

Store Consciousness and Watering our Positive Seeds

In Buddhist psychology there are several ways of conceiving and dealing with matters that arise as a result of being alive and conscious. These include the Six Paramitas. In this paper, we will look at Virya Paramita

Preamble

In the previous paper of this series (D2), we looked at what we can give (of ourselves) to other people. Dana Paramita is one of the six Paramitas in Buddhist psychology. In this paper we will look at another of the paramitas¹, Virya Paramita: this is to do with the concepts of “diligence, energy, and perseverance” (Hanh 1998), and provides a model for dealing with negative emotions and afflictions.

Seeds in our Store Consciousness

We have many latent “seeds” within us – and these are described as being within our Store Consciousness. When these seeds are activated, we become conscious of them – and they manifest themselves in our Mind Consciousness². Figure 1 illustrates the situation when the seeds of affliction and the seeds of mindfulness are both dormant.

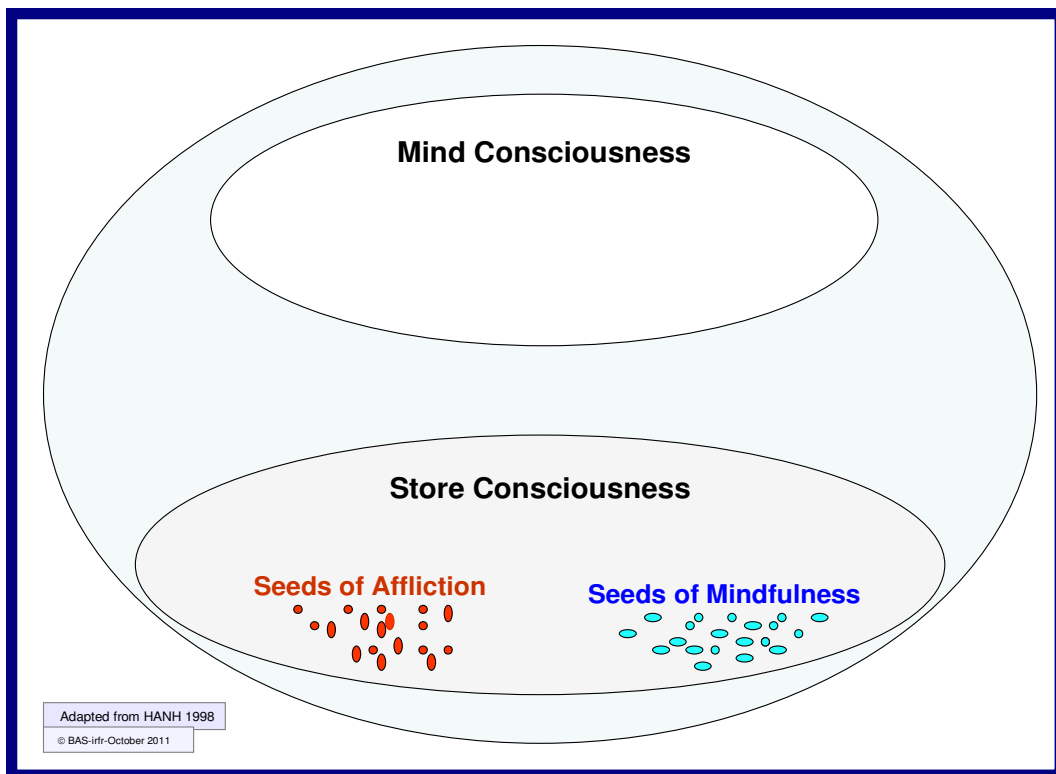


Figure 1
Store Consciousness and Mind Consciousness
with seeds dormant

¹ D2 gives a brief introduction to the concept of the Paramitas

² The terms Store Consciousness (unconscious) and Mind Consciousness (conscious) should be seen in terms of metaphors for what is going on, not as anatomical sites.

The seeds in our Store Consciousness can be seen as being negative, neutral, or positive. For example, we have “seeds of anger, delusion, and fear” on the one hand, and seeds of “understanding, forgiveness, and compassion” on the other (Hanh 1998 p 206).

Some of these are genetic and are wired into our neuro-physiology; in addition, how our genes express emotions (in an epigenetic sense) may be related to the types of lives our ancestors lived³.

.....Many of these seeds have been transmitted to us by our ancestors. We should learn to recognise every one of these seeds in us in order to practice diligence. If it is a negative seed, the seed of an affliction like anger, fear, jealousy, or discrimination, we should refrain from allowing it to be watered in our daily life. Every time such a seed is watered, it will manifest on the upper level of consciousness, and we will suffer and make the people we love suffer at the same time. The practice is to refrain from watering the negative seeds in us.

Hanh 1998 p 206

Our ancestors of course include our own parents.

Watering our negative seeds (of affliction) will actually set in motion our negative neuro-circuits such as FEAR and RAGE, and thus reinforce them. As the saying goes: “Neurons that are wired together, fire together”. Watering such negative seeds will keep the wired-together RAGE circuits firing together. Figure 2 represents the situation when a seed of Affliction has surfaced into Mind Consciousness.

There is of course an alternative: to water our own and other people’s positive seeds, which we will come on to in due course.

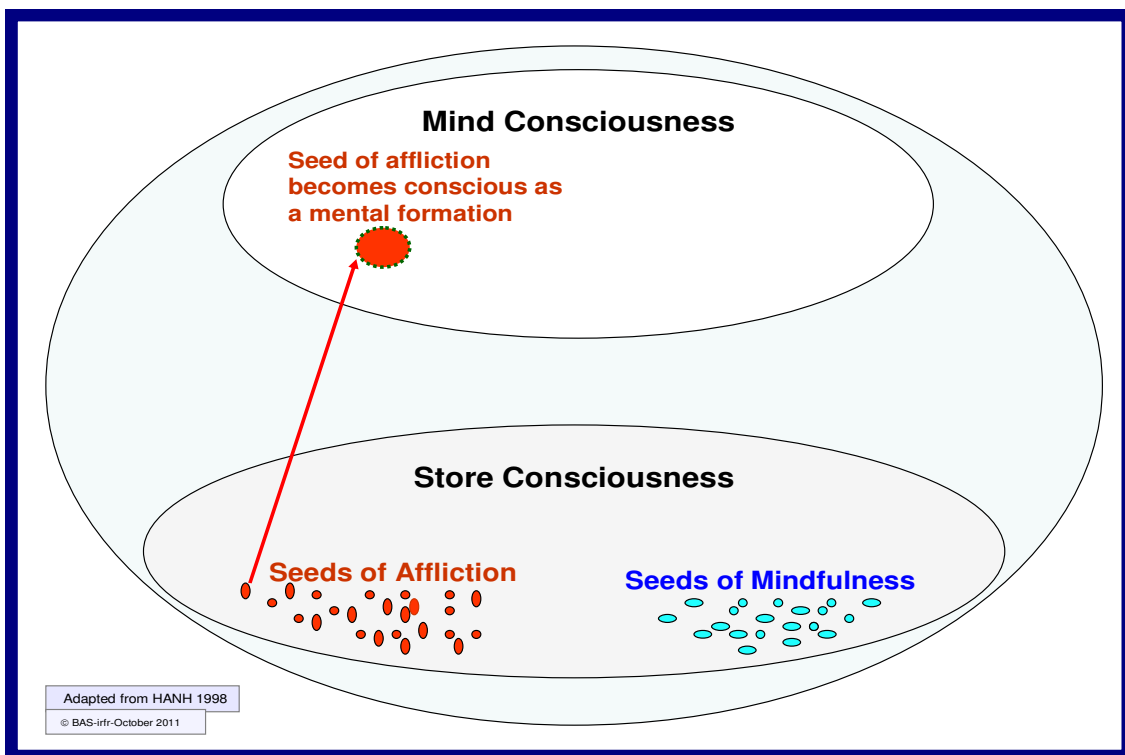


Figure 2
A seed of affliction becomes conscious

Comments on Figure 2 /

³ In addition to the way we live – which will also have an epigenetic impact on our own – and our descendants’ – genes.

Comments on Figure 2

- A seed of affliction – such a jealousy or fear, has been activated and so manifests itself in Mind Consciousness.
- Such affects are sometimes called “mental formations”.
- They can lead to negative ruminations and, for example, “plotting to get our own back.”
- If we are not mindful, we can water our own and other people’s seeds of affliction.

Seeds rising up into Mind Consciousness

So once these seeds in Store Consciousness rise up, they manifest themselves in our Mind Consciousness: certain consequences will result. If our anger / RAGE seeds are watered, this will result in activation of the anger and RAGE circuits (Panksepp 1998). This is associated with physiological changes including an increase in the blood supply to our hands (Ekman 2008 p 41). On the other hand, if our nurturing and positive seeds (of Mindfulness) are watered, this will result in our CARE circuits becoming active – with an associated release of oxytocin.

Now we are, to some extent at least, able to control which seeds manifest themselves in Mind Consciousness. We can water our own positive seeds, and this can be facilitated daily by Mental Training (e.g. Positive Mental Training, Meditation, and Autogenic Therapy). For example, seeds of empathy and insight⁴ (Siegel 2007).

We can also reduce the effect that a negative seed has on us once it has entered Mind Consciousness. For example, we can label it. In the case of a fear arising, naming it (“fear is arising within me) can reduce amygdala activity (see Liebermann 2007; Creswell 2007; and B12 of this series).

Watering each other’s seeds

Our colleagues at work may water our positive seeds or our negative seeds. In turn, we may water, for example, their nurturing / positive seeds or their negative seeds. The same is of course the case with couples. When we are feeling tender and caring, we will be watering their positive seeds. On the other hand, if we have got into a negative spiral of point scoring, we will find, or we will already have found, ways of intentionally watering their negative seeds (e.g. fear, anger, jealousy⁵).

There is an old Cherokee story about a grandfather and his grandson. The old man says to his grandson: “My son, there is a battle that goes on inside each of us between two wolves. One is evil: it is the wolf of anger, jealousy, rage, ill-will towards others, hatred, greed, false pride, arrogance and Ego. The other is the wolf of love, compassion, understanding, concern for others, generosity, truth, and nurturance.”

The grandson reflects on this for a little while and then says: “Granddad, which one wins?” To which the grandfather replies: “The one you feed”.

adapted from Fredrickson 2009 p 179

Some occupations and some activities of the mind will feed one wolf; other occupations and activities of the mind will feed the other wolf.

⁴ Siegel lists nine specific functions relating to medial Pre Frontal Cortex activity. (Siegel 2007; and see also C2 of this series)

⁵ This is of course similar to pushing our partner’s “negative buttons”.

Maintain wholesome neuronal activity

As already mentioned in connection with FEAR and RAGE circuits, “neurons that are wired together fire together”. This is of course also true of positive circuits such as the CARE system. So we can facilitate this process by regularly allowing our positive seeds to be watered, and then keeping these in our Mind Consciousness for a good duration. One of the positive seeds is mindfulness (D1).

Thepractice is to keep a wholesome seed as long as possible (in Mind Consciousness) once it has manifested. If mindfulness is maintained for fifteen minutes, the seed of mindfulness will be strengthened, and the next time you need the energy of mindfulness, it will be easier to bring up. It is very important to help the seeds of mindfulness, forgiveness, and compassion to grow, and the way to do this is to help them be present in your mind consciousness for as long as possible. This is called transformation at the base....

Hanh 1998 p 209

Some Approaches to dealing with mental afflictions.

i. Affect Labelling

If we become aware of a negative feeling / affect, the first thing is to acknowledge it. We can say to ourselves, for example, “a feeling of anger is arising in me”. Note that this is a different formulation from “I am angry”; the latter implies identification with the anger.

Naming the disturbing affect in some ways dis-empowers it, and we can “witness” or observe the anger as we might our child who is upset – that is, we can take good care of our anger in a compassionate way. Naming our feeling in such a way is sometimes called Affect Labelling, and, as already mentioned, has been shown to reduce amygdala activity.

ii. Spinoza and transforming negative affect⁶

Spinoza, in his Ethics, argues that we cannot overcome negative affects simply by thinking about them or wanting them to go away. There are limits to cognitive / rational / left brain approaches.

..... An affect cannot be restrained or neutralised except by a contrary affect that is stronger than the affect to be restrained.

Spinoza 1677:
Ethics, Part IV; Proposition 7;
Translated by Edwin Curley.

Antonio Damasio, an eminent neuro-scientist, comments on Spinoza's proposition thus:

In other words, Spinoza recommended that we fight a negative emotion with an even stronger but positive emotion brought about by reasoning and intellectual effort. Central to his thinking was the notion that the subduing of the passions should be accomplished by *reason-induced emotion and not by pure reason alone*.

Damasio; 2003; p 11 - 12
italics added - ifr

⁶ Please note that most of this section on Spinoza is taken from Ross 2010 pp 153-154.

What does the phrase "reason-induced emotion" mean? We know as human beings and as therapists that reason alone will not settle our negative mind-states⁷. Yet, if this reason is accompanied by a positive nurturing type of emotion, we have the potential to overcome the negative mind-state. CARE-circuits are associated with the release of various [informational substances](#) including oxytocin and endorphins (endogenous opiates); and these are known to diminish – or act as an antidote to – the RAGE-, FEAR-, and PANIC- circuits (Panksepp 1998; also Goleman 2003). This is very similar in principle to the concept of Changing the Peg (see below).

We could represent these effects schematically thus:

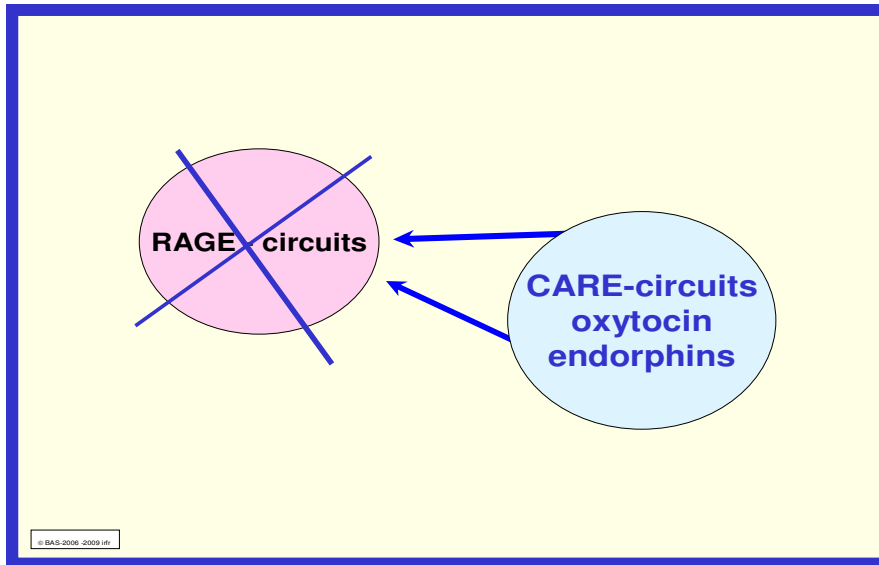


Figure 3⁸
Schematic inter-linking of the concepts of Spinoza, "Changing the Peg", and some aspects of neuro-physiology.
 Oxytocin and endorphins act as antidotes to RAGE-circuits
 (Adapted from Ross 2005X)

So from a neuro-physiological perspective, we know that some positive emotions can act as an antidote to negative and destructive emotions; and that this is mediated through informational substances.

iii. The effect of Meditation on negative affect / mental afflictions

Meditation, and so by extrapolation the Autogenic State, can result in increased Left Frontal Lobe Activity, and reduced activity of the Right Frontal Lobe (RFL) and its (i.e. RFL's) association with negative / destructive emotions (Davidson 2003B; p 335; Davidson 2003B / Goleman 2003; p 12; and see B5). Thus Meditation per se will tend to reduce mental afflictions.

iv. Changing the Peg – CTP (see also Appendix A for three further perspectives on CTP)

Spinoza's concept was not actually new; its roots go back millennia to the time of Sakyamuni.

⁷ And in this context there would seem to be limitations in pure Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: that is, we need to embrace more than reason. For change to come about, there needs to be an Autonomic Nervous System response, which may (sequentially) involve both the SNS and PSNS; and to move into a positive affective state. See also B11 & B12.

⁸ Imported direct from Ross 2010 p 154

In Buddhist psychology, it has long been recognised that we can off-set a negative or destructive feeling / affliction with a positive affect. The following gives a brief introduction to the concept.

In the old days, if a tent peg became rotten, it would be taken out of the ground and would be replaced (by the carpenter) with a new and strong peg. In the same way, the negative / destructive emotion can be replaced – over time – with positive, nurturing and healing emotions.

So in this context, in Buddhist psychology, we have first to recognise that we are suffering from a negative / destructive emotion: which we therefore acknowledge – and then take good care of – just as we would take good care of our child if she or he were angry or upset: we would pick up and cradle the child within our arms, thus nurturing them; and containing their hurt. Having acknowledged the situation, and nurtured the destructive emotion / feeling, the teaching is to replace the destructive / negative emotions with a positive one. Thus the rotten and dangerous is replaced by the new and nurturing.

Original: Ross 2005X; p 31
(with minor modification)

This manifestation from Ross 2010 p 153

Thich Nhat Hanh puts the matter thus:

If you have a mental formation arising you consider to be unwholesome, one way to practice is to invite another mental formation to replace it. Many seeds in your store consciousness are wholesome and beautiful. Just breathe in and out and invite one of them to come up, and the other seed will go down. This is called “changing the peg”.

Hanh 1998 p 207

This is illustrated schematically in Figure 4.

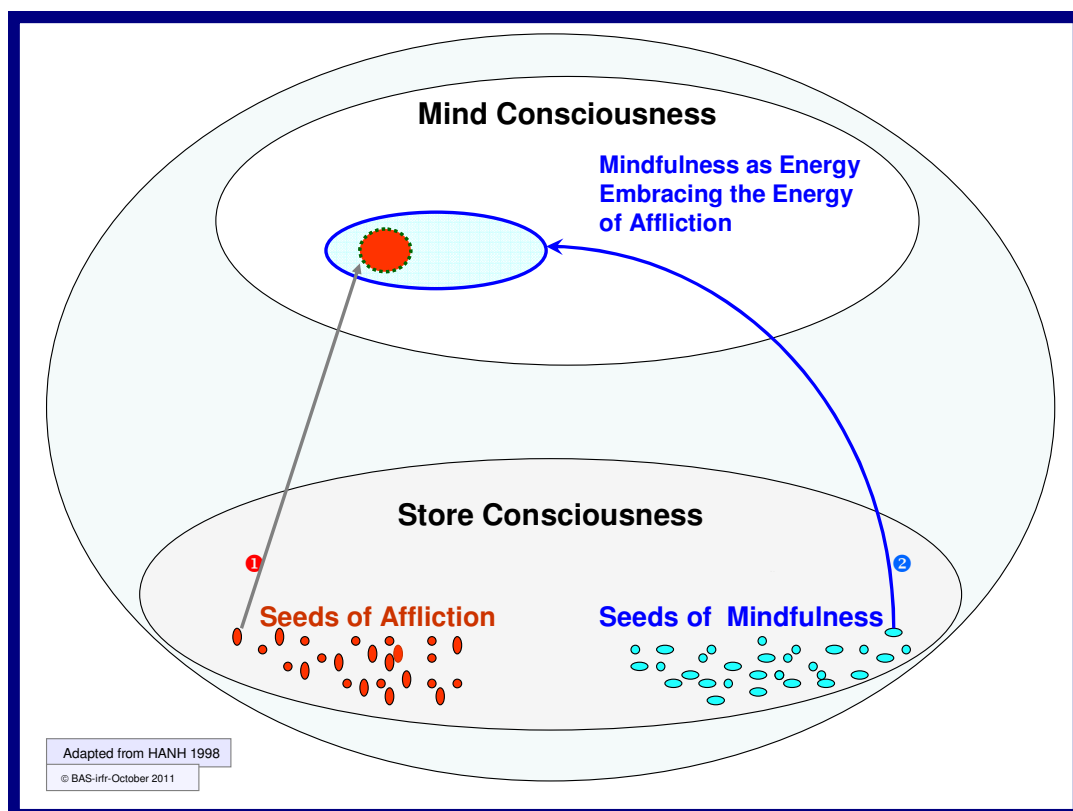


Figure 4
Mindfulness Energy embracing the Energy of Affliction

Comment in Figure 4:

The Energy of Mindfulness is able to embrace and thus contain the seed of affliction. This de-potentates the negative affect, and as a result the negativity subsides.

I was writing this on an October Sunday morning while staying in London. Before breakfast, I went out into Russell Square, and walked through the wonderful space with enormous trees in their delicate autumnal orangey-yellows. The beauty of the moment acted as a life-enhancing, new and wholesome peg – and my transformed being reverberated with these positive vibrations for the next hours.

Changing the Peg can also be seen as a form of re-framing / re-appraisal (see B2).

[Appendix / References / Linked Themes /](#)

Appendix

Changing the Peg

This Appendix covers much of the same ground as the preceding paper, but is included in case it is a helpful summary/ reminder of some of the core concepts of the paper⁹.

<p>Changing the Peg i.</p> <p>E6 E8</p>	<p>A concept from Buddhist psychology. It is suggested that negative mind states, including both destructive and negative emotions, can best be overcome by changing our inner mental state to one of a positive emotion / affect (Hanh 1998 p 207-209). This switch in our mental state is called “changing the peg”. Interestingly, Spinoza developed a similar concept in which he stated that we can only overcome a negative affect by reason-induced-emotion, not by reason alone (Spinoza 1677; Damasio 2003 p 11-12; Ross 2005X p 30-34).</p> <p>Studies in neuro-science support this concept; positive affects tend to act as anti-dotes to the informational substances associated with such negative mind states as anxiety; grief; and anger (Panksepp 1998; Ross 2005X p 31-32). In addition, meditation, and so by extrapolation the AT state, activate the Left Frontal Lobe (pre-frontal cortex) region of the brain, and this in itself reduces amygdala, activity (especially fear / anxiety circuits) and in so doing dissipates any pre-existing negative affect (Davidson 2003B pp 212-338; Ross 2006A)</p>
<p>Changing the Peg ii.</p> <p>E6 E7 E8</p>	<p>“Changing the peg” is a Buddhist metaphor for the concept of dealing effectively with negative mind states / afflictions. In rural / nomadic societies, if a peg (e.g. a tent peg) became rotten or damaged, it would be replaced by a carpenter with a new and wholesome peg. In the same way, if we are suffering from a negative / unwholesome affect, it can be overcome by replacing it with a positive wholesome affect – in the context of Meditation and Mindfulness.</p> <p>This concept was echoed by Spinoza who suggested that we cannot overcome a negative mind state / affect simply by reason or rational thought, but rather by “reason induced emotion” (Spinoza 1677; Damasio 2003; Ross 2005X Part 7).</p> <p>In modern Affective Neuro-science, Panksepp notes that activation of, for example, the CARE-circuits can release informational substances that act as antidotes to the FEAR- and RAGE-circuits. Thus we could say that, by extrapolation, Panksepp’s research supports this ancient concept of changing the peg.</p> <p>Changing the peg can also give us new insights and a new meaning to life.</p>
<p>Changing the Peg iii</p>	<p>If my inner Child (in Transactional Analysis terminology) is hurting as a result say of some loss (e.g. a relationship break-up – in which we may have mixed feelings of loss and anger), then our inner Nurturing Parent (NP) can take good care of our inner hurt Child, and comfort her / him, just as a mother (parent) would with her distressed child. The NP as it were becomes the new peg, and the associated CARE-circuits will release eu-molecules (e.g. oxytocin), and can be an important first step toward healing deep wounds within.</p> <p>This is an example of changing the peg, because instead of being the pain and hurt of the child, we can reframe the whole situation from the perspective of our own NP with its associated nurturing dynamics.</p>

⁹ It is taken from the Glossary of Autogenic Dynamics – Stress, Affect Regulation and Autogenic Therapy (Ross 2010). The words notated [thus](#) are also in that glossary.

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Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

C2	Mindsight – <i>our seventh sense and associated pre-frontal cortex functions</i>
B2	Reframing, Reappraisal and Well-Being
D1	Reflections on foundations for Mindful Living
D2	Dana Paramita
B5	Emotions, Frontal Lobe Dynamics, and Autogenic Training
B10	Snakes, Conditioned Stimuli, and Equanimity – <i>Approaches to treating mind-body disturbances</i>
B11	Distressing Mind-Body-States – <i>from Negative Ruminations towards Well-Being</i>
B12	Affect Labelling, Autogenic Training, and reducing Emotional Distress