

AGAINST THE STREAM: Dave Smith **Mindfulness Study Program: Part 1**

Introduction: The English language is rich in many ways, particularly when explaining the features of the material world, but it is remarkably clumsy when it comes to articulating the nuanced terrain of inner experience. This is one of the reasons why the current conversations about consciousness, meditation and psychology in general can at times become rather confusing. As we are now beginning to understand the inner workings of the mind-body process thru cognitive and neuroscience it is quite humbling to see that a detailed and highly developed map of the mind and body as a system of “lived” experience had been delineated by the Buddha and his immediate followers some 2500 years ago.

- *Andrew Olendski*

When we begin to study or attempt to understand the psychology of present-moment consciousness from a Buddhist perspective, we need to have a foundation for what it is that we are actually hoping to accomplish. The study of “consciousness” thru the practice of the Dharma is rich, fascinating, detailed, intellectually stimulating and can even give sense of superiority if the interest is merely academic. To begin, I will outline some simple criteria as to the purpose of this exploration.

- (1)** The end result of this exploration is to know suffering, its cause, its end, and the process that leads to its end. The Buddha himself claims to teach just one thing- suffering and its end.
- (2)** The “knowing” of this process is to be developed within the framework and practice of mindfulness meditation, and then applied to all areas of our lives. The development of mindfulness plays a key role in the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion...that which puts an end to suffering.
- (3)** Study of the Dharma and the practice of meditation should go hand and hand, as one has the ability to inform the other and vice versa. A balanced approach will produce the best result.

Approaching the Mind: Dr. Daniel Siegel from UCLA has done a lot to further our understanding and begin to offer some concrete definitions for the word “mind”. Several years ago Dr. Siegel conducted a research project where he interviewed a wide range of people from the mental health field and asked him if they had ever heard a lecture, received any training or took a course that offered a concrete definition of the word “mind”. This is what he discovered.

“What I discovered was that the fields of mental health, psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing, occupational therapy, and educational therapy, didn't have a definition of the mind. We didn't even have a definition of mental health. Over the course of the last nine years, I have asked almost 90,000 officials from every discipline of mental health around the globe if they ever had even one lecture about what the mind is or if they ever had a lecture defining what mental health is. Well over 95% of professionals in the field of mental health don't have a definition of the mind or mental health. I personally felt this

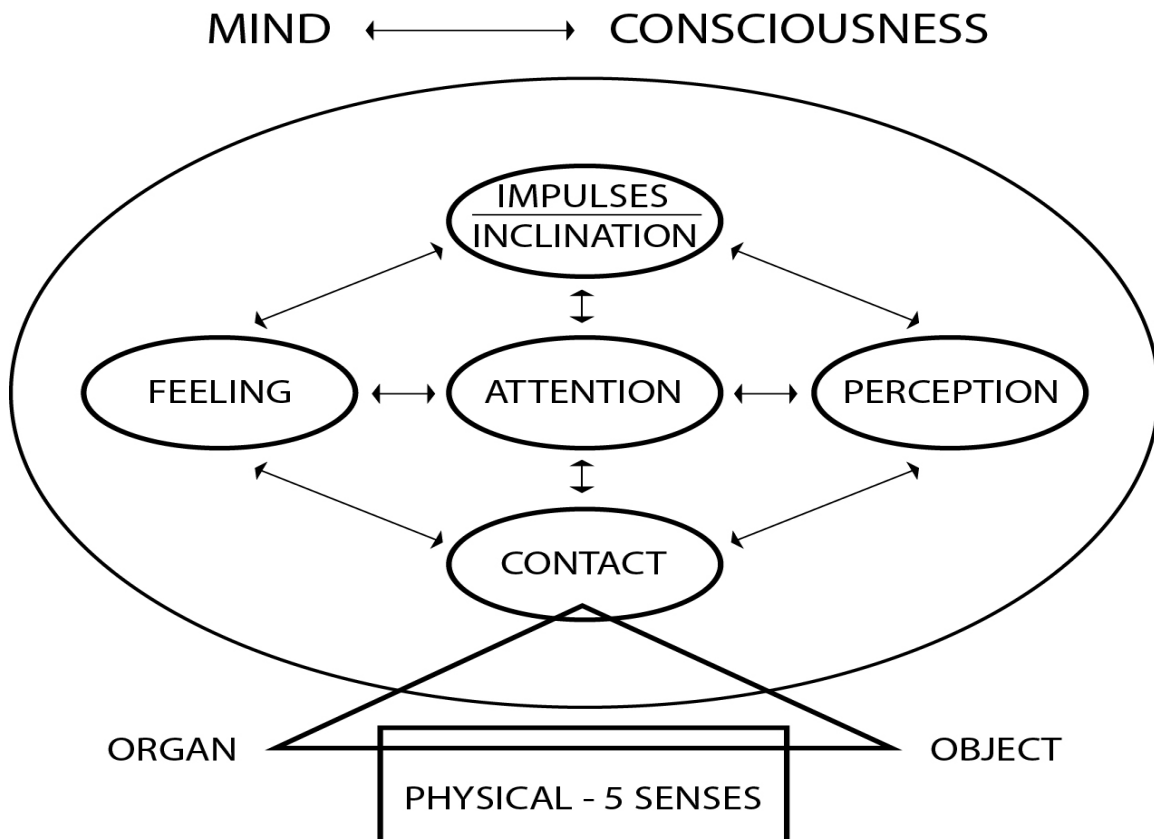
was a crisis because after all, if we are mental health practitioners, what is it we are practicing?”-Daniel Siegel

Dr. Siegel’s definition of the word mind:

Mind: An embodied and relational emergent process; that regulates the flow of energy and information. The mind is a regulatory process that can be monitored, measured and modified. There are also a number of terms, concepts and ideas that can be used as synonyms for the word mind: consciousness, awareness, experience, cognition, etc.

Below is a diagram of how the mind is described within the context of early Buddhism, which is typically described and articulated as the “five aggregates” or sometimes called “mental factors”. This definition is built upon the idea that consciousness begins the moment that an organ comes into contact with an object. The Buddha uses the 5 physical senses but adds the “mind” as a sense gate, meaning that a “thought” is no different than a taste or a smell or a sound. The mind is made up of 5 components that arise and pass away in each moment of consciousness. They are: Pali is in (...)

1. Contact (phasso)
2. Feeling (vedana)
3. Perception (sanna)
4. Impulses/inclinations (sankara)
5. Attention (manisakaro)



1. Contact-with-Materiality (physical forms): We make contact with the physical world thru the 5 senses. This creates the conditions for c-ness to arise the moment that an organ comes into contact with an object. We can bring our awareness to all or any of these experiences at any given time. Although we see that most of the time our attention is pulled in a particular direction and we habitually follow whatever experience is the most prominent or whatever seems to be the most interesting-or important and so on. Tuning into sensory experience and developing sustained attention is the preliminary tool when developing mindfulness. We are encouraged to fully-embodiment the totality of our human sensory experience. Mindfulness practice typically begins by intentionally placing the attention on the sensation of the in-and-out breath.

2. Feeling: Once contact is made a feeling “tone” will arise. We have only 3.

1.Pleasant+ 2.Unpleasant- 3.Neutral 0

This may seem fairly obvious, but with further investigation we see that we almost always reach for what is pleasant and push away what is unpleasant. This is known as the pleasure/pain dichotomy or the law of attraction vs. resistance. When things are neutral we often become bored or uninterested and try to distract ourselves in a various ways. (Repeatedly picking up your smart phone as you await you next scheduled event).

Neutral feelings can also be experienced as contentment or ease if mindfulness is present. Due to the arising and passing of physical and mental conditions we will have more than one feeling tone present at any particular time. We find that we are being bombarded with thoughts, emotions and sensations all of which can be registered as + - 0. But if we look closely, there is usually a prominent feeling arising in each moment that draws us in. Placing the attention on the feeling tone of the breathing body is very helpful because it is almost always pleasant or neutral. It is also always available and “only” available in the here and now. Remember, feeling tone can and should be applied to all aspects of the experience: thoughts, sensations and emotions.

3. Perception: The role of perception is to differentiate one object from another. It is thru the aggregate of perception that the world makes sense to us; it is where we form “intelligence” through memory and analysis. This is also where we can start to get ourselves into many different forms of distress. The role of perception in our lives has tremendous value in some areas, but can be quite inaccurate in others. In some ways, all forms of Buddhist meditation can be seen as-perceptual-reorganizing. That is, to see the ever-changing, unreliable, and impersonal nature of experience. We have a wide range of perception about so many things and they come and go very quickly. We often don’t really know what to do with them. We struggle to a large degree with our perception about past and future, which is the basis for anxiety and depression. Perception will often give rise to difficult emotions and mind/mental states. Based on our moment-to-moment perception we may begin to experience anger, fear, jealousy, doubt and an over all sense of “lack”. Many of us live in what can be summed up as “scarcity culture” which is rooted in the idea and perception of “never enough”. In mindfulness we are encouraged to learn how to question and investigate our perceptions. Are they causing us peace or restlessness? Are they even true? Letting go of the perceptual tendencies of the mind and simply returning to the breath is an important and useful action to take while practicing

mindfulness meditation. Most cognitive behavior programs encourage people to question perception; to challenge views, opinions, core beliefs, theories and so forth. The perception that we often struggle with the most is “I am”. The tendency to personalize or subjectify what arise within c-ness can be the source of tremendous stress and an unhealthy and even harmful sense of “self view”.

4. Mental formations-inclinations-intentions: based on the information we receive from feeling and perception we are “inclined” to do something about what we perceive to be happening. This is what can be called the “to do” mind- as it motivates us to think, speak or act. For us, this can go many different ways. So if we take the time to pause and check out our motivating “pulls” we can actually intervene and take a different action. This is where mindfulness can really begin to make a difference in our lives. We see that we don’t actually have to follow our initial reactivity, we can learn to re-train, and we can let go of harmful or unskillful habits and work towards cultivating a better way to go about things. This is really the root of developing mindful awareness, the ability to try different things and to take another approach. The fourth aggregate is translated from the Pali term (sankhara). As is often the case with early Buddhism, there is no one English word that can accurately sum up what the term sankhara embodies. To over the widest view, sankhāra means ‘that which has been put together’ and ‘that which puts together’. Other English translations for sankhāra include: will-power, determinations, impulses, motivations, intentions, mental fabrications and mental formations (or, particularly when referring to mental processes, ‘volitional formations’). Buddhist scholar and academic Andrew Olendzki defines the term sankhara as: intention, volition, choice, decision, activities of body, speech, and mind, traits and dispositions. *Olendzki also adds that the term can also been seen to encompass the majority of what we know as “emotions”*. The full analysis of Buddhist psychology is found in comprehensive body of work known as the abhidharma. The abhidharma outlines 52 mental factors that arise in consciousness. It is stated that 50 of the 52 factors fall under the heading sankhara; which would make sense that many of us struggle, to a high degree in the realm of emotional experience; as our entire organism is bombarded with a wide and bewildering array of content that influences mind states, attitudes, emotions and so forth. There has been a wealth of practices and ideas developed in Western Psychology that address the need for emotional awareness. The Emotional Intelligence movement led by Dr. Daniel Goleman provides a tremendous resource for working with and understanding the emotional landscape.

5. Attention: Early Buddhism defines attention as: “making in the mind”. Modern Neuroscience is constantly studying the role and affect of attention. This can be seen as the current crossroads where “east meets west” in the practice and theory of how the mind and emotions works. What we do know is that attention regulates emotion. Attention reaches forward and connects us to the world, defining and shaping our experience. Attention provides the mechanisms that underlie our awareness of the world and the voluntary regulation of feelings and thoughts. Attention defines and creates our reality. It is the most valuable and affective aspect of the mental apparatus, the mind. Often times mindfulness practice instructions will use the words attention and awareness interchangeably, which colloquially speaking does work, but is not entirely true. For example, imagine that you are overlooking a field from a hilltop; all of what you are

taking in can be experienced within the container of awareness. Awareness is panoramic. Now, if you pick up a pair of binoculars and focus in on a tree, a flower or a deer that can be understood as attention. Awareness is wide, attention is narrow. Awareness is open, attention is focus.

Consciousness: Simply put, consciousness is the container that holds all of these factors together. From the view of Buddhist psychology, c-ness is an event, it's an episode, and it arises and passes away one moment at a time. It is not a noun; it's not a thing. It's a verb; it's what is happening. Again the same idea can be applied to mind. It arises based on conditions that allow it to do so, when and organ meets and object. It's really that simple. The term awareness can more accurately be associated with c-ness. A good way to remember it is thinking of c-ness as a fist, which is comprised of 5 fingers: contact, feeling, perception, formations and attention. As the old story goes, consciousness is like the king who never arrives alone but is always accompanied by his entourage.

Let's walk thru this process.

1. Contact- As we begin our practice we come into contact with the felt sense of our entire experience as it arises and passes away. **2. Feeling-** We begin to notice that the world/life feels a certain way to us- (+ - 0). **3. Perception-** Our experience also makes perceptual sense to us- (it appears intelligent)-we can differentiate one object from another thru memory. **4. Formations-** We are inclined to take a stance or disposition towards all that we experience- (a sense that something can be done "to do"). **5. Attention-** Attention manifests as a "confrontation" with any particular object- it literally means "making in the mind"-its characteristic is the conducting of the mental aggregates towards an object. All of these 5 factors arise together and pass away together in every single moment of consciousness. This is the core structure of what constitutes the experience of "mind". Mindfulness is the ability to navigate the system.

The practice of mindfulness meditation is taught as a process that balances concentration with investigation. Using the factors found within the 5 aggregates provides the structure to perform that task. We can also bring confidence knowing that these factors are available in every single mind-moment. We can apply attention to connect and sustain with present time experience (contact). As we do this, we begin to investigate the ways we are relating to feeling, perception and formations. In this way, the mind is "relational". We begin to learn how to navigate the core structure and inner workings of the mind-heart-body-process. Exploring the world and the on-going relationship between feelings, thoughts sensations and emotions.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness:

1. Mindfulness of body/breath: sensations
2. Mindfulness of feeling tone: impressions
3. Mindfulness of mind states: attitudes
4. Mindfulness of mind objects: activities

The world of mindfulness is rich in both meaning and application. The term “mindfulness” is derived from the pali word “sati”. The best English translation we have for the term sati would be described as the ability to remember or to recognize. The current cultural understanding of the term sati is “to be attentive to the present moment” or “present time awareness.” We could say: “remembering to be mindful of the present moment.” Upon an academic study of all the ways the term sati or mindfulness is used in early Buddhism we find that it can be reduced to four particular applications.

1. Simple awareness (bare attention)

*Application: developing focus and concentration.

In the practice of simple awareness, sati is the conscious registering of the presence of objects, which can be any incoming sensory data or experiences.

Whether in normal daily activities or during meditation; i.e.- connecting and sustaining with the sensation of in-and-out breathing.

Western perspective:

These practices consist of non-judgmental observation and recognition. The mind is simply aware of a sensory object objectively without being concerned with the object or with the subject (i.e. the observer or the mind) or the interaction between the two. Mindfulness is often understood or employed in this sense by psychologists. For example, Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

Following this definition, Teasdale says, “the non-judgmental characteristic of mindfulness means that pleasant and unpleasant experiences are treated simply as that, as experiences.”

2. Protective Awareness:

*Application: guarding the mind.

While one perceives incoming sensory data, one is further aware of how the mind reacts to the objects. In this instance, sati is related to the restraint of the senses and requires moral or ethical judgment. This function is impossible unless preceded by simple awareness.

3. Introspective Awareness:

*Application: identifying unwholesome mind states.

While one is in contact with incoming sensory data, one’s mindfulness can have an introspective function with regards to one’s own mind. This function serves as the remedial measure when protective awareness fails. In the case of unwholesome mind states arising in the mind, one can be able to active mindfulness, noticing and recognizing the states and take measures to abandon them.

4. Deliberately forming conceptions: 4 roles

*Application: (understanding the nature of “things”-“dharma”- see italic below)

This function of mindfulness is not the same as sensory perception; and does not co-exist within perception. It is possible, but must be learned, in short it is not automatic. It consists of the “wholesome functioning of perception”; it is associated with conception,

not apperception. It is based on constructive recognition-(contemplation) and has four specific roles.

1. Forming inspiring/wholesome concepts.
2. Recognition of what is negative/unwholesome/unskillful.
3. Reflecting on death.
4. Developing loving-kindness towards all beings.

1. Direct experience of the fact that everything changes, if applied to all aspects of one's personality, can powerfully alter the habit patterns of one's own mind.

2. Not seeing the rising and passing away of phenomena is a core "mis-perception", while to regard all phenomena as impermanent and ever-changing; leads to clear knowledge, comprehension and understanding.

3. Ones volitional/intentional decision in the present moment is to a considerable degree amendable to personal intervention and control, each decision in turn shapes the habits, character traits, experiences, and perceptual mechanisms that form the content of future decisions.

Special thanks to: Daniel Siegel, Andrew Olendzki, Daniel Goleman and Stephen Batchelor.

www.againstthestreamnashville.com

For more info on Emotional Intelligence and Mindfulness: www.morethansound.net

For more info on Daniel Siegel: www.mindsightinstitute.com

Resources for Dharma talks: www.dharmaseed.org

Dave Smith, a Buddhist meditation teacher and addiction treatment specialist was trained to teach meditation by Noah Levine, founder of Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society and received training in Buddhist psychology from the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBS). As a long-time Buddhist practitioner and recovering addict, he has been working closely with recovering addicts for the past six years. During which time he operated intensive programs and trainings as the local director for the Mind Body Awareness Project (MBA). Dave has extensive experience bringing meditative interventions into jails, prisons, youth detention centers and addiction treatment facilities. He is the guiding teacher and program director of the Against the Stream Nashville Meditation Center and teaches over 300 meditation classes and workshops a year. He provides direct services for mental health agencies, the public library, and speaks nationally at Addiction and Behavioral Health conferences.

