

The Different Levels of the Mind, as Experienced in Meditation

Outline

Part I. Introduction – A little history of how this began; Some of its uses; An overview of the idea of these levels, and how they can be worked with

Part II. (in response to a letter) Encouragement to know these things for ourselves

Part III. On integration; On the intermediate levels, and how meditation applies

Part IV. More on the intermediate levels; Karma, habit energy; Setting a current in motion, Vow; Strengthening or weakening a current; Tradition and form; Consciousness a qualities

Part V. On wisdom ‘digesting’ the emotions; Compassion and whole function; A bit more on the qualities of consciousness

Part VI. More on digesting something with wisdom and compassion

Part VII. Collectedness – I

Part VIII. Collectedness – II

Part IX. What mind will we use? - On the qualities of our consciousness and how this effects experience

Part X. The emerging self

Part One. Introduction – A little history of how this began; Some of its uses; An overview of the idea of these levels, and how they can be worked with

About two years ago, while I was living in Taipei, I had the opportunity to teach what I know about the Tarot. Near the end of the course, we were discussing some general principles for reading the cards, and to illustrate an idea I had about contemplation in general, and reading in particular, I drew a boat on the surface of the ocean, with a submersible going down further and further into the depths of the water.

I wanted to say that, if we want to get a clear reading or a deeper reading, usually it works best if we can calm down the surface activity of our mind a bit.

I remember I had the idea of the different levels of mind we meet in meditation (or calm and contemplation) expressed to me by a Zen Buddhist teacher named Nancy Schroeder (Zen name: Fu). I had asked her what she experienced in meditation, and I remember she said that, first, she experienced whatever was going on with her that hour, that day – whatever thoughts and emotions were there. From there she went on to describe going deeper.

For some reason this stayed with me for many years – the idea that there are different levels of mind, and that progressively deeper levels are experienced in meditation or contemplation. Since then this idea has proven useful in a number of ways.

First, it's helpful to know where we are at any time – where we are identified, or perhaps stuck. Being stuck is where we identify exclusively with some thought, some emotion, some experience, some history. We take a part to be the all of who we are. Of course, we don't consider it a problem unless it is uncomfortable, or limiting, but being caught, or being stuck is the same, whether we resist and struggle against it or not.

In any case, it is useful think about the many factors that make up our life. We can compose an image like this for ourselves, by thinking how these

variables exist in our own life. Then we can say that all these levels - this is what our experience is made of.

To get the benefit of thinking about an idea such as this, we will need to fill in the variables with some sense of our own experience. Then a diagram, or these terms, such as 'culture' or 'ancestry' will resonate with us – or we can say, they will make sense energetically, experientially.

I've been thinking that reflecting on this idea, and building up a sense of the different levels can be useful in more ways than one. In addition to helping us not to get stuck, or to get unstuck if we are caught, this diagram also tries to show, or to point as much as it can to a fuller sense of who we actually are, not limited by the relative, temporal experiences we have.

The levels described, and how they can work to consider

I've made four attempts at these sketches over the last couple of years, and while the idea behind them is the same, they've gotten more detailed with each attempt. This is all intended more as a suggestion – pointing out how things are in our mind, and inviting us to look, to discover for ourselves, these levels, these riches...

On the surface level in these diagrams (as the submersible first enters the water) we experience our current thought – what's on our mind now, this last half hour's concerns or ideas, what we've just read or watched; the influence of what we've just been exposed to, or experienced, what we've heard or said...

Go down a little deeper and we find the currents of what we've been thinking about a lot lately, or what has made a strong impression on us lately. We find what has been in the news of late, or what's happening in the environment, work or home.

These really are currents in a sense – sometimes they are like eddies, or whirlpools, and we can get caught so that an experience repeats, or stays with us, dominating what we think and feel, and sometimes it's hard to get out of such currents (if we do want to get free of them).

A little deeper and we find our habits, and the more lasting trends in our life and society.

It goes this way, I'm sure you see the idea: the deeper we go the more lasting are the elements or the variables we can know. For example, we find in our identity, underlying the sense of what is going on on the surface these days, elements or currents of character, the influence of our parents (and deeper still, our ancestors); we find deeper values and the characteristic influence of our culture, and our environment. Deeper still is the sense of ourselves as gender, as race, even as species, until we arrive at universal water.

To see for yourself what I am referring to, learn to go deep in meditation, contemplation, or self study. Then you can make your own working diagram. This would be far better than taking someone else's word for how things are. But some ideas, I think, would be the same: that there are these different levels of mind; that we shouldn't get caught in identifying ourselves with something less than what we are.

One way to refer to being caught is to say that sometimes we stand on some ground and feel that this is who we are, and, at least for that time, we may not experience anything else. With words or without words, there is something in us that says, that asserts 'I am this'. And often this kind of assertion takes something that is temporary or relative to be the ultimate, when it's not.

When I was living abroad, I remember being surprised by the feeling that, although culture is something deep, something profound, it is not ultimate. There is something deeper.

When a person gets stuck what is happening is that they identify (read: experience strongly and exclusively) with one part of their experience.

We can say that we people often take a part of ourselves to be who we are entirely. We assert it emphatically because this is what we strongly experience.

For example, saying 'I am a woman, of such and such an age, parentage, culture'; 'Am American woman, thirty years old, with this history, these experiences in the past, these habits and recent thoughts'.

Or, 'I am of this race'

Or 'I did this' 'This is who I am', or 'I had these experiences – these define me'

Sometimes when such identifying is taking place, it can block out any sense that we are more than this. This relates also to the resources that we feel we have. Just as it has been said that, truly, we are more than our problems, we are also more, much more than our race, or our gender, or our chronological age; or our culture, or experiences.

Sometimes it can be like this: a person finds a way, or one religion that works for them, and perhaps they tell themselves that 'I am a conservative Christian' or 'I am a Buddhist' or 'I am a Hindu', as if this were the ultimate. From this experience then, everything else is 'other', and there can be no sense of a shared basis, a shared life. A gap between self and all others is the mark of being stuck, or being caught.

Optimally, we can use a diagram or an idea such as this to keep from getting caught in identifying with anything less than the all of who we are. It is possible to experience something like standing on the deep ground or on the ocean floor and looking up through all these different levels – seeing through them. We can be with our diversity, our history, our background and culture and experience, and we can know the relative as the relative and the deeper and more lasting as it is. We can know more fully who we are.

The surface relative is relative, and it arises from the deeper levels (whatever name we give it, or the unnamed). The relative, our history, our current circumstances, habits, thoughts and feelings, these are to be honored, but not to be taken as our deepest identity.

When the common basis is known, then this affirms all the differences. All the diversity, all the differences, they all have a place, and we can have a harmonious relationship to them.

We can feel connected with all life, sharing in others' joys, and feeling sympathetic with their struggles, and so dedicated to doing all we can to help, with abundant resources, naturally, spontaneously, for all time.

Part Two - in response to a letter

Encouragement to know these things for ourselves

Thank you for your message - my first response to you is that perhaps I should have named the first pages 'An Explanation of the Different Levels of the Mind, As Experienced in Meditation', only because, while we can think of this image, or idea, and it is indeed useful to do so, my main purpose was and is to encourage people to meditate more, and more deeply. That's the only way we can experience these things for ourselves. That's the only way we can actually get unstuck, as compared to keeping it on the level of thought - these are more energetic, progressively deeper, inner, or more subtle levels. Just thinking is still on the surface and shouldn't be a substitute for directly experiencing these things.

Second - Perhaps I should have modified the part where I said, make your own drawing - while there certainly is validity to that (as you've proven - since doing that is useful to you) - maybe I should have said, learn to go deep, to quiet the mind down and to look at what is there, and then make your own drawing, in the sense of, connect what you experience with some of these terms....

My sense is that, and correct me if I'm wrong, these are universal elements for human beings... Any time, any place, and culture, any experience, and all this is there. The being caught, or identified, and the possibility of seeing, experiencing, directly knowing for ourselves something deeper, and the way to universal water, which is freedom, not caught or limited by anything at all, abundantly resourceful, creative and naturally compassionate, and universally viable... ha!

Ok. Let me know what you think. Quiet and then quiet, and looking, and then quiet, calming deeper, mindful and concentrated, clear and calm.... like this...

By the way, you are perfect as you are. I don't know if you intended it, but the first part of your message does connect, for me at least, with the second.

You are a mother, ex-wife, woman, 40 or so, with this background and experiences, habits of thought, elements of character, parentage, ancestry, environment, culture, race, species... but... you are also more than these

things. But how to know this not just conceptually? (our habit as educated Westerners) Aah... (see above) And find your own ways....

ps. continued feedback more than welcomed, very very useful, essential for the next step and the next...

Part Three

On integration; On the intermediate levels, and how meditation applies

Hi again - thanks for your input - especially your pointing out what I just assume everyone is already on board with- come on! get with it people!.. hmmmm ... my bad... ok - I'm not sure if integrating the different levels is the phrase I would use, not that can't happen, but that my feeling is it may still remain on the level of concepts if we use this term from the outset. Maybe we can say that when the different levels are integrated they 'talk' to each other - inform each other, so to speak, affect and change each other (even speaking about them as discrete is false, but with this in mind maybe some useful descriptions are possible.

What's it like when the deeper (deepest) level 'talks' to the surface - like what we are engaged in with another today - there is fresh life, adaptability, food, in a manner of speaking, energy that arises from that level of being not caught in things as fixed in a certain way, but flexible, workable... anyway, maybe I get ahead of myself.

Maybe it's better to talk about the intermediate levels, once we are not caught, like you said, in survival issues, or gross, all consuming emotional afflictions (anger, desire, despair, obsessions of one sort or another - all whirlpools that can a person can be caught up in indefinitely) and once we've gotten past the inane commercial jingles and strong images, then, there, we meet our habit energy.

We can even say the habit energy all the way down to the universal is there, even when we are just experiencing things in a surface way.

I may have told you about a retreat I was on with Thich Nhat Hanh where he said something during the first talk and repeated it throughout the retreat, with it each time making more sense. He said, If you touch deeply the historical dimension, you reach the ultimate dimension; and when you reach the ultimate dimension, you have not left the historical dimension.

He also said, when you touch the ultimate dimension, you get the greatest relief. In fact the name of the retreat was 'The Greatest Relief'.

Maybe this relates

You'll never guess what happened - someone in the store came up to me and said he was looking for books for a friend of his who was studying gay writers and artists who had transcended their sexuality.

I asked him right away to please tell me, off the top of his head, what he meant by this phrase 'transcended their sexuality', and he said:

Freedom

I asked him to tell me more, to tell me what he meant by this (though I knew what he meant, I wanted to hear another person say it) He said they were not limited by their sexuality (a good turn of phrase, I think).

(interesting isn't it, how and when these things happen).

Then of course I told him about this diagram and gave him a copy of what I sent you, and we had a nice little chat...

So, getting back to the intermediate levels, after surface feelings and thoughts and emotion, we get to the more lasting elements or currents in ourselves and in our society. We can see our habits, perhaps what we've inherited from our parents, the more lasting ideas and values of our culture.

Deeper and it goes like this, more elementary and generative: the influences of our ancestry, root national or cultural ideas and ideals (like humanism in this nation, but also the shadow sides, such as cultural superiority) It's interesting to think what makes an American, for example, and to find these elements in ourselves...

In a way, finding these things in our selves gives us some range of choice, we can accept them, approve of them and choose to continue them, passing them along, or not.

I told the fellow in the store about a story Thich Nhat Hanh told, about a teenage boy who had practiced mindfulness and meditation for a few years. This boy had a father who had a problem with anger, and the boy swore he

would never be like that.

Then one day the boy's sister hurt herself, and he found himself getting angry - he saw the anger arise in him, but before he could shout at his sister, he stepped back and looked at it. He thought 'I'm just like my father' - Oh no!

Then he kept looking and realized that perhaps his father had gotten the seed of anger from his father, and when he saw this, he thought he had to do something, to catch and not express this, otherwise maybe he would pass the seed of anger to his children too. At that moment the continuity of that anger was stopped.

I think it works this way with every habit energy, or current. We have the choice, if we are not caught in it, as to whether we want to continue it's functioning and pass it along. If we are caught though, then we really don't see most of what is happening.

Not to leave too much out (yet again, but it will go this way) What is Western Culture in us? The good and the not so good? Can we really see this? Perhaps we need the contrast of other cultures, or other nations to see what is this level, but maybe not...

How to work with this - I was thinking of a phrase Lama Yeshe used. He referred to 'the organic problem of ego', and I think meditation, or contemplation is working with this, to soften it, to get out of it and it's whirlpool of experiences, to gain more freedom...

It's not that the feelings come on the basis of identification - the thoughts, sensations, emotions are themselves the identification.

Meditation is the process of understanding these things, and this brings freedom, a greater range of motion, if you will, experience, and gradually more true identity; more resources, more joy. It can't be hurried, and no step can be left out.

I'm attaching something because you mentioned compassion in your last two messages. Perhaps I've shared this with you before, and if so, please pardon my senility. It does pertain though, this much I'm sure of.

What else is on the intermediate levels.... the energy of our environment, certainly, in terms of the elements, the organic life that is here, and the spiritual environment as well. These are more lasting. In fact, we could say that these terms are interchangeable: the intermediate levels, or we could say the more lasting... you can choose whatever language you like.

Hope this helps. I'm still working with this idea myself, and, of course, if possible, my wish is that it can be useful to others besides myself. As far as I'm concerned, whatever I have, it belongs to the whole world.

Thanks again, and

Much happiness to you,

J.

Part Four - A bit more on the intermediate levels:

Karma, habit energy, past lives; Setting a current in motion;

Vow; Strengthening or weakening a current; Tradition and form;

Consciousness as qualities

In thinking about what I've said so far about the intermediate levels, I feel like there are a couple of things I've left out that I want to say something about here.

The intermediate level covers a lot, and you were right to point out the need to say more. They include everything just a little further down from the most recent events, influences, and currents on the surface, to some rather deep factors (we could say something like, 'deep intermediate'). These are not the ultimate, but significant, a big part of our lives.

What I want to say, first of all, is that I know when we think of habits, or currents of habit energy, we usually think of these as negative factors. Not to underestimate the importance of these things that hold us back, or make us suffer repeatedly, but there is much more to habit energy than what is neurotic or caught.

We also have positive habits, propensities (seeds), positive currents, that we should be able to identify, build on, and draw from as needed.

We should be able to increase these positive factors that we find in ourselves, the skills and the qualities that we already have.

Karma is action, and the result of action, not as a static result, but as a kind of movement or energy. They say, if you want to see what you did in the past, look at where you are now, and if you want to see where you will be in the future, look at what you are doing now. That is karma.

In a way, karma is neutral by itself, or indeterminate – it can be positive or negative, helpful or harmful to us. I like to think of it as the ultimate workability of any situation. This puts a positive spin on it, don't you think? Whatever is going on...

Karma is deep. How deep? To read teachings from Eastern Traditions, it is deeper, much deeper than just this one lifetime, even deeper than our birth as a human.

Now, whether or not we have a feeling for past lives, or accept it as a working theory, what remains true is that we do have unique abilities, our own affinities and tendencies.

The most logical idea I heard about karma and past lives is that it doesn't matter so much if past lives are a fact or not, what matters is that our makeup and our lives function as if past lives are real.
We experience things as if they were.

We should be able to identify not only the karmas (habits) that hold us back, but also those that further our aims.

Optimally, we should be able to tap into our resources and use them at will. This is what I wish for everyone. When we can do this with ease, we feel capable, confident. Of course, it is not always the case that we can access our strengths, and then the question becomes – why not? What keeps us from doing this? and What can we do about it?

We all know that sometimes our energy can be monopolized. We can be completely taken over by some event, some current or habit, and so we need to be able to know it when it's happening, (or when it is beginning to happen), and to dis-engage our mind, feelings, and emotions.

This is necessary for our own well-being, and for us to be able to reach and draw from the currents of our own positive abilities, and good habits.

Moreover, if we can identify what our karmic affinities are, then we can further cultivate these positive factors, by study and practices that suit us. The key to this all, I think, is mindfulness, with some calm and contemplation, so that we can know ourselves.

A good teacher can see what is below the surface for us as well, and can recommend practices, names and forms, that can help us to go in the direction we want to go.

If we can connect with a tradition, perhaps through a teacher, then we can find and make use of these reservoirs of positive, creative power. Traditions are transmitted over time and through cultures, by their ideas, their language, and imagery, and directly from teacher to student.

They say the mind is fundamentally not limited, so it can develop greatly. We can make our positive karmic forces powerful in us. This is certainly possible.

When we are able to see a current in us, or something like a wheel that has been set spinning in us, and when we can tell if it is helpful to us or not, then we have, then and there, a choice. We can either strengthen it, if it is good for us, or we can let it be, or try to weaken it .

Even with the practice of letting things be, not feeding something, or further spinning that wheel in that direction, it's in the nature of things that it will still take some time for the old karma to work itself out, to slow down and stop in us.

It's also true that we may be overwhelmed at times, swept away by the current – that happens – that's the power of suffering – but we must try, and keep trying, as much as we need to until we are free.

Starting or reinforcing a stream

If we look in ourselves and feel nothing is there in the way of, say, generosity, or peace, or forgiveness, or patience, or concentration, then we can begin a current. No effort is lost.

Then when we try again to practice that virtue, we will find that we are not starting from the beginning. The action, the current is still there, flowing in us, to be made use of, and built on.

Today, someone handed me a bookmark with the line on it, 'Karma can change into a vow' (Suzuki Roshi), and I thought of how what I think of as a vow is a naturally arising karma.

When we feed our aim, or intention, to go in a certain direction with our life, and when we practice that, gradually removing what holds us back, we can reach the point where we can see the flourishing of vow. This is natural. We

should all be able to tap into the power of our past vows. This is certainly possible.

One more thing for now, on the analogy of water

I think we might be careful not to too closely analogize our mind – consciousness with water. Certainly an oceanographer will tell us that there are many different kinds of water. Still, I think it is stepping a bit away from something we are intimately familiar with, which is the qualities of consciousness of our own life experience.

I was thinking of these different levels as being like different substances, or liquids with different properties (such as milk, orange juice, water, pure water, salt water, and so on).

If an analogy leads us further into experience, then it works. If it leads away, well, then it functions better just as something that points us back to our experience.

Some levels have certain kinds of nourishment. We should see for ourselves how all this works.

Part Five – On Wisdom ‘digesting’ the emotions; Compassion and whole function; and a bit more on the qualities of consciousness

I came across a phrase by Lama Yeshe, in *Becoming Your Own Therapist*, where he talks about wisdom ‘digesting’ the emotions. I found this intriguing, and ‘onward leading’.

It seemed an apt metaphor for one state of consciousness, or level of the mind, ‘talking to’ another, or influencing it. We’ve all had the experience of an idea ‘dawning’- what happens to the old idea then? Or the absence of knowledge? It disappears.

This process is especially apparent when we are talking about a concept, or an idea we may have about ourselves or another. Sometimes we do have a dialogue within ourselves, and then, when we are successful, what happens is just this: wisdom digesting emotion, or a less informed state of being...

I think of someone telling themselves they reasons they should or shouldn’t be with someone, or go somewhere, until the mind changes. We use this phrase all the time – I changed my mind – and this is due to our talking to ourselves, one level communicating with another.

When it comes to our concept of ourselves, we reach the source of either much confusion and emotional suffering, or much freedom from confusion and harm.

The way I phrased it in another place is that Buddhism is essentially the practice of freedom from suffering through insight into our own nature. And we can see for ourselves how this works. When we have a concept of ourselves or another that is less than who we are, less than who that other person is, and we hold that idea, all manner of emotional reactions can take place – anger, jealousy, pride, a lack of forgiveness, attachment... but when we see more of who we are, or more of what is really here, then the concept that the negative emotion is based on can actually be seen to dissolve, taking with it the feelings that were produced. We can see them... vanish...

We should learn to watch our mind and to know how we are conceiving of ourselves. When there is more wisdom in our mind our experience is more stable, happier, more resourceful and considerate of others.

‘I am large, I contain multitudes’ – eh? What’s that?

If our experience is to have any consistency, the wisdom about who we are should permeate our life. I pray we will all have time, and make the effort to be integrated, whole people. This is so necessary.

Lama Yeshe has another book called ‘Make Your Mind An Ocean’ (both of these books are on www.abuddhistlibrary.com). And this title alone is worth thinking about. When we are able to make our experience larger somehow, what we experienced previously changes, it is no longer there as it was. We’ve all had that kind of experience, yes?

Rumi calls it ‘a drop of vinegar in an ocean of honey’

Compassion and whole function

My friend sent me a good question regarding freeing the mind, or being more aware of others, and whether that would naturally lead to compassion. I think she referred to some people who, when they consider others it is with a negative intention, with arrogance and perhaps also the wish to harm.

This kind of a mind, though, is a distorted consciousness. If we look at contemplative traditions, what we find is that there is always an ethical component to their teachings, and training. The reason is this: our emotions (positive and negative) are produced based on our state of mind, the state of our consciousness, and when we know less, or know in an incomplete way, what our life is and what the life of another is, then the emotion that follows reflects that – out of ignorance comes afflicted emotion and harm to self and others.

Ethical teachings, and teachings in what’s sometimes called the ‘higher ethics’ of love and compassion, forgiveness and respect, and altruism, is essential both to re-orient the mind in truer, more appropriate ways, and as an expression the truth of our nature.

The Zen teacher Dogen has an expression ‘whole function’ that I think points to action arising out of non-separation with the world and with all others. What is less often pointed to in Zen teachings is the need for profound respect, kindness, and compassion to be cultivated right along with our calm and clear meditation.

Gregory mentioned a number of years ago that, ideally, Zen is self-correcting. I think this refers not only to meditation, but to life in the world, in relation to others. If we say in the zen manner, with D.T. Suzuki, ‘there are no others’, then for this to be a thought or a state generative of wholesome, positive things, then, one way or another, the heart qualities also need to be produced, and to be awake in us in abundance. (generosity, patience, gentleness, gratitude, humility, joy, and so on) Then whole function is effortless, naturally arising compassionate activity, without limit. Ema Ho! (how wonderful!)

A bit more on qualities of consciousness

Whether or not we think of it this way, we are all familiar with different states in ourselves having different properties. It’s common, for example, to speak of ‘toxic emotions’ or states. For myself, I know that if I get angry for any length of time, I feel not well because of it... it can be like I’ve eaten something not good, and it may take a day or so to ‘get it out of my system’.

What we talk about less, and seem to have less of a vocabulary for are the positive states of mind, and the effect they can have on us. There are also healthy and healing emotions or states of consciousness, that we should all know of and freely make use of, for ourselves and for our family and loved ones.

I know that we don’t really have a language to speak about different properties of mind – we just think of mind as mind, on or off like a light switch – but there is more, much more to it. We all know that our mind can be creative, and adaptive, positive or negative, harmful or greatly helpful to us. It is the treasure house of qualities. And I think at some point we are going to have to develop a language to talk about this.

I remember when I was in Taiwan, trying to explain this culture in as concise a way as I could. I talked to my friends and students about ‘the quality of immersion’ – in advertising, or sports, or in people’s thinking; the ‘cross-reinforcement’ of certain values; and the cumulative effect.

The way this applies here for me is that I think it’s useful to consider states of consciousness as having a degree of potency, in a negative or a positive

way, and then to avoid what is even a little harmful. What is positive, of course, we should tap into, cultivate, or produce in ourselves as much as possible.

A last word, for now

This world's religious Traditions are great storehouses of healing life energy. I know that in these times Traditions are not held in much esteem, but it should be said that these resources are available for us. To read a traditional teaching, meditate on a form, or a story can be to connect with wonderful, beneficial life.

The images, the poetry is often 'soaked with psychic substance' (to use a phrase by Robert Bly). I've sometimes thought of how the colors in Tibetan Buddhist art are rich to show that the quality represented is there in abundance; the figure or image is saturated with that beneficial quality, rich with that healing quality, love, freedom, or purity that is represented. We would do well to know and to make use of what tradition offers to us all.

Part Six - More on digesting something with wisdom and compassion

When we digest something with wisdom it is like eating, in a way. It isn't that the mind remains unchanged. The relative mind, imbued with wisdom is changed. We draw a particular kind of nourishment from what we have eaten, and like nourishment, this protects us in the future, and can be built up, it is like health that can be augmented...

When we digest something with wisdom it may seem that the wisdom mind is what it is, before, during and after. And in a way that is true - our fundamental nature, clear light, self-existing loving kindness and wakefulness, and so on. But we are talking here about one of those intermediate (or at least manifest - moving in the realms of manifestation) mind. And certainly that mind is changed by what it absorbs, or knows.

There is something of an 'overcoming' involved here too - like one view dawning and dispelling the mistaken idea (like seeing a rope and thinking it is a snake, when light comes the appearance of a snake disappears). That understanding of how the mind works, and can trick us is important. We have done more than remove the mistaken idea, our mind has learned something about itself, about how it can work, can get caught or get free. And compassion for ourself and others is born right there as well.

Compassion Consuming Suffering - The Mythological Peacock

Everyone knows that medicine is not an ordinary substance – that, above this, it has positive properties. If we are skillful we can practice ‘turning adverse circumstances into the path. Another way to express this is ‘turning poison into medicine’.

They have an analogy for this in Tibetan Buddhism. They talk of a mythological peacock who's colors become brighter and more vivid from eating what is otherwise poison. It doesn't harm that bird, instead it makes it more beautiful, and even more fully itself (the image of a peacock strutting and raising it's glorious tail feathers – anyone who has seen a peacock dance knows what I mean – along with it's call, this bird is most being itself when it shows it's colors).

In a similar way, when compassion absorbs, or digests the knowledge of some suffering – it can be from our own past, or from the lives of those we

meet, or from what is going on in the world – if this is done in a skillful way, then our compassion is made stronger, more vividly itself. It can really shine, and really function in us, in our lives and in the world.

The reason I say it needs to be done skillfully is because a person can also be overwhelmed, and when this happens, something in us shuts down, and we can't assimilate what has happened. We need to nourish ourselves in a number of different ways for compassion to work effectively in us. We do need to take care of our body and our mind. With time though, as compassion matures, it can become a strength such that more of the hurt we encounter is a source, like fuel for this wish to benefit others, and to help. We can become more and more capable, through our own contact with suffering, to be with suffering, and to offer something that is medicinal, something that is healing, which is our own compassion.

Part Seven – Collectedness - I

The relationship between cultivating concentration and touching the present more deeply

We all know that when we are relatively more clear minded and collected we are able to touch the present reality. The experience is larger; we receive more of it, and we know more of what is going on in another, or in a situation, or in ourselves. By contrast, when we are dispersed we just skim the surface of what is happening. We meet only a small part of the experience.

Dispersion needs some more explanation, so we can see what collectedness is. It's not just that we are thinking of many different things at once, noticeably, or that our mind won't stay with whatever we are attending to. The absence of a habit of collectedness exists whether we are aware of it or not.

Two analogies:

First, to use a computer analogy: when we have a number of programs running in the background, it takes processing power from the task at hand. There is less available energy, and the task goes slower.

The mind can also be compared to moving water: when we divide a river, the flow is less, but when we join streams together, the energy produced can accomplish a great deal.

To add yet another analogy (talking about the mind here – they do refer to something we can see for ourself). In the Indian Tradition there is a way of talking about the mind and concentration.

They say the powers of the mind are like rays of light that are dissipated. When they are concentrated they illumine.

The difference between adults and children

Many adults are preoccupied – which is another way of saying their energy is consumed, with little left available to feel the sunshine, or to receive the

benefit of the beauty in this world. Because of this they also not available to respond to suffering.

By comparison, a young person is relatively free; their joy is greater, and their pliancy too.

Why do adults lost their suppleness? I think that gradually, over time much of an adult's energy can learn to go flow to regrets about the past, or worries about the future, to plans and projects. Unfortunately, part of the problem when a person is stuck is that they may not have the energy to see any other way, or to change.

By contrast, looking at children's joy, we can see they are more energetic not just because their bodies are young, but because their minds and their energy is free of all this. They are more available to touch life.

A person may say, but we are not children, we have adult responsibilities, but I am not talking about abandoning responsibility. I'm talking about habits of the mind that allow for more joy, more energy, more peace (of course), more resourcefulness, more life, more of the feeling of being alive. There are adults who have this capacity.

These days though, 'multi-tasking' is not only accepted, it is praised, actually aimed for, such that we've almost completely forgotten the meaning of the phrase 'less is more'. Almost total dispersion produces predictable superficial experience – not satisfying, with shallow understanding, restless, fragmented...

I know that some teachers shy away from using the word 'concentration', perhaps because of the associations it has sometimes of squeezing our selves, or of setting a goal in the future. So words and phrases like cultivating mindfulness, collectedness, one-pointedness, or presence of mind are used.

They all point to the same thing, which is a habit of mind that is more fully present, bringing deep resources of attention to any experience.

This is definitely possible by degrees, but we need to know this for ourselves for words such as these to make any sense.

We can ‘thin out’ our conceptual activity, gradually learning to be with ourselves and experience in a more direct, non-conceptual way. And we can notice how our experience changes. More can be seen. More of the depth of what is here can be known. The application of this, the practice, is always in the present moment.

In meditation, calm and mindfulness go together. When the mind settles down, even a bit, and we become even a little more calm and clear, we can naturally see more of what is going on.

I know that if we practice sitting and walking meditation, and mindfulness in our daily lives, present, and collected, we can know what is here more deeply, more fully. “When sitting, just sit. When walking, just walk.”

Our experience will be richer, more enjoyable. And we will have more to offer to others – more resources, more spontaneity, more freedom, more joy.

All the world’s contemplative traditions, and, also I think, everyone who has ever gone to any depth, at least at some time in their life has practiced mindfulness, and natural concentration.

Even if we can’t always do it perfectly, at least we can have collectedness as an aim.

‘All that we are is the result of what we have thought...’ says the Dhammapada. A number of years ago, I heard it phrased like this: thought leads, and energy follows.

But please don’t take my word for any of this. See for yourself if what I am saying here is true.

Part Eight – Collectedness – II

I recall something that Eknath Eshwaran said about strong emotions and energy. He said that some strong emotions, like anger, desire, worry, and obsessive thinking, are like sitting in an RV in our driveway and gunning the engine – they use tremendous amounts of energy.

At some point these need to be abandoned, as a necessary condition, if we are going to have the energy to look deeply into things, to solve problems, and also to access the resources we have beneath the surface of things.

We could say there is a physics equation here – when we have huge amounts of energy going into these emotions, or into excessive thinking, then often we don't have enough to accomplish other purposes.

I think of the lives of contemplatives – monks or nuns, or laypeople with this function, using this capability, and how they live simply, with their lives dedicated to study, reflection, and prayer. Anger, desires, fears, and the over-use of the intellect – these have no place in the picture, or, they are greatly minimized.

While this may be 'the North Star', or unattainable for most of us working class people, at least it is a direction we can face and intend to move towards, for our own sake, for our relatives, for our community and for the greater world.

The principle is clear: we need to use our energy skillfully to be able to understand, and make use of our own depths.

Here is a paraphrase of something from the Taoist Tradition, by Liu I-Ming: He said

People age because they indulge in emotions and passions- a hundred worries affect their minds, myriad affairs weary their bodies. Expending their vitality, they exhaust their spirit... but if people know enough to regret their errors and change, cut off emotional entanglements, get rid of addictions to intoxicants, sensuality, and possessions, look upon wealth and status as ephemeral clouds, regard power and profit as like bandits and enemies, then they will not be attached to anything.

Concentrating the energy like a baby, being abstemious, storing the vitality and nurturing the spirit, integrated with the design of nature, they can thereby be rejuvenated...

Part nine - What mind will we use?

There is a prominent idea in Western thought that what we call 'mind' is a single unchanging phenomena. Like a light that can either be turned on or off, it's easy to believe that our mind is either something that is there, and knowing, or it isn't. We seldom think of this one thing we call mind as having different characteristics that effect what we see.

Much of Philosophy in the West has this as it's point of departure, this basic idea that if something is there, we should be able to see it, and if we don't see it, it's not there. The approach, then, to solving problems, or to developing understanding involves thinking, and manipulating concepts, or looking at things from a variety of perspectives.

Eastern traditions have a very different starting point. Their idea is that, if we don't see something we can change our mind itself. When we change our mind, what we can see changes as well.

I bring this up here because as we get to know ourselves, the deeper levels of our life, feeling, experience, it is crucial to consider this, at least as a working proposition.

If we look, but bring one kind of a mind to our experience, we may not actually see what is here. If we take an aloof, analytical mind, or a critical attitude, this will certainly effect what is known.

Modern physics has arrived at the understanding that the observer is not separate from what is being looked at, but there is still a lack of understanding of the different qualities of the mind, and how these effect our experience.

At some point, if we want to understand this process, and to go deeper into experience, we're going to have to develop a language to talk about this.

Here's one analogy that comes to mind:

I take it as a starting point that there is more beneath the surface of experience that can be known. When we are talking about our own experience, everyone knows that there are things that are more difficult to

look at. They may be painful, or some things are ashamed of. They may be difficult, complex, or close to what we value most, with great hope.

I have the image of talking to someone on the other side of a door. (we are both persons here) If our voice is hostile, or aggressive, then we can see how the other, draws back, maybe ‘barricades the door’, so to speak. If this is what we see, then what goes on on the unseen levels, we can be sure, is more of this kind of action – drawing back, hiding itself, protecting itself.

Even when we use just a neutral voice, neither friendly, nor aggressive, there are only some things we will be willing to reveal, consciously and on deeper levels.

When the voice on the other side of the door is warm, however, saying in effect with it’s tone ‘it is alright – I wish you well – I care for and support you, unconditionally... I am here for you’, with this kind of open hearted feeling, the door opens, so to speak. We feel we can trust ourselves to such a heart.

Love is a mind that we can trust implicitly. With love present, we can open, we can be vulnerable and feel safe. We are encouraged like the flowers.

This is what is visible to anyone. We can infer that there are also deeper levels that can only be known to such a warm mind.

I know we can experiment with cultivating different qualities in ourselves, and then seeing what effect that has on our observation, on our looking more deeply into this life.

For example, we can think on generosity, bringing to mind examples of giving with an open heart, and we can produce something of this mind in ourselves. Then when we look into our experience, we can see how this effects the experience.

Some more examples: we can cultivate forgiveness, or patience, humility, gratitude, or devotion to an ideal, or compassion, and any of these will effect how we are able to see.

I know we don't have a language for this, because it is not quantifiable – we are talking about the quality of the mind. As such, there are degrees of every quality that we can produce, cultivate, and increase.

There is a difference between initial forgiveness, for example, and when this factor is strong in us. Our experience of this quality is different, of course, but moreover, what we see, how we are able to know is different as well.

There is a difference between the initial development of compassion in us, and when this is there in abundance.

And so on, with joy, gratitude, humility, dedication, generosity, patience, and other positive emotions.

It is useful to ask 'what kind of a mind will we use?' to look at others, this world, and our own life. Such a question implies that we do understand that there are different kinds of minds, different qualities in varying degrees, and that we know the mind we use will determine what can be known.

Only looking into this for ourselves, and honestly, patiently experimenting will show what I mean here.

One more note on the qualities of the mind

Each of us has traveled a different route to get where we are in our study. In our lives we have produced different qualities, emotions, habits. Most of us have known extremes of negative experiences – despair, anger, greed, and whatever we have been through has produced the mind as we know it in ourselves.

If we've been angry a lot in our lives, or fearful, or if we've followed our desires, or had a lot of depression, these have produced the kind of mind that we use, as a 'default' in looking at the world, and our experience.

We should each know our own mind, as it has been, so we can make adjustments. All of the difficult emotions 'color' the mind in ways that, just like the positive, effect what we see.

It is possible to ‘counter balance’ the mind, according to our own specific needs, so we can move on to producing more positive minds. This is so essential.

If we’ve been greedy, we can produce unselfishness; if we’ve been angry, forgiveness, patience, gentleness; if we’ve had a lot of fears coloring the mind, we can produce more trust, more faith, or at least the absence of a priori not trusting. These are things we can learn, things we can do. And we will find that doing this kind of specific counter balancing supports the development of positive states.

I like to tell people that are involved in yoga, or breathing meditation and body awareness, to try producing a positive state of mind, such as loving kindness, and then doing their regular practice. This way we can begin to learn the beneficial effects we are capable of producing in ourselves, for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for this world.

Part Ten - The emerging self

It's possible to look at ourselves, with or without a diagram such as this, and to see factors from our past, as well as those that are just emerging in our lives. When we see something, a habit, for example from the past, if we can recognize it, then we can decide if that factor is helpful to us. We have some choice right there.

As we grow and mature, we can also identify what could be termed 'the emerging self'. At that point we can choose to augment the factors, habits, qualities, streams, thoughts that are more in line with the person we wish to become.

This is something worth thinking on – What is this deep self? What is the deep reason we are here? Who do we want to be? What will help this process? What holds us back? (and no one can tell us this – we have to find out for ourselves) If these things become more clear to us, then we can gradually create the conditions where that self can manifest more fully.

The 'old self' factors – qualities, habits, thoughts and types of energy – if we let them be, they will gradually fall away. Or, we can be more active in this process, and 'erase' their influence more directly and energetically. We would do this by identifying and producing a counter-current, to bring balance, a corrective function. This is what is called purification. It is complete in itself, and necessary, and it also supports the function of all that is positive in us.

A related notion - the modern imperative – a parallel

We can use the idea of a diagram with different levels not only to consider ourselves, but also to look at our society at this time. Just as in ourselves, there are currents, histories, obvious and hidden, and potentials to. There is an 'old self' and many possibilities for an 'emerging self'.

I was thinking recently how our world has changed so much in just the last 10 years, or even less, and how we haven't really caught up with those changes, with what is implied in those changes. Maybe people are too busy, or stressed, or distracted, I don't know. What I do know is that new knowledge brings with it new responsibilities. That is natural.

Compared to fifty years ago, or even twenty, or even five years ago, it is much easier to know now what is going on in our community, and in the larger spheres of this country and this world. Whereas before it was understandable if people lived in a world and responded to a smaller range of needs.

Twenty years ago, if we wanted to find out what the greatest needs were in this world, we would have had to devote much more of our time and resources. These days though, with in an hour on the computer, we can learn from people who are well informed about a whole range of truly important human problems.

We can learn, for example, about hunger and food scarcity; about the need for clean water in many parts of our world; we can learn about human rights causes, and labor issues worldwide.

All these things should be responded to. But what we have, just as with our self, is the 'old self', the old world view, and the currents, education and industries that developed out of that. They stand squarely in the way of what would be an appropriate response to the world as we now know it.

Perhaps before there was no reason to question soap operas, sports, culinary arts, entertainments, aspirations to leisure travel, to accumulate and to retire on a hill; but a new sense of the world requires a new response. Much of what developed before, will have to be looked at in light of what we are now, more and more, coming to know.

Interestingly enough, the processes of change will be the same in a culture as in an individual- there will be resistance, habit energy, the need for integration and a clear sense of what can be to provide a sense of direction. And, just as when we look at ourselves, actually knowing our potentials as human beings is the basis of our hope.