

No conscious thought?

[Previously published as fb181221 piya]

We will examine the fact that we are actually and habitually unconscious of not only our thoughts but also our speech and actions. Now, we are **aware** of these: we make them happen or let them happen, and we don't really have much control over them, unless some other stronger awareness supervenes.

One common teaching of the Buddha on human nature is called **the 5 aggregates**. This set comprises the following:

- (1) form = the physical body (of solid, liquid, fire and motion);
- (2) feeling = the subjective experiences of hedonic tones (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral);
- (3) perception = a recognition (usually virtual) of distinctive experiences;
- (4) formations = intentionality or conative decisiveness towards an object resulting in thought, speech and action;
- (5) consciousness = cognitive access based on each of the sense-bases (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind).

What should interest us here are (2)-(5), that is, **the mental aggregates**: feeling, perception, formations and consciousness.

The mind (*mano*)

The **mind** includes both our conscious (*sa,viññāṇaka*) processes and unconscious latent tendencies (*anusaya*). The "conscious" processes deal basically with the experiences of the senses or faculties (*indriya*) of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touch and thought. The last, in Pali, is *man'indriya*; but it is also called "mind-base," *man'āyatana* or "mind-element" (*mano,dhātu*). "Thought" or a broader word, "the mind," also coordinates the other sense-activities.

The sense-objects of these experiences are the visible, sound, smell, taste, touch and mind-objects or thoughts (*dhamm'āyatana*). The last is the same as "mind-element" (*dhamma,-dhātu*). In other words, any of the other 5 physical sense-objects can become the "mind-object," especially when we are unmindful or dreaming. In the unawakened and the unmindful, this process predominates.

Each of the 6 senses has its own **sense-consciousness** (this is what we generally understand as "attention"). There are the eye-consciousness, the ear-consciousness, the nose-consciousness, the tongue-consciousness, the body-consciousness and the mind-consciousness (*mano,-viññāṇa*). Technically, the last is called "mind-consciousness element" (*mano,viññāṇa,dhātu*), that is, the **attention** itself, that is, how we attend to the sense-process before us.

Virtual attention

To understand how most of our thoughts, speech and actions are **habitual** and unconscious, we must first understand the 2 different sets of processes: what I provisionally call **virtual**

attention and **real attention** (or technically, we can use the phrases “phenomenal attention” and “noumenal attention”—the terms have no other senses except as used here).

“Virtual attention” is when our attention projects or constructs what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think through the **mind-consciousness element**. This is actually what happens most of the time. We don’t merely see, say, a flower or a person, or hear a piece of music, but “we” or the “I” (that is, the mind-consciousness element) associates “it” with some past experience of that flower or person. Hence, this is a “virtual attention” bringing on a “virtual experience.”

Perception and latent tendencies

In the 5-aggregate model, this process is called **perception**. We recognize or associate a present sense-object with how we remembered our experience of “it” the last time. Suppose we have a great time drinking from such a glass in a happy environment, we will **unconsciously** like it. When we recall or associate our experience of a person with someone in an unpleasant past event, we unconsciously recognize this present experience of that person as being unpleasant, too.

It takes some training, that is, **mindfulness and wisdom**, to see and convince oneself of the real situation. This happens at the level of the “mind-conscious element,” how we attend to the sense-experience in the first place. In other words, we already decided what sort of images will have what sort of emotional or hedonic **value**, and we react accordingly. This may be called a view, habit, bias, inclination, etc. They go deep into our **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*), comprising basically of lust, aversion and ignorance.

Real attention

It is easier to “really attend to” or correctly recognize the sense-object for what it is when we know that lust, aversion or ignorance (the latent tendencies) are at work. Only then, we can make a **conscious** effort to see the glass simply as a glass, and see the person as a present moment of experience and get to know him better.

This is where understanding the sutta teachings of the aggregates, the sense-bases, the latent tendencies, etc, are truly helpful. This generates **wisdom**, which is broadened and reinforced through **meditation**, when we calm the mind (our various mental process, especially mind-consciousness element) and clear them of the latent tendencies.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is basically properly remembering what’s right or wrong, what’s true or false, what’s real or unreal in our mental experiences. In this way, we do not have a “virtual reality” or projected experience of what **is** really before us. “Is” is used here because we can only experience one state at a time, but these states move at great speed—the speed of thought.

A healthy way of letting go of such virtual realities that we have conjured up is through the habitual experience of **joy** arising from meditation, a reflection on truth or beauty, or an

appreciation of wholesome art and literature. When we are immersed in truth and beauty, the joy disarms or frees us from grips of the latent tendencies (at least temporarily).

Scholars' discovery of Buddhism

Often enough, we get scholarly writings and researches that help us with a better understanding of the Buddha's teaching on the mind. Despite the simplicity of the Pali suttas, their profundity demands that we give significant time, attention and practice to them. We need all 3 aspects to benefit from any kind of useful understanding of the Buddha's psychology of mind and liberation.

Although there is no mention of Buddhism in it, a recent paper by Peter Carruthers (along with his other works) challenge us to look deeper into the Buddha's teaching on the mind:

https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/there-is-no-such-thing-as-conscious-thought/?utm_medium=social&utm_content=organic&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=SciAm_&sf204687125=1.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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