind anywhere, certainly not in the brain: see **Consciousness and meditation**, SD 17.8c (7): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>

⁷ See **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (9.3) Dreams: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8a-Khandha-5-Vinnana-piya.pdf>

⁸ See **Sal-āyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 137/3:216-222), SD 29.5: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.5-Salayatana-Vibhanga-S-m137-piya.pdf>

⁹ On Aṅgulimāla, see **Aṅgulimāla Sutta** (M 86 sections 5-6), SD 5.11: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/5.11-Angulimala-S-m86-piya.pdf>

¹⁰ On Bāhiya, see **(Arahatta) Bāhiya Sutta** (U 1.10 sections 15-18), SD 33.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/33.7-Arahatta-Bahiya-S-u1.10-piya.pdf>

¹¹ See **Paṭācārā**, SD 43.3 (4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/43.3-Patacara.-Piya.pdf>

dhyana). Emerging from such a calm and clear mind, we are able to truly see things as they are. This, in simple terms, is an awakening experience, a taste of timeless reality.

Here's another interesting point. We can say that we sense without thinking (without any mind-consciousness), and when we are thinking we cannot sense. Time exists when we are sensing (in the physical sense). Time, however, does not exist when we are using the mind, that is, thinking or feeling.

What's the difference between thinking and feeling here? Thinking has one of the physical sense-experiences as its object, but feeling (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral) goes beyond the object. In the unawakened mind, such feelings are based on perceptions of the past (especially by way of memories). When we are creative or mindful, the mind is rooted in the present (in things as they are): this is feeling. If we truly feel the moment, then we would see it incessantly arising and passing: we see impermanence. Then we have deep insight. If we cultivate this habit of perceiving impermanence, we are on the way to awakening.¹²

Finally, a note on mindfulness. Mindfulness always occurs in time: we are always mindful of something (of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking). If we are reading this mindfully, for example, our mind rapidly shifts between seeing and thinking, alternates between mind-moment and sense-moment, between thinking and sensing.¹³ If we are able, at some point, to simply let go of the sense-moments, and stay with the mind-moments, then we touch the timeless, and feel its bliss: we are close to dhyana, or even tasting dhyana itself. We are in the presence of nirvana, or getting closer.

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¹² See eg **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-s25.1-piya.pdf>

¹³ See **Vīññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (4.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8a-Khandha-5-Vinnana-piya.pdf>