



Mindful Decision-Making

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Who makes the decisions – you or the mind

Reflection

Please bring to mind a recent experience when it was very stressful to make a decision about something. What were the circumstances? What were you feeling in the body and what thoughts kept arising?

Decisions

A decision is defined as a conclusion or resolution reached after consideration. Note that consideration is not defined. This will be explored further.

What prompts a decision?

The answer is causes and conditions. The truth is that everything happens because of multiple causes and conditions. So, something happens, and you feel that you have to make a decision to resolve the issue. For example, you feel hungry and need to make a decision about what to eat. Or your car is getting older, and you feel that you need to decide what to do such as buying a new vehicle. Or you are having an exam coming up and you need to decide how much to study. Or you are having a relationship that is going south and you are trying to decide what to do about it.

We often don't realize that causes and conditions prompt us to decide something. Instead, we take the need to decide for granted and then we feel stressed because either we can't decide, we fear we will make the wrong decision, we don't want to make a decision, or we feel pressured to decide.

Consideration

Going back to the example that you were reflecting on; what did you take into consideration and what sources did you use for your consideration? Did this include you, your mind, and/or anyone else? This is important because often we just let the mind make a recommendation and we automatically go along with it. The mind plays a big role because all experiences coming from causes and conditions go through the mind first and the mind then makes a prediction based on comparison with stored memories and beliefs. Then it is up to you to choose. But what are the other choices and how do they appear to you?

Let's take an example. You have a friend with whom you are finding more difficulty in dealing with them. The causes and conditions are at the point where you are unhappy with the relationship and a thought arises that that are unhappy with the relationship. The mind becomes conscious of this thought before you are aware of it. The mind then conditions this thought by identifying it as unhappiness with

this person and comparing this experience with the stored memories of this person and your beliefs on relationships. It then sends you communications via unpleasant bodily sensations and negative thoughts. In summary, the mind is sending you predictions that this relationship is making you unhappy. Because of the unpleasantness of the bodily sensations and thoughts, you may decide to end the relationship. So, you are acting only on the mind's prediction based only on past memories and beliefs. The mind is interested only in protecting you. It is not considering other aspects of the relationship which may be positive. The end result is that you may take action that, upon further reflection, you may come to regret.

The important point here is that you are letting the mind make the decision without full consideration. The problem is that when you feel the symptoms of stress, there is a tendency to ruminate, judge, and make decisions. All of these are focused on the current prediction, one option. There is a loss of perspective as if there were no other options.

How to deal with the mind

1. Realize that you are not the mind and that you can deal with it as if it were a person giving you a recommendation.
2. Be aware that you are not truly aware if you are:
 - a. Ruminating (mental proliferation)
without new data, this is useless
 - b. Judging that this is a bad situation because you didn't want to be in this position in the first place,
 - c. Making decisions
Without new data, this is also useless.

Just notice if you are doing any of the above. The seeing is the doing. Don't resist.

3. Calm the body with a mindful breath pause.
4. Choose to face the issue and move to silence where you are just listening and taking no actions.

How to practice the seeing is the doing

1. When you notice symptoms of unpleasant bodily sensations and unpleasant thoughts, you know that the mind is communicating its predictions with you.
2. Pause and, if time allows, take 5-6 slow deep inbreaths and outbreaths. This activates your parasympathetic nervous system and calms the body
3. Go to silence and be aware of your reaction to the symptoms. Being aware is just listening, not thinking, not resisting, not trying to make them go away.
4. Be open to what arises for you.

This practice allows you to see more clearly and gain perspective outside of what the mind is telling you. This is mindfulness in action. You are paying attention moment to moment to what is rather than automatically giving in to the mind.

Who is making decisions, you or the mind? Are you using the mind or is the mind using you? You decide!