

Duhkha, Impermanence, and Inter-relatedness

(Some Reflections on Sakyamuni, Inter-relatedness, and Well-Being)

Buddhist practices.....offer a therapy, not just for the disturbed, but for all who seek to improve the quality of their lives.

Ekman et al 2005 p 62

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1. Preamble

Western approaches to psychology have historically focused on psycho-pathology, and treating these ‘mental disturbances’. In the East, and particularly within the Buddhist tradition, there has always been an emphasis on ‘personal development’ and well-being for all those who are interested in improving the “quality of their lives”, as Ekman puts it in the quote above. We all experience ups and downs in life - some of which can be very stressful. Yet it is still rare in our culture for coping skills for life to be taught in schools, let alone universities and higher education in general¹. During the 1980s my wife Maggie and I visited China – and were very struck one morning when we went out for a walk at about 6.00 a.m. to find the centre of a local round about full of Chinese citizens practising Tai Chi.

Despite these exceptions, our culture has not really grasped that to transform the world a good place is to start with ourselves (Jung 1934; para 329; p 154), and this can be a long and difficult task; yet the rewards are great, and can lead to well-being and a deep inner tranquillity. Ekman is well aware of this and comments:

Western approaches to changing enduring emotional states or traits do not involve the long-term persistent effort that is involved in all complex skill learning – for example, in becoming a chess master or learning to play a musical instrument. Typically, not even psychoanalysis or the more intensive forms of cognitive-behaviour therapy involve the decades of training Buddhists consider necessary for the cultivation of *sukha**.

Ekman et al 2005 p 61

* Sukha is the Sanskrit and Pali term for “well-being and happiness”; see also section 4.

Now, for most of us, it is not suggested that we embark on becoming an adept Buddhist. On the other hand, the idea of developing skilful means to deal with the ups and downs is appealing to many. Autogenic Training and other meditative-type practices can facilitate the development of these skills.

2. Impermanence and dukkha

Despite all the “advances” in civilisations and science, we really understand relatively little. We find ourselves as conscious beings on a planet, in a solar system, within a galaxy, within a cosmos thought to have been created 13.7 billion years ago. We are but passing beings in the history of aeons of time; our own planet will eventually be engulfed by our sun as it becomes a red giant. Our sun is thought to be about five billion years old, and will go on shining for about another five billion years before becoming a red giant. Nevertheless, the fate of our planet, in terms of being an incredible home for life, is but a passing phenomenon in the aeons of cosmic time.

¹ There are of course, notable exceptions, such as Jung and his concern for wholeness / Individuation (e.g. Jung 1958); and, more recently: i. School programmes for developing emotional intelligence for children (see, for example, Goleman 2003 pp 256-279; Greenberg 1995, and ii. The Positive Psychology movement (e.g. Seligman 1988; Fredrickson 2002; 2003; 2005; 2009).

Thus each individual life, and life in general, and our extraordinary planet, are all suffused with impermanence. So how can we live in mental harmony when aware of impermanence in general, and our and our loved one's mortality? From this perspective, there seems to be an inherent unsatisfactoriness within life itself²: all things must die. In Buddhist philosophy / psychology, this unsatisfactoriness is called Duhkha (Sanskrit): this is often translated as suffering, but this is not really what is implied.

The usual translation of “suffering” is too strong, and gives the impression that life according to Buddhism is nothing but pain. As a consequence, some regard Buddhism as pessimistic. While duhkha certainly embraces the ordinary meaning of ‘suffering’, it also includes deeper concepts such as impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, and may be better left untranslated.

Keown 2003 p 81

We all live with the knowledge that we are born, and that sooner or later we will die. Loss is inevitable. Our brains are wired in such a way that we feel at times physical pain and / or emotional pain³.

The causes of duhkha are many, and include: pain, separation, and our assumption that we have (are) a permanent, separate, self. Actually, we are “empty” of such a separate self. Rather, we are intimately inter-related with plants; with our family; society; our own sun; clouds; the earth; our atmosphere; and the whole cosmos – the large atoms that make up our bodies were formed in giant hot stars vaster than our sun (Bizony 2007 p 193). These atoms include oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, sulphur, sodium and magnesium, iron and copper⁴. Consider this:

The atoms that constitute these substances (oxygen, carbon etc...) were created not in our sun but by other stars long since dead..... They are not our atoms. They do not belong to us, nor to our bodies. They are just passing through. Every moment of our lives, we exhale carbon dioxide. The atoms in that gas have existed for billions of years already, and they will continue to exist for billions of years more after we are gone; in soil, in leaves, in dogs, in cats, in flowers, and in the air breathed by our descendants.

Bizony 2007 p 193

Thus our being is intimately linked with all that has been and all that is yet to come.

3. Inter-relatedness

So we are intimately linked with the cosmos, from the smallest subatomic particles within us to the vastness of the cosmos. We are part of that cosmos, and all that is within it. We could call this the vertical linkage to matter. We are of course also linked to our own memories of our childhood and past; and to our

² This may seem an extreme statement. Yet consider: a mother whose child dies; those suffering intractable pain and / or illness; those whose brain no longer works.

³ Our original emotional pain, in evolutionary terms, is probably Separation Anxiety (See Panksepp 1998; Sunderland 2007 – e.g. pp 24-25).

⁴ Elements heavier than iron are created “extremely rapidly” in the supernova explosion at the end of a star's life (Bizony 2007 p 176).

hopes / dreams about the future: we could call this the horizontal axis. These two dimensions are represented schematically in figure 1⁵.

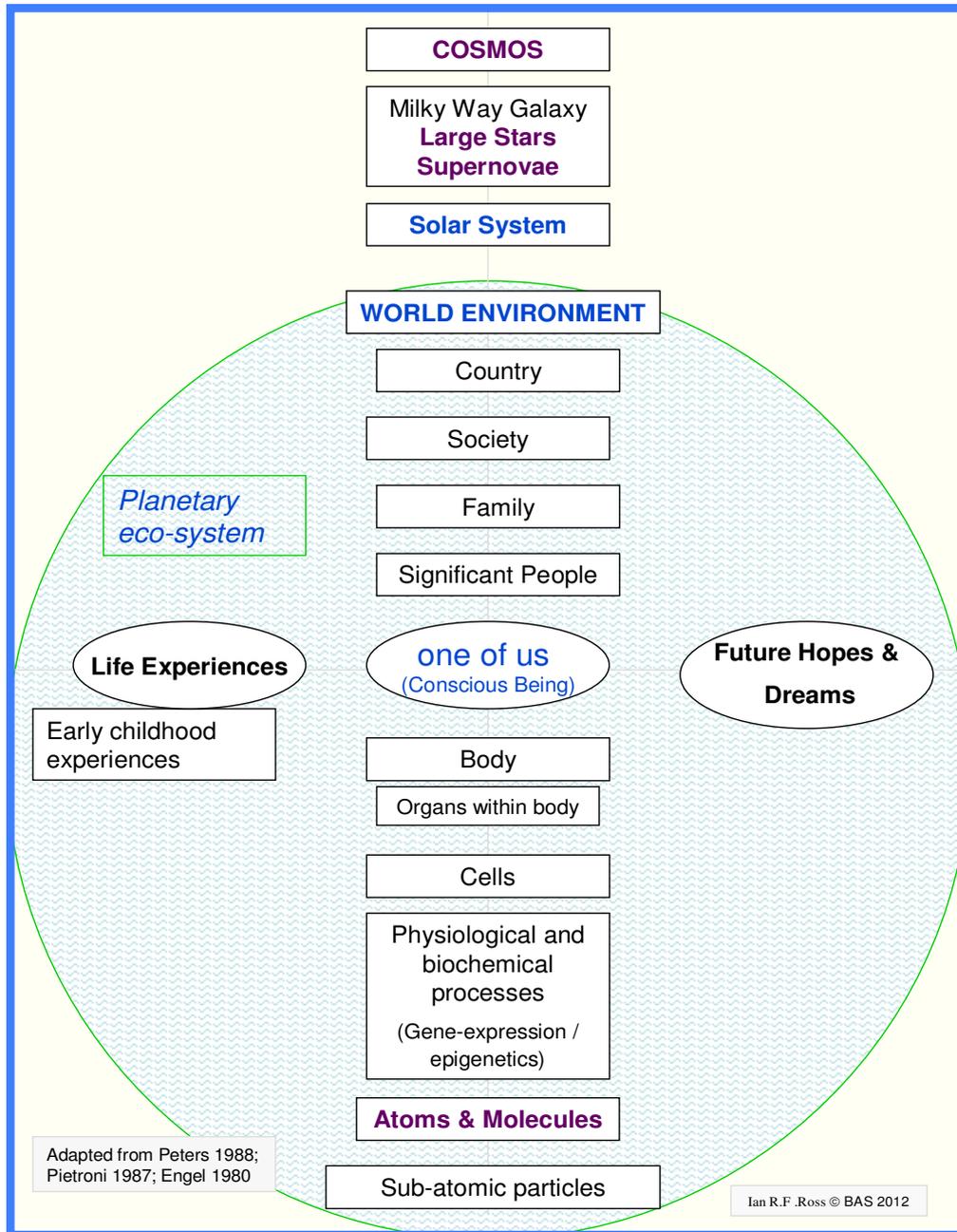


Figure 1
Inter-relatedness

Comments on Figure 1 /

⁵ The origins of Figure 1 go back, for me, to the Holistic Medical Journal and an article by Peters "What is Holistic Medicine" (1988), which itself emerged from the work of Pietroni (1987) and Engel (1981) – among others. The feeling of the inter-relatedness of all things was beautifully expressed by Pietroni in his paper: 'The meaning of illness – *holism dissected*' in which he says: "In the space / time / energy mode of medicine, we are seen to live in a participatory world, all taking part in a universal conga. Your illness is my illness, your health is my health, and conversely, my health may be at the expense of your illness and vice versa" (Pietroni 1987 p 359).

Comments on Figure 11. From human to the subatomic level:

- An individual human being is represented at the centre as “one of us”; i.e. a conscious manifestation of the cosmos.
- We are each made up of a body, organs within that body, cells; and so right down to molecules and atoms and sub-atomic particles.
- Most of the atoms within us (excepting hydrogen) were made up in vast stars (ten or more times bigger than our sun) that produced the temperatures necessary to fuse hydrogen into helium and then larger atoms such as carbon and iron. This was first worked out theoretically by the astronomer Fred Hoyle (Bizony 2007 p 174).
- This process of atom formation is hastened in the death throes of these large stars when they explode into supernovae, thus creating even higher temperatures – and in particular this allows elements heavier than iron to be created very rapidly (again Bizony 2007 p 176).
- Hence the mirroring of colour in Figure 1 of atoms and large stars / supernovae.

2. From human to the cosmos

- As human beings, we relate to those close to us – here initially notated as “significant people” – who may or may not be family members.
- We are also of course members of our society..... The vertical axis goes on up to embrace the environment we all depend upon, our sun and our whole solar system, and eventually to other galaxies and the totality of the cosmos.

3. The horizontal axis

- This depicts our previous life experiences – going back to childhood and pre-natally; our parents and on back to our ancient ancestors and the beginnings of evolution (see below).
- Our hopes, expectations, and dreams regarding the future.

4. Our Ancestors

- We are only alive as a result of our parents – and their parents and grand-parents going back to the dawn of life on earth.
- This ancestral history is not explicitly indicated in the diagram, and will include archetypes.
- Note that the genes we inherit from our parents may or may not be expressed; this is dependent upon our early experiences and environment – including our intra-uterine existence. This is the field of epigenetics.

5. Eco-system

- Human society has evolved within a delicate and balanced ecosystem.
- We are immersed and enmeshed within this system – as implied in Figure 1.
- If the ecosystem collapses, so do we.

In the light of Figure 1, we can begin to see that it is an illusion to think of ourselves as individual separate beings; we are inter-linked to the whole history of the cosmos; without those vast stars creating vast temperatures the iron in our blood could not have been created. In the light of the fact of our existence being dependent upon all our ancestors, the ecosystem, and ancient stars, we can begin to see that we ‘inter-are’ (Hanh 1998 pp 221-222).

In cognitive terms the above is fairly obvious; and yet it is very easy for us to be blinded by cultural and ego conditioning. On “Thought for Today” on BBC Radio 4 the other morning, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, the speaker, mentioned that he has recently been in Georgia (in the Caucasus) with a friend on his birthday. They were visiting local people and a toast was offered to him for his birthday; this was then followed by a toast to his parents, then to all parents, and then to all our ancestors. From a very young age, simply our birthdays can be conditioning us to either an ego-centric or allo-centric perspective (see below: Allos is Greek for Other – Austin 2011 p 71).

4. Duhkha and Sukha

In contrast to duhkha, sukha is the Sanskrit and Pali term for well-being and “enduring happiness” (Ekman et al 2005; see also A3). In Buddhist psychology / philosophy, some emotions⁶ are regarded as inherently toxic; others as neutral; and a third group as positive and facilitating well-being. Sukha is associated with this group of “well-being-related” emotions / mental states (Ekman et al 2005).

The construct of sukha includes:

.....a deep sense of well-being, a propensity toward compassion, reduced vulnerability to outside circumstances, and recognition of the interconnectedness with people and other living beings in one’s environment.

Ekman et al 2005 p 61

The development of sukha can be greatly facilitated by meditative practices including Mindfulness Stress Reduction programmes (e.g. Kabat-Zinn 1990) and Autogenic Training. Now this sukha, this state of well-being, “is not contingent on the presence of pleasure stimuli, either external or internal” (Wallace & Shapiro 2006, citing Wallace 1999). This seems reasonable: we can have inner calm, inner equanimity, independent of whether there are pleasant stimuli. Can we have sukha and equanimity when we are going through phases of profound loss?⁷ Before we discuss this question, it is salutary to consider briefly some of the neurophysiological changes that can occur: one of the facts of the loss of, for example, our partner / spouse – is the loss of intimacy and close physical contact. One of the physiological consequences of this can be a reduction in oxytocin and endorphins – and this can have a profound and negative effect on our well being (see, for example, Sunderland 2007 pp 183-214 in the context of ‘The Chemistry of Love’). In effect, our normal healthy underlying physiological milieu collapses.

Returning to the question of whether we can have sukha and equanimity concurrently with profound loss: perhaps we can.

Equanimity

Equanimity is a key concept in Buddhist psychology. The Collins English Dictionary defines equanimity as: “calmness of mind or temper; composure” (CED 2011). In the context of impermanence, loss, and dukkha, I have found the following perspective helpful:

Equanimity: an ability to observe in a non-judgemental way without reacting on an emotional or conditional response level. With practice – through AT, mindfulness meditation or other techniques – we learn to observe with complete equanimity. Through equanimity there is an acceptance of impermanence.

McLellan 2012

⁶ Note that in the Buddhist languages of Sanskrit, Pali, and Tibetan, there is no word for “emotion”. Ekman comments: “..... the fact that there is no term in Buddhism for emotion is quite consistent with what scientists have come to learn about the anatomy of the brain. Every region of the brain that has been identified with some aspect of emotion has also been identified with some aspect of cognition (e.g. Davidson & Irwin 1999). The circuitry that supports affect and the circuitry that supports cognition are completely intertwined – an anatomical arrangement consistent with the Buddhist view that these processes cannot be separated” (Ekman et al 2005 p 59. Also see: Davidson 2000; Phan 2002).

⁷ I am not sure about this. It seems to me that if we have had a close meaningful relationship with A.N. Other for say decades, then our neuro-physiologies have become inter-related and attuned. If one partner dies, this linked neuro-physiology and wholeness becomes broken. This causes deep grief and suffering. This is part of duhkha. We can only start on our grieving path back toward wholeness by first accepting the fact of the loss**, of impermanence; that this miraculous being that we were so close to no longer is. We are like the lilies of the valley; we are for a blink in cosmic time, and then return to Mother Earth.

**That is, accepting the loss as loss.

This means that while we are experiencing the pain and upset, we are also noticing and observing the pain and loss in a way comparable to being the witness to, for example, “My Solar Plexus is Warm”. And we do this mindfully; non judgementally. Equanimity does not mean that we do not experience distressing feelings, but rather that we are able to observe them and see them in the wider context of the on-going dance of life and death in an impermanent world and cosmos.

Mudita / Sympathetic Joy

Part of the pain of dukkha is to do with us being rooted in the belief that we have a separate permanent self – separate from all other beings. Our Ego tends to look at matters from a very Ego-bound perspective, and this distorts our perceptions. As already discussed, all beings, all things, are inter-related. As we, through mindful practice, allow our ego-bound-self to dissolve, we can experience mudita, sympathetic joy. Mudita reflects the joy⁸ when we embrace other people’s happiness / well being – that is: “the pleasure that comes from delighting in other people’s well-being rather than begrudging it.”⁹ (Wikipedia on Mudita, paraphrasing: Salzberg 1995, Chapter 8). For example, the joy a parent may have at seeing their child swim a whole length in a swimming pool for the first time, or become independent and leave home.

In our ego-bound state, we can easily be jealous / envious of other people’s good fortune. Yet this is absurd. Do we actually want other people to suffer, other people to have pain, other people not to experience joy? I have found reading Sharon Salzberg’s Chapter 8 very liberating; it allowed me to come to a painful – yet helpful – realisation that at times I have not been able to enter and share another person’s joy wholesomely. The other day a carer commented to me that she was just going to see her second grandchild who had been born two days before – and I was really delighted for her. Previously I think I would have held back. A few days later I was walking down to the shops and a flock of birds flew over – in a purposeful sort of way with a feeling that they were enjoying being aloft on that summer’s morning: this lifted me – metaphorically! – as I felt in some real sense able to share in their joy of being alive.

Mudita means that we no longer need to be bound and limited by our own sorrow and loss. We can share in the joy of others, of nature, and of the stars.

It is as though all of a sudden there are many wonderful joys in life that have been passing us by, are free, and we can now share and be part of.

All human beings seek happiness / Well Being – and if we can let go of our ego-bound-self, and allow our mindful-compassionate-self to flow, then we can rejoice in the happiness of others – and thus add to the total of human positivity (Fredrickson 2009). This means that whatever befalls us, we can still be in a mental state that is joyful and glad when others experience happiness / good fortune / Well Being.

We cannot avoid the storms and traumas of life, yet we can develop mindfulness (D1) and the ability to remain firmly rooted in the present moment whatever happens to us, to those we love, and to our world. As I write this, I hear the wind in the trees and see big white billowing clouds to the north as a fore-drop to the blue sky. Present Moment, Wonderful Moment (Hanh 1993).

So even with profound loss, we still have the potential each day to be in the present moment, and so be in awe of the very fact of existence. This is the experiential mode / mind-body state (B11).

⁸ Sympathetic Joy – Keown 2003 p 181.

⁹ When I came across Salzberg’s perspective on Mudita, I was greatly moved by it – and it also brought to mind the negative feelings we can have as humans such as Schadenfreude (German): “pleasure derived from the misfortunes of others” (Wikipedia 2 2012). Schadenfreude is a toxic feeling, while Mudita is a great antidote to negative affect. Note also that tender and caring feelings to others can be associated with the release of oxytocin in both ourselves and the other (Panksepp 1998; Sunderland 2006 / 2007).

5. The toxic trio (this section is based mainly on the perspective of Ekman et al 2005)

As mentioned already, some emotions in Buddhist psychology are regarded as inherently toxic. This is in contrast to western psychology's philosophy which sees all emotions in terms of evolutionary theory – and thus that each emotion has had an adaptive value. Perhaps the wise response to the diverging perspectives is to accept both as being valid within their own contextual framework¹⁰.

The toxic trio comprise:

- i. Craving: That is, a desire for something that we have not got – and also a desire to keep what we have got.

- A feature of craving is to exaggerate the good aspects of what we want, and neglect what may be negative or destructive.
- “Craving is concerned with acquiring or maintaining some desirable object or situation for ‘me’ and ‘mine’, which may be threatened by ‘the other’ ” (Ekman et al 2005).
- Craving is rooted in a belief in a separate permanent self (see iii. below).
- Craving may be based on a dysfunctional Life Position in which we discount the other’ (“I’m OK; You’re not OK” in Transactional Analysis terminology – also notated as I+; U-; and possibly also I-; U+).

- ii. Hatred / Ill will towards others: In some ways hatred / ill will towards others is the reverse of craving.

- Here, we exaggerate the negative aspects of the other, and deny the positive.
- We become resentful of others:

When the mind is obsessed with resentment, it is trapped in the deluded impression that the source of its dissatisfaction belongs entirely to the external object (just as in the case of craving, the mind locates the source of satisfaction in desirable objects). But even though the trigger of one's resentment may be the external object, the actual source of this and all other kinds of distress is in the mind alone.

Ekman et al 2005 p 60

- “The actual source of this and all other kinds of distress is the mind alone”. If it is the mind alone, then we have the potential to settle the mind by mental training.

- iii. Belief that we are a separate self (in an Ego-centric sense) and this gives us a right to do as we please regardless of others. Ego is here linked to dysfunctional Life Positions such as I+; U- (see next section).

¹⁰ Having said that, it seems to me that the toxic trio are toxic in that they are negative neo-cortical elaborations of our primary process emotions (the seven basic Emotional Operating Neural Circuits / systems [EONS] that we share with mammals – see Panksepp 1998; Panksepp and Biven 2012; and B3 Part I & Part II of this series). The EONS themselves are not toxic.

The third, most fundamental affliction of the mind is the delusion of grasping onto one's own and others' reified personal identities as real and concrete. According to Buddhism, the self is constantly in a state of dynamic flux, arises in different ways, and is profoundly inter-dependent with other people and the environment.

Ekman et al 2005 p 61

- Whatever we may feel about the first sentence quoted above, the second sentence is a profound truth.

The toxic trio all stem from an inappropriate (and false) sense of self and ego as they are all caught up within an ego-centric perspective that is divorced from a true awareness of the inter-relatedness of all. The malignant trio can begin to be dissolved when we develop a more other-centre, allo-centric, perspective (Austin 2012; and see section 8 below).

The toxic trio and Emotional Operating Neuro Circuits (Systems – EONS)

Craving can be considered as a dysfunctional aspect, neuro-physiologically speaking, of the SEEKING system (Panksepp 1998; B3). Human societies developed through cooperation, and the SEEKING system helped societies to survive with its motivational circuits to find shelter, food, companionship, and meaning. It can become a dangerous system if it is hijacked by Ego, in which “me” and “my” and “mine” concepts come to dominate. In Transactional Analysis terms it may be related to the Life Position: I'm OK; You're not OK [I+; U-] (Stewart & Joines 1987).

Hatred and ill-will towards others have their origins in the FEAR and RAGE circuits (Panksepp 1998; B3). In evolutionary terms, the FEAR and RAGE circuits helped communities to protect themselves from threats such as bears and tigers. Hatred and ill-will towards others is related to Ego and is the antithesis of an allo-centric orientation. As Figure 1 makes clear, we are actually inter-related to everything else. As with craving, hatred and ill will towards others is linked to a dysfunctional Life Position: I+; U-; or I-; U-; or I-; U+.

Note also that the fight / flight response may at least partially be a reflection of the toxic trio. As highlighted in A1 of this series, the “Tend and Befriend” response to danger has also been crucial in our evolutionary development (e.g. Sapolsky 2007 p 608). The “Tend and Befriend” response reflects an awareness of our inter-dependence and inter-relatedness.

The toxic trio and our world

The toxic trio are all interlinked, and, as indicated above, can be very damaging for the individual, his or her family, and each community. Craving in particular is a feature of present day Western Consumer society; it is one of the roots of global warming (e.g. Speth 2008; pp x & xi).

6. Loss, oxytocin, bereavement, and suffering

As mentioned elsewhere in this series, stress, properly regarded, is a physiological-whole-body-state [PWBS] (Epel 2011). In the same way, it seems to me that loss and bereavement can be regarded as “physiological-whole-body-states”. Those suffering from loss and / or bereavement may experience days,

weeks, or months of a sort of flat-emotionless-state permeated with meaninglessness, which certainly feels like a PWBS. Other negative PWBS include clinical depression (see also B11).

While the suffering of profound loss stems in part from our underlying assumptions about permanence (i.e. the denial of impermanence), this is not the entire picture. In a close relationship, there is an ongoing neuro-physiological bio-dance between the two partners that embraces love, nurturing, CARE, SEEKING, and PLAY neuro-circuits – that can sustain both members of the couple in Well Being. This sustaining positive neuro-physiology is ruptured in loss / death¹¹. For example, oxytocin is a significant informational substance underpinning such close relationships: the loss of the loved one will axiomatically be linked to a decrease in oxytocin secretion (producing a hypo-oxytocin state), thus adding to the negative PWBS.

7. Transforming Duhkha with Mindfulness and Meditation

Mindfulness and Duhkha

Sakyamuni suggested that there is a way to reduce dukkha¹², to reduce this unsatisfactoriness, which is outlined in his Eightfold Path (Hanh 1998 – e.g. pp 9-11; and the whole book). Mindfulness is one of these eight paths (see D1 and D5). Mindfulness, in the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn, has been described as “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994 p 4). Being present, in the present moment, can itself off-set dukkha.

Hewig’s 2010 fMRI research on thinking cf. feeling

In a recent paper by Hewig (Hewig et al 2010), brain activity was monitored in subjects who were asked to focus on thinking, feeling, or a neutral state while undergoing an fMRI. These three states are summarised below:

- Thinking condition: “Think about yourself, reflect who you are, about your goals etc”.
- Feel condition: “Feel yourself (i.e. experience how you are feeling at this moment – IR), be aware about your current emotions and bodily feelings”.
- Neutral condition: “Do nothing specific, just await....” (until the experiment is over).

Quotes from
Hewig et al
2010 p 735

Their research suggests that focusing on an emotion being experienced in this present moment, non judgementally, reduces amygdala activity; whereas the thinking arm of the study was associated with increased amygdala activity (Hewig et al 2010 p 736). The neuro-physiology of these findings overlap, to some extent, with that of affect labelling (see B12 Figure 6 in this series), and are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

¹¹ There seems to be a bit of a conundrum here: if we open ourselves up to tenderness, love, and nurturing then this can be seen as a reflection of our Authentic Self. Allowing ourselves to be open to the magic and otherness of the other means, I think, that we are opening ourselves to the vulnerability and pain of loss / dukkha when it comes – however much we may feel we understand the nature of impermanence. [I wrote this foot note before I added to Section 4 (Duhkha and Sukha) the comments on Equanimity and Mudita. Perhaps if we are no longer ego-bound, then, though we will still experience pain and loss, we can face these with equanimity.]

¹² Note that Sakyamuni did not say that dukkha is itself an illusion: rather, he accepted it as part of the human experience. He went on to suggest ways of off-setting dukkha, and commented that part of the problem is that we have a distorted view of reality in which we can become locked into an ego-centric as opposed to an allo-centric perspective.

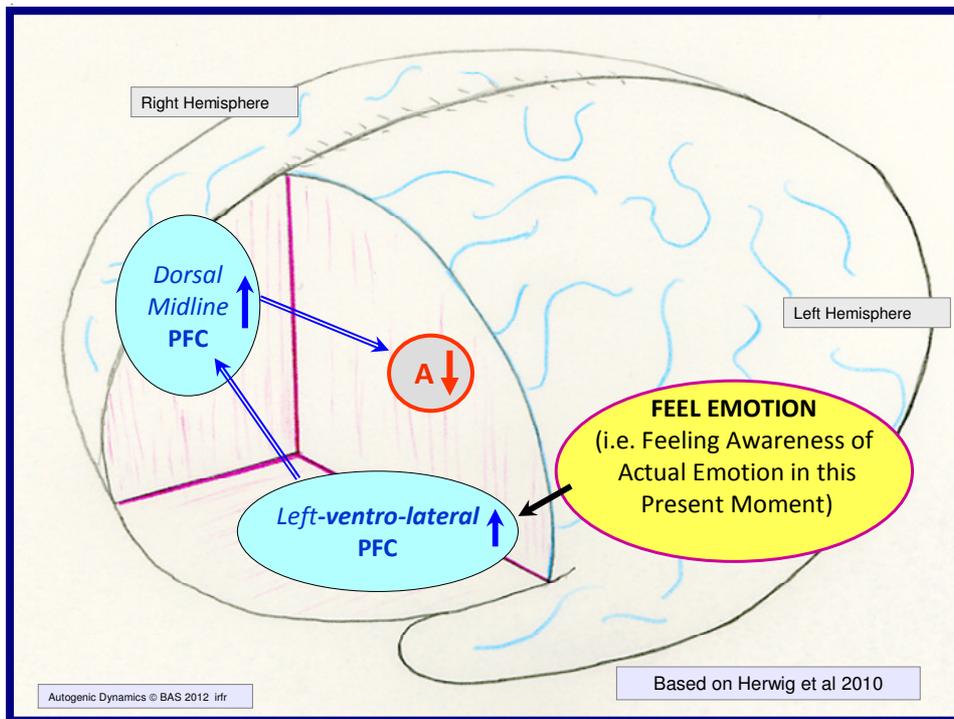


Figure 2

Feeling the emotion in this Present Moment and associated brain activity

Schematic representation of the pathways involved when we feel an emotion.
[Model suggested by the work of Herwig et al 2010]

Comments on Figure 2 /

Comments on Figure 2 and Herwig's research

- i. PFC: Pre Frontal Cortex.
- ii. Reflective thinking, and Feeling the emotion being experienced at this moment, were both associated with increased activity of the Left-ventro-lateral Pre Frontal Cortex and the Dorsal Midline (medial) Pre Frontal Cortex¹³. [Note that only the pathways when we Feel an Emotion are shown; those of reflective thinking are not shown in Figure 2]
- iii. Amygdala activity was only reduced in those feeling the emotion.
- iv. In the cognitive-thinking (reflective) group, by contrast, amygdala activity was increased.
 - This implies that ruminations (e.g. when we are anxious and / or depressed) will tend to make us feel worse as it is associated with increased fear / negative emotions / depression (see also Herwig et al 2010 p 740).
- v. The pathways from the (subjective) emotional feeling to the left ventro lateral PFC and thence to the midline PFC and then to the amygdala shown in the diagram is a suggested pathway – based on previous research on extinction and re-appraisal (Gross 2002; Delgado et al 2008; and see also Ross 2010 p 211). [There does not appear to be a direct connection between the ventro lateral PFC and the amygdala.]
- vi. Reduced amygdala activity is indicative of reduced negative emotions – and thus of a reduction of suffering / dukkha¹⁴.
- vii. The dorsal midline PFC appears to be the crucial final PFC area for modulating emotions – for example, in reducing fears / anxiety by reducing amygdala activity.

Feeling the emotion brings about changes in our neuro-physiology. In the context of Autogenic Training, Schultz described this in terms of a 'psycho-physiological shift' (Schultz / Luthe 1969 page 1); these days such a shift is often put in terms of change in neuro-physiology; which of course brings about a psycho / affect shift. (Formulated with Sue McLellan during discussion in Melrose, 21.08.2012).

¹³ But note that the specific areas involved were somewhat different in the two groups (Herwig et al 2010 p 736).

¹⁴ Amygdala activity is complex. Classically, it shows increased activity in distressing emotions such as fear (LeDoux 2000); but it also shows increased activity in "reward related processing" (Herwig et al 2010 p 737, quoting Synofzik et al 2008).

Brain research has developed enormously during the last two decades, and is likely to continue to develop at a fast rate: the above analysis is based on one paper – but other papers have shown comparable results. The three extracts below from Herwig’s paper give a flavour of the author’s perspective:

-our finding implicates the ability to attenuate emotional arousal related brain activation through the mental process of directing attention and awareness to actual emotions and bodily feelings, notably without the conscious intention to regulate the emotions.

This implies going with the flow of the feeling in an accepting and non-striving way.

- Making oneself aware of how one feels may lead to an inner distancing from these feelings and thus may represent an important strategy for the self-regulation of emotions.

Such self-regulation of emotions has the potential to reduce dukkha.

- A practical implication is to regulate emotions by non-judgementally making them aware, an intervention which can be applied in each present moment.

Herwig et al 2010; i. & ii p 738; iii. P 740

A recurring theme of Herwig’s study was the non-judgemental, non-striving, and present moment orientated aspect of the ‘Feeling the Emotion’ (arm of the study). These are crucial aspects of mindfulness (D1). Autogenic Training is good practice for dealing with distressing emotions. In the Standard Exercises, we focus, for example, on “My Left Arm is Heavy”: if it feels heavy, that is fine; and if it does not feel heavy, that is fine. We observe / witness whatever is at that moment in our arm – essentially as a mindful observer. [This is essentially an Experiential mode, as opposed to the Analytical-Ruminative Mode which is associated with a potentially toxic hyper-vigilant state – see Dobbin & Ross 2012.] Mode Our practice is to focus our attention on the arm / formula in the present moment in a non-striving and non-judgemental way – that embraces Herwig’s approach to dealing with our present moment feelings. Such focused attention in each Standard Exercise, it is suggested, overlaps with Calm Abiding Meditation (see below). The observer role allows us to develop an allo-centric rather than ego-bound perspective¹⁵.

Depression, Well Being, and Mindfulness

Research over the last couple of decades suggests that:

- Depression is associated with reduced Mindfulness and
- Increased Mindfulness is associated with a reduction in depression (Herwig et al 2010; Teasdale et al 1999; Segal et al 2002).
- Increased Mindfulness is, per se, associated with increased Well Being (Kabat-Zinn 1990; and also see A3 in this series – “Towards a concept of happiness and well-being”).

Autogenic Training lays good foundations for Mindfulness.

Meditation and Dukkha

Many traditions embrace some form of Meditation as being central to facilitating well-being for the community as well as the individual. As described elsewhere in this series (C10 & D6), there are two fundamental forms of meditation:

- Calm Abiding Meditation (Samatha – *Sanskrit*) and
- Insight Meditation (Vipasyana – *Sanskrit*)

¹⁵ This is also reflected in Rumi’s poem, the Guest House (Rumi /Coleman 1995; and also see Ross 2010 p 212).

Autogenic Training, and especially advanced Autogenic Training¹⁶, embraces both of these forms (Sinclair McLennan 2006).

Meditation facilitates the development of Mindfulness – for example, in allowing us to become more accepting and less striving. Distressing and negative affect has been linked to increased activity of the Right Frontal Cortex on EEG (Goleman 2003 p 12; Davidson 2003B; p 194; 335; 338-340). Meditation, on the other hand, has been shown to increase Left Frontal Lobe EEG activity (Davidson 2003A) which facilitates positive emotions (such as nurturing and CARE circuits), while at the same time reducing negative / disturbing affect.

In summary, meditation can act as an anti-dote to negative emotions such as FEAR, RAGE, and feelings of ill-will towards others. (See B5 in this series for a brief summary of these matters including three illustrations; and also Ross 2010 pp 147-149).

8. Allocentric modalities and Insight Meditation

In Zen¹⁷ practice, James Austin (2012) implies that while Calm Abiding meditation is a vital skill, it can also be seen in terms of a required stepping stone towards Insight Meditation. In such Calm Abiding meditation we focus internally on the present state of the body / mind and /or, for example, counting the breaths. This has been shown to induce the Relaxation Response (e.g. Benson 1975), and is an essential prerequisite for any form of Mental Training for equanimity; in particular, distressed mental states – which include the hyper-vigilant states that are associated with a negative interpretation bias (e.g. seeing a smiling face as an angry face) – can be dissipated by such (Mental Training) Practices (Dobbin & S. Ross 2012; also see B10 & B11 in this series).

On the other hand, Austin suggests that focusing on what is close to us, and within our “grasp”, can be unhealthy if it leads to increasingly focusing on “me and mine” modalities in an ego-centric way¹⁸. Indeed, this can result in an increased activation in what he describes as “egocentric processing streams” (Austin 2012 pp 66 - 67).

In Insight Meditation, our eyes are (metaphorically and sometimes actually) lifted up to the hills, the sky, and the cosmos. Such meditation is in essence Receptive (Austin 2012 p 71). The other morning toward the end of a meditation I looked up and out of the window – and became aware of a foxglove gently swaying in the breeze. That foxglove today is, yet in a few tomorrows will be no more: it came into being as the result of a seed falling onto the ground two years ago¹⁹. That seed was the catalyst for the miracle of the foxglove, yet that material presence of the foxglove outside the window is only partially due to its DNA: without the soil, the rain, the air and the sun, it could not be; nor could it be without atoms that were forged in super-stars eons ago. If the seed is left in a dry box, or sent into Space, it will remain as a collection of inert atoms and molecules divorced from its potential. Reflection allows us to see into and beyond the present – as well as back to the past. All present moments are impermanent; if we miss this present moment, it is lost from conscious awareness for all time. Present Moment awareness can in itself act as an antidote to existential suffering, and gives us an allocentric perspective that can in be life enhancing (Greek allos = other; Austin 2012). Herwig’s 2010 study described above is in essence doing just this: the subjects

¹⁶ Such as the Meditative Exercises (Luthe & Schultz 1969 pp 142 – 174; Linden 1990 pp 60 – 65).

¹⁷ “Zen: A form of Mahayana Buddhism which emphasises a systematic approach to meditative training and spiritual growth. Its two major schools, Rinzai and Soto, were imported from China and developed in Japan during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.” (Austin 2006 p 474)

¹⁸ Austin is here talking in the context of Zen and our life journey. In the context of a nurturing mother gazing down at her child, the conceptualisation of me and “my child” can be entirely appropriate and healthy. Positive mother-child interactions will be stimulating the mother’s CARE circuits, and laying the foundations for her child to develop his or her own CARE (and SEEKING & PLAY) circuits (Panksepp 1998; Sunderland 2007; and B3 Part I and Part II in this series).

¹⁹ A foxglove being a biennial: thanks to Annie Sturgeon for this floral information.

that focused on their feelings (whether positive, negative, or neutral), had reduced amygdala activity – and thus reduced suffering in the context of, for example, fears / anxiety / sorrow / loss.

Mindful awareness (D1) implies being Mindful of others, of nature, of our environment (including the world environment) and the cosmos that gave us life. This is an allo-centric perspective. Insight Meditation can foster such an allocentric perspective, and this awareness of the inter-relatedness of all things can act as an anti-dote to the toxic trio, and at the same time can give our lives a new sense of meaning. Extensive and prolonged meditative practices can, according to Austin, lead to fundamental changes in some of our neuro-circuits that result in a permanent change from the “Me-Mine-Ego-Duhkha” modality to an all-embracing allocentric perspective (Austin 2012 pp 71-72).

9. Some concluding comments

If we look at life in some ways, we may become despondent and become immersed in negative ruminations and dukkha – in the suffering and “unsatisfactory” nature of life – in the sense that: we get old, may become ill, our beloved may die; and the knowledge that sooner or later we all must die.

Part of this suffering, this dukkha, is the result of a misperception of reality.

- As we grow up, we may assume that our life is permanent – that nature is permanent. Actually, there is nothing permanent in the cosmos.
- Linked to this is the idea that we have a permanent and separate self. Actually, we are inter-related and inter-dependent upon everything. The atoms that compose our bodies come from stars; the oxygen that we breathe in from the atmosphere comes from stars. We inter-are.
- Ego and craving are linked, and do not lead to happiness; rather, they lead to feelings of dissatisfaction which then leads to more craving.
- Happiness is not an individual matter; well-being is perhaps a more wholesome concept (See A3 in this series; and also Pietroni 1988; Bohm 1980).
- Skilful approaches to life were proposed by Sakyamuni: he suggested that we try them: and we continue with those that we find are of help / benefit. These may include: regular meditation-type disciplines; Mindful Approaches (D1); Dana Paramita (D2); “Watering each other’s positive seeds” D3; and Seven Mindfulness Practices (D5).
- Recent research has shown that regular meditative-type practices are associated with changes in the middle pre-frontal cortex, with associated benefits to the individual and society (Siegel 2007; 2010; C2).
- Such practice can help us become Awake to the true nature of reality and the inter-dependent nature of our existence.

This review suggests that in the various forms of Mindfulness Training, including Autogenic Training, there are at least two distinct processes going on. The mental exercises involved in Mental Training change our brains – our neurophysiology in the direction of increasing positive affect and reducing negative affect; this then forms a sound basis for the development of Mindfulness and some of the more cognitive aspects of personal transformation.

Further aspects on the theme of dukkha are discussed on web-pages D8 and D9.

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²⁰ No relation to Ian Ross

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[Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section /](#)

Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

A1	The Stress Response, the Relaxation Response, and the Tend and Befriend Response.
A3	Towards a concept of happiness and well-being
B1	Bears, Imagination, and Well-Being
B3	Part I: The origins of Affect and Affective Neuro-science
B3	Part 2: Emotional Operating Neuro Circuits – <i>a brief introduction to Panksepp’s model</i>
B5	Emotions, Frontal Lobe Dynamics, and Autogenic Training
B6	Perceptions, Flowers, and Reality
B10	Snakes, Conditioned Stimuli, and Equanimity
B11	Distressed Mind-Body-States to Inner Tranquillity – <i>from Negative Ruminations towards Well-Being</i>
B12	Affect Labelling, AT, and reducing Emotional Distress
C2	Mindsight – <i>our seventh sense and associated pre-frontal cortex functions</i>
C10	Autogenic Training, Insight Meditation and Mindful Awareness
D1	Reflections on foundations for mindful living
D2	Dana Paramita
D3	Store Consciousness and Watering our Positive
D5	Seven Practices of Mindfulness
D6	Autogenic Training, Mindfulness, and two Fundamental Forms of Meditation
D8	Duhkha II – <i>one or two arrows?</i>
D9	Duhkha III – <i>reducing duhkha, and implicit / intuitive working memory</i>

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Post Script on Figure 1

In general terms, we can regard the horizontal axis in Figure 1 as to do with the Personal domain of each of us. The vertical axis, on the other hand, resonates with the Universal domain²¹. The Personal domain can be equated with the Buddhist concept of Form (matter, the material world, each me), while the Universal domain can be equated with the concept of Emptiness: that is, we are empty of a permanent, separate self / existence (Kornfield 2008 pp79-92); everything in the cosmos is interlinked with everything else.

This morning, at dawn, I went for a walk on the beach: I was aware of the wind ruffling my face and hair; near by, three gulls and a crow were facing into the same wind, their faces / feathers also being ruffled by the bracing wind – thus all four of us experienced a special sharing: the Personal becoming Universal.

When we experience loss, bereavement, or joy, this is within the personal domain: yet, at the same time, we can see our loss, our bereavement, our joy in terms of universal experiences of all humans going back for millennia (see also Patrick Pietroni’s comment in foot note 5 on page 4); in this reframing, we are moving from Personal suffering to a sharing of our common humanity. Mindfulness involves embracing both the Personal and the Universal. Sympathetic Joy, the ability to take delight in another’s happiness / joy, also reflects the Universal (Salzberg 1995 Ch 8).

²¹ The Personal and Universal, in this context, have sometimes been mistranslated as the Absolute and the Relative; this is incorrect and gives the impression that one is more important than the other (Kornfield 2008 p 80). It would be more accurate to compare the Personal & Universal with concepts such as Yin and Yang; both complement each other – they are co-dependent / co-arising.