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## The Unconscious and Personality Transformation

*“It is difficult indeed then to understand how conscious awareness can effectively guide action without massive support by unconscious guidance systems.”*

~ J.A. Bargh<sup>1</sup>

*“The psychological unconscious refers to mental structures and processes that influence a person's ongoing experience, thought, and action outside of conscious awareness.”*

~ J.F. Kihlstrom<sup>2</sup>

*“We must give up the insane illusion that a conscious self, however virtuous and however intelligent, can do its work singlehanded and without assistance.”*

~ Aldous Huxley<sup>3</sup>

### **The unconscious workings of our brain**

For most of human history, the proposition of the supremacy of conscious thought and intentional behavior has been primary even though a persisting hypothesis existed about the importance of unconscious causes of human behavior. As we have seen in earlier chapters, contemporary psychological science remains attached to a conscious-centric model of the higher mental activities, supporting the idea of the unconscious as a system that is primarily a subliminal stimulation from the environment. This conception perpetuates the idea that our conscious self promoting processes are most important and significant, representing the causal force of human judgment and behavior. John A. Bargh et al., wrote, *“Today, most theories of goal pursuit emphasize conscious choice and guidance of behavior on a moment-to-moment basis.”*<sup>4</sup> Instead, in this chapter we will begin to examine the fact

that many of our actions are not fully determined by our conscious mind, but, rather, we more often act habitually and without conscious awareness. In fact, not only our brain but our whole body is very busy automatically maintaining itself and our relationship to the world. Such processes are unconscious and continue even when we are engaged in conscious calculations. There are many unconscious processes going on not only because we have to filter out stimuli or impulses, but also because many of our cognitive operations function quickly without cognitive awareness. We define the concept of unconscious in referring to mental activity, in contrast to consciousness.

Therefore, the term ‘the unconscious’ means the existence of sophisticated, flexible, and adaptive outside of awareness behavior guidance systems. Something formed by a combination of biological and environmental influences. It is a process—a way of constructing perception, memories and other kinds of cognition that changes systematically with development and experience. While our consciousness plays a significant role in our ability to transform, manipulate, and convey information, nevertheless, even when we are alert and attentive, our body, which includes the brain, processes a great amount of information automatically and out of awareness. In fact, we are often unaware of implicit percepts, memories, and thoughts that affect our ongoing experience, thought, and action.

The Buddha gave a primary importance to the psychological unconscious in his analyses of mental processes and called it the latent tendencies (anusaya). These are defined latent because they have the potential and are likely to manifest when stimulated by a sufficient cause. In fact, the so-called ‘unconscious’ mind is not without an awareness ability. For example, it is always conscious of body sensations, and it reacts to them. If they are unpleasant, it reacts with aversion. If they are pleasant, it reacts with desire. This is the habit pattern, the behavior pattern, of the so-called unconscious. Similarly Bargh writes “*What this means for present purposes is that not only did sophisticated unconscious modules evolve that give us today the building blocks of adaptive motives, preferences, and behavioral impulses, all operating unconsciously; there also evolved (indeed, had to evolve) a mechanism to integrate or interface these separate, parallel inputs into serial behavioral and judgmental responses. (Indeed, it has been proposed that the primary function of consciousness is to integrate the outputs of different action oriented systems that are vying for skeletal muscle control).*”<sup>5</sup>

## **Mindfulness and unconscious psychological processes**

In his formulation of the six senses, the Buddha recognized how our initial perception of things occurs through the higher yet still unconscious cognitive processes of recognizing or giving names and forms to the impinging sense-data. These mental processes are given structure and meaning by cognitive schemas derived from past sensory and conceptual experience. In this way, we construct our present, based on our past knowledge, which is then either transformed or substantiated by the present experience. Much of the time our lives are driven by an autopilot of our habitual tendencies, selective memories and biased perceptions.

For the Buddha, the training of mental purification needed to attain Awakening, was aimed at transforming these mental processes by mindfully examining the persistent psychological and physiological structures, such as sense organs, faculties, dispositions and traits. A significant conclusion of the Buddha was that mental representations (percepts, memories, knowledge acquired through learning, and thoughts) can exist outside the conscious awareness, and, they importantly dominate our ongoing cognitive experiences and action. The formed habits are involved in how these vital processes exist. In fact, conscious awareness, to effectively guide our actions, needs an extensive buttressing by the unconscious systems.

As we have already seen in earlier chapters, in response to the contact of sense stimuli, impulses are generated which activates unconscious operating motives, preferences and their associated approach (like) and avoidance (dislike) tendencies, emotional reactions and then related motivations. Indeed, the generation of responses of the possible reaction/action is largely unconscious, even though we usually wrongly believe that the decision of an action is consciously generated. There are two ways that non-conscious processes trigger or cause a response to surface. Firstly, when we respond emotionally, based on the latent tendencies, which bias the mind state; or during the process of perception, there are thoughts from which often obsessive conceptual proliferation can occur.

The process of developing latent tendencies within our memory structures is generally as follows: When we do something enjoyable, like eating delicious food, it affects both our bodies and minds in pleasurable ways. These experiences create and/or reinforce specific neural pathways in the brain and body which participate in their being used again. We come to experience physiological and psychological desires and cravings for the sensations that

they provide, and thus we tend to habitually repeat them over and over again. For example, a common satisfying summer activity for many is eating ice cream. Our first taste of enjoyment as a child has us seek out again a similar ice cream, over and over. Then we may be adventurous and try new flavors, repeating those we like and avoiding the ones we find distasteful. So whenever we recognize an ice cream shop sign or see someone else eating some, we automatically are stimulated to go to the ice cream shop and satisfy our desire of tasting our favorite ice cream. If there isn't the possibility of satisfying our wish immediately, we can then use our thoughts to at least indulge in the less yet still satisfying fantasy of having and eating our favorite ice cream flavor. This desire can be easily activated. In this way, actions (going to the ice cream shop and eating ice cream) gradually reinforce the conditions that participate in their repetition, resulting in the psycho-physiological complexes called 'latent tendencies' which are stored and then activated unconsciously in the mind under the right conditions.

The most problematic latent tendencies or dispositions, and hence important in the Buddha's psychology of relieving suffering, are called the Three Poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance which lead to unwholesome effects in the present and future. These latent tendencies are often categorically expanded to a set of seven, which includes sensual desire, aversion, conceit, wrong views, doubt, craving for existence, and ignorance. They are considered ingrained unwholesome patterns of mind that are harmful to a person's wellbeing. These unwholesome latent tendencies lie dormant in the mind and, yet, are easily activated to be the source of one's addictions and deep clinging, holding the mind in a state of attachment and, as a result, in suffering.

Buddhist thought usually identifies seven latent tendencies:

- (1) Sensual craving;
- (2) Aversion;
- (3) Conceit;
- (4) Views;
- (5) Doubt;
- (6) Craving for existence;
- (7) Ignorance

Then for each latent tendency there are three levels of activation:

- (1) The deepest is the latent level, a subtle gross level of defilements, where they remain as latent disposition in the life continuum. We are not aware of it, unless it is stimulated by an encountered stimulus.

- (2) The Intermediate of 'Adherence or habituation' obsession level, a level of defilements, where they arise and become 'Mental Intoxicants' to obsess and addict the mind, yet it has not been overtly expressed physically or verbally.
- (3) The transgression level, a level of defilements that lie dormant, but are easily activated and create difficulties because they instigate and one expresses unwholesome physical or verbal actions, with greed, hatred, and spuriousness.

In general, through the program of cognitive transformation (Eightfold Path) defilement by or activation of the unwholesome lapse tendency is inhibited by observing the moral precepts (sila). The habitual level of obsessive defilement is overcome through mental cultivation (samadhi). And the deepest levels of latent tendencies is conquered by insight wisdom (Panna)(Vism 1.13/5). These three levels of defilements are mentioned often throughout the Commentaries. The latent tendencies are transcended by the practitioner gradually - level by level. To transcend with right view, one does not consciously foster by fixation and clinging any kind of mindset associated with an unwholesome latent tendency. The Buddha taught that if we purify and nullify our unconscious dispositions, through observation and equanimity to our feelings, then, we realize truth 'as it is' and can become wholesomely free. This realization is also called 'Wisdom' which is cultivated through Insight Meditation. The defilements are totally eradicated by the fully Awakened, while partially eradicated by the other four types of Noble Disciples (1. stream-enterer - sotāpatti; 2. once-returner - sakadāgāmitā; 3. non-returner - anāgāmitā; 4. arahant - arahatta).

According to William Waldron, craving and views are types of a 'mindset' or 'mental standpoint' which are the foundation for the mind.<sup>6</sup> They are linked to our motivation because they stay in the mind and lie latent there. They are considered so potent as a force of motivation that whatever personality qualities dominate and lie latent in one, one is regarded by those characteristics. For example, if we have a dominant latent tendency towards a form of conceit, then we will have the tendency to respond to the world with arrogance, self-importance, over-estimation of one's abilities, etc. This is an important consideration in the idea of purification of the mind and personality to reach Awakening. In fact, the Buddha taught that each predominate unwholesome personality trait or tendency could be countered by an intervention that specifically targeted that characteristic, i.e. greed- generosity.

Indeed, the Buddha's emphasis on the importance of continual mindfulness or awareness of cognitive process in order to transform and purify those processes shows both his understanding of the crucial influence of unconscious processes and their effect on the total cognitive and action processes, as well as the role of awareness as the monitor and gatekeeper of consciousness. If a habitual non-conscious behavior pattern is not broken, there will be continued reaction of craving or aversion, from which, as Buddha taught, suffering arises. They are like dormant volcanoes that may become active at any time. Thus, unwholesome latent behavior patterns must be changed. With intervention, over time, and with effort, the whole habit pattern of the mind can change at the deepest level. In fact, the Buddha's insight into a foundation of cognitive processes is in harmony with contemporary theory and research in biology, in which unconscious forces are understood to motivate the behavior of all living organisms.

Neuroscientist Pessiglione and colleagues have shown how brain regions and cognitive processes are invoked in unconscious as well as in conscious goal pursuit, and that conscious goal pursuit makes use of preexisting unconscious motivational structures.<sup>7</sup> The pursuance of a goal can operate independently of any conscious awareness which implies a distinction between the executive control structures in the brain responsible for continual 'running' of that goal's 'program' and from those that facilitate conscious awareness of the goal pursuit. For example, the often-said expression, 'I will sleep on it' belies the wisdom of letting the unconscious process the decision information to gain a better perspective before rushing to an action. Also, the unconscious use of body movement through space supports the notion of the separateness of conscious awareness and intention from the unconscious operation of complex behavioral processes. Modern science, similarly to the Buddha, has learned that unconscious processes are significant in the moment-to-moment operation of our cognitive process and actions.

In Buddha's psychology the unconscious processes that create our actions are considered ultimately volitionally motivated, and such actions create expected consequences. The Buddha said, "*Bhikshu, one is reckoned by whatever lies latent in one. One is not reckoned by what does not lie latent in one.*" Even though the mindsets are habitual, below conscious awareness, they are still considered deliberately formed. The formation of these latent cognitive processes is through volitions, decisions and integrations which create memories and habits. Actions gradually reinforce the conditions that conduce to their own repetition, resulting in the psycho-physiological complexes called

dispositions, in Pāli, *anusaya*, or underlying tendencies. Latent tendency is qualified as “in the sense that they have not been abandoned in the mental continuum to which they belong and because they are capable of arising when a suitable cause presents itself” (M 1995, 1241, n. 473). Therefore, at the center of Buddha’s motivational psychology, actions are called ‘formations’ (*saṅkhā-ra*) and are considered closely connected to the deeper latent tendencies or dispositions. Actions occur with a sufficient causal impetus.

Let’s look at the process of one latent tendency the Buddha mentioned, that of sensual craving (*kāma, rāgānusaya*). This is a biological potential because as we saw earlier in this book (*khandhas*) we are our six senses—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, corporal and mind—that continuously seek gratification from corresponding sense-objects—forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and mind-objects. Sense-desire is essentially craving or a ‘thirst’ at its most instinctive. Sensual craving is a ‘pulling toward’ factor. Continuously, our senses hold on to pleasant sense objects and then satiate to it, release it and seek a new one, just as a monkey clings on to one branch after another, swinging from tree to tree. (Assutava Sutta 1. S 12.61) As we now know, the Buddha and the texts state (M I 303) that through contact with sense objects, a feeling or sensation (*vedanā*) occurs arousing one of the dispositions and we respond to pleasure with craving, to discomfort with aversion, and to neutral feeling with indifference. These affective responses in turn evoke actions whose effects reinforce the very conditions that supported their arising in the first place. As these patterns are repeated, they gradually become entrenched habits increasingly difficult to uproot. Even when one does not intend or plan, they latently persist in memory relatively independent from the changing contents of conscious awareness; however, ever ready to reactivate when a suitable cause stimulates them.

### **Some traditional clarifications about latent tendencies**

(1) Where does the latent tendency of sensual craving lie latent?

The latent tendency of sensual craving lies latent in the two feelings (pleasant and neutral) of the sense-sphere. This most common manifests itself as the lust for sense-pleasures, the collecting of sense-experiences perceived as pleasant.

(2) Where does the latent tendency of aversion lie latent?

The latent tendency of aversion lies in painful (bodily and mental) feeling. Aversion is a pushing away factor.

(3) Where does the latent tendency of conceit lie latent?

The latent tendency of conceit lies in the two feelings of the sense-sphere, and in those of the form sphere and the formless sphere.

(4) Where does the latent tendency of views lie latent?

The latent tendency of views lies in all states related to identity (sakkāya).

(5) Where does the latent tendency of doubt lie latent?

The latent tendency of doubt lies in all states related to identity (sakkāya).

(6) Where does the latent tendency of craving for existence lie latent?

The latent tendency of craving for existence lies in the form sphere and the formless

sphere and has the most powerful influence. It is the abiding self-love which functions as self-construction, 'I am'. Self is the deepest stratum of psychological life and is the last to be transformed on the path toward liberation.

(7) Where does the latent tendency of ignorance lie latent?

The latent tendency of ignorance lies in not knowing the four truths, or a kind of blurred or distorted vision of them (sakkāya).

(Yam 268; cf Nyanatiloka 1971: 104)

### **The habit hardens into character**

An untrained mind is habitually and mostly impulsively ruled by the senses because of the programmed and embedded interaction of the body with the environment. It is the untrained and unawakened mind that keeps craving pleasant objects, rejecting what it considers as unpleasant, and ignoring what is neutral. This situation is enhanced and strengthened by our use of language, which creates virtual static objects for us to desire or reject. While ignoring their actual dynamic, impermanent and non-substantiality nature, we eagerly grasp at every pleasant sense-object or sense-stimuli. However, contrary to our belief, these experiences are not pristine pleasures because we tend to repeat the past even when it seems the present. To desire what we identify as lasting, pleasant, essential or good means to recognize what we are familiar with. They become adherences to fixed mental standpoints, mindsets or bias. Therefore, we mostly repeat ourselves in all of our lives. The Buddha called this tendency 'Adherence or Habituation' (abhinivesa) referring to the habitual level of behaviors which is intimately linked with the adherence of our yearning for the

arising of pleasant sense feelings. So, what one chooses and repeats again and again becomes a natural disposition and then a habit. Even at a physical level, my repeated movements become a basic sense habit because of their recurrent patterning.

Since habits originate through our chosen and continued repetition of actions, this clearly indicates the significant cognitive dimension in both the formation and the maintenance of habits. This intertwining of routine, motivation and action originates in the mind that becomes excited by expectations. Or as a passage echoing the Buddha expresses this basic causal chain of events:

*The thought manifests as the word,  
The word manifests as the deed,  
The deed develops into habit,  
And the habit hardens into character.  
So watch the thought and its way with care,  
And let it spring from love  
Born out of concern for all beings.<sup>8</sup>*

However, the Buddha also distinguishes between two kinds of pleasures: the craving after pleasant sense experience versus other pleasant feelings such as the bliss of meditative absorption, which does not activate the sense based latent tendency. However, even though the basis of the pleasant sensation is different, one must treat them the same in terms of non-clinging and adherence for in both cases they are impermanent and subject to dis-ease when ending. Nevertheless, the Buddha's ability to discriminate between the impacts of these two different pleasant-based experiences led him to the Middle Way and ultimately awakening. Also, the Buddha taught that obsessive and reactive behaviors can be overcome through mental cultivation. The point is that while we have our six senses and the six sense-objects, and our feelings and perceptions of them, these are not permanent; they all change in time. An emotionally reactive person impulsively reacts to both internal and external stimuli; to perceive an injury or to fear one it means to try to eliminate the source of pain or attempt escaping or protection. Such reactive behavior is not only unskillful but also predictable, people act as if they have no choice, while, of course, ultimately, they have one. The obliviousness created by habit includes not looking for or considering facts, perspectives, or ideas different from, or contrary to what is known and accepted hence comfortable- one's 'comfort zone'. Latent tendencies, as unconscious sources of motivation, work

with one another. The latent tendency of arrogance also functions with craving for existence and with strong and biased perspectives. They are all interconnected in the matrix of self-identity that can range from a harmless sense of self-satisfaction to an exaggerated self-glorification. Actually, all pretensions are ultimately self-defeating because although a conceited person is self-centered, he/she does not have a secure sense of self. In fact, such an individual is always dependent, and hence insecure, on how others define and approve or not of them. For the Buddha, the deepest, most obstinate yet crucially important disposition is the 'I am' or the belief that we are substantial enduring entities. Buddha declared, if *'that view of self-existence has become habitual and is not eradicated'* then our suffering would be endless.

From an evolutionary perspective over humanity's long history as a species, knowledge (both physical and cognitive) gained from experience represent shortcut processes that appear as a priori knowledge. It saves us from a continuous figuring out about good/bad and helpful/useless things. In other words, we don't always have to 'Reinvent the wheel', as the saying goes, every time we have problems to be mastered. Therefore, thankfully, the conscious mind is mostly unconsciously activated and is not the source of most of our behavior. Instead, consciousness acts as a gatekeeper that allows us to reflect on, evaluate and to make sense of our interactions. In other words, the impulse is firstly unconsciously generated, and then consciousness or awareness allows what is appropriate and experiences it.<sup>9-13</sup>

The Buddha's method of mind transformation and 'purification' doesn't suggest eliminating dispositions or latent tendencies or habits, as that is impossible, instead, he describes a program of refining and uprooting unwholesome and ignorant tendencies and developing wholesome and skillful ones. If the latent tendencies are not purified, they keep us in a loop of ignorance and illusion that feeds on itself, transforming us into self-inflated beings, which crave and loath objects that truly signify nothing – only our whims. We desire and hoard temporary and impermanent objects seeking a safe, pleasurable, static, predictable and permanent world which does not exist- it is only an illusion of an ideal. Once we understand this dilemma, we can start working on earnestly healing and purifying ourselves and eventually achieve Awakening.

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