



Overcoming unwholesome states of mind which have arisen

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Suffering is caused by the arising of unwholesome states of mind and it is critical that your effort be directed at overcoming them. Overcoming does not mean resisting as this will just entrench the unwholesome thoughts more. When you encounter yourself having an unpleasant feeling and/or suffering in the form of frustration, anger, inconvenience, dissatisfaction and or in general wanting life to be other than it is, you are having a **break in being**. You become “self” conscious focusing your attention on the “I” rather than flowing with life. When this occurs, it is time to be mindful and investigate (self-inquiry).

The way to overcome is to **apply mindfulness and investigate with energy**. This is practicing the first three steps (mindfulness, investigation, energy) of the seven factors of awakening which have been described earlier. These steps make it possible to experience joy, contentment and peace (equanimity).

It is beneficial to understand how we experience life as explained in [The Practice of Mindfulness: A Guide](#). The relevant section is included in the endnotes.¹

Begin by observing your breath for one or two minutes as in concentration practice, then either investigate by reflection or meditation. By being mindful (paying attention moment to moment to “what is”) you investigate the experience that triggered your suffering and the conditioning that followed.

Investigate these following questions about what you experienced. Avoid making judgments, commentary or decisions while you are investigating. Just be with the investigation and be persistent.

1. What was the **mental formation** that arose?

Mental formations are emotions such as anger, frustration, dissatisfaction.

2. What was **actually sensed**?

Moving back to the start, this is the experience that arose when your consciousness made contact with the sense base and the sense object. It is not the interpretation of the mind. This is the trigger that started the conditioning process.

3. What was the **feeling** like in the body?

A feelings is a bodily sensation, either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Where in the body did this feeling arise? How would you describe it? It is important to know how you experience the feeling as it serves as an early sign that an unpleasant state of mind has arisen.

4. What was your **perception** (assessment)?

The perception can be a mental impression and/or a prediction about what might happen in the future. For example, seeing a person with whom you have had conflicts might cause the mind to predict that the same thing will happen on this encounter.

5. Is this perception **true** or is this a story that comes from your memory and beliefs?

All perceptual predictions come from your memories and beliefs. They cannot accurately predict the future so that you always must be aware that there may be a different outcome.

6. Which of the five hindrances did this come from?

The five hindrances are desire, aversion, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and worry, and doubt.² Identifying the hindrance can direct you to a specific way to overcome the unwholesome state of mind. This is described in more detail in the [The Practice of Mindfulness: A Guide](#). The relevant section is included in the endnotes.³

7. Can you see that this suffering came from an **internal conditioning process** and not from the actual experience?

The results of this investigation will give you a better understanding of how your conditioning caused the mental formations to arise and possibly overcome the unwholesome state of mind. Even if it doesn't completely succeed, you will be much better prepared the next time this happens.

As De Mello states: *“Try it out now, identify the negative feeling that this event aroused in you. Was it anxiety or insecurity, jealousy or anger or guilt? What does that emotion say to you about yourself, your values, your way of perceiving the world and life and above all your programming and conditioning? If you succeed in discovering this, you will drop some illusion you have clung to till now, or you will change a distorted perception or correct a false belief or learn to distance yourself from your suffering, as you realize that it was caused by your programming and not by reality; and you will suddenly find that you are full of gratitude for those negative feelings and to that person or event that caused them”⁴*

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¹ How is life really experienced?

The Buddha described the process of how life is really experienced which shows that unconsciously we create our suffering. Today, scientists are confirming his findings through their investigations.

To begin, we have **six sense organs** (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind). These organs contact **sense objects** (tangible objects, visible objects, sounds, smells, tastes, and mental objects: thoughts/memories). This interaction is called **form**. All of our experiences come via one or more of these sense organs. However, although our sense organs are constantly sensing, we are not aware of this interaction until our **consciousness** makes contact with the sense organ and the object sensed. When all three factors are connected, we become **aware** of what we can call an experience.

The mind conditions that awareness by comparing it with stored **memories and beliefs**. Out of this comparison arise a series of three conditioning factors: **feelings, perceptions and mental formations**.

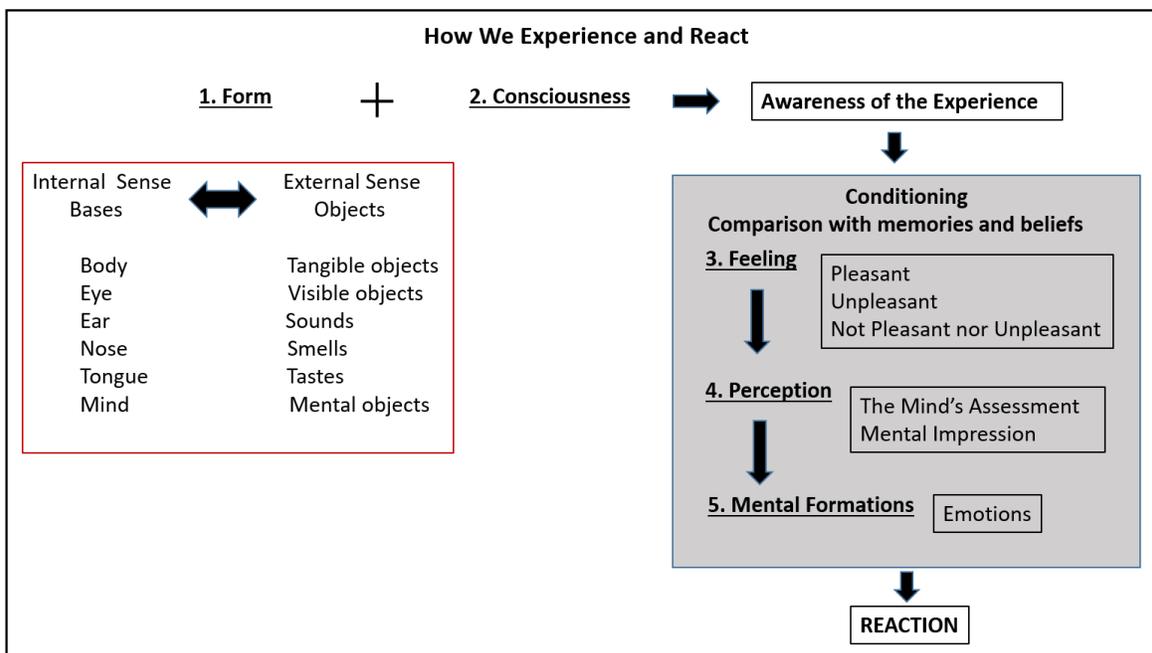
Feelings are what is sensed in the body about the experience. These feelings are not emotions. (Emotions are mental formations as noted below.) Feelings occur instantly after awareness and are either pleasant, neutral or unpleasant. After a feeling arises, a **perception** (mental impression, identification, recognition, discrimination, assessment) of the experience arises in the mind. Note that the perception is dependent on memory for identification. If we have no previous memory of what we have originally sensed, we can't identify it. Next, **mental formations** (emotions) arise as a result of the feeling and the perception. Depending on the intensity of the mental formation, a **reaction** might occur.

For example, if your eyes make contact with a person for whom you have negative memories, an unpleasant feeling in the body may arise. The perception that arises may be that of an unpleasant person because of the comparison with past memories. Next, the mental formation that may arise might be anger or ill-will. Your reaction might be to speak harshly to that person.

Without an understanding of the internal conditioning process, you may only be aware of the anger and therefore blame this emotion on the person you just saw. You might even say, "This person made me angry." Yet, the anger actually arose from your internal processing of associating the image of this person with your internal memories and beliefs. Another person seeing this person might experience a different emotion.

In summary, suffering is caused by the conditioning that arises after our awareness of the experience. It is not what we sense externally that causes suffering, it is the internal processing.

The diagram below shows this process.



By being aware of this process of how we experience life, we can reduce our suffering because we realize that the cause is within us, not the external experience that triggered it. When you say, "That makes me angry," it really is the "that" triggered something within you to cause anger to arise."

Our reaction to an experience often involves making decisions. If we don't realize that the decisions might be influenced by our conditioning with past memories and beliefs, we can fall into the trap of making unskillful choices. We need to understand that as Søren Kierkegaard said, "It is perfectly true, as the philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. " In other words, we make decisions that are going to have an impact on the future, but we don't know the future and often we don't know what that impact will be. All we know is what happened in the past, and sometimes we don't even know that every well because our memory gets fogged, distorted. Psychologists have observed that most people tend to repeat decisions they made in the past even though the decisions didn't really make them happy. We forget we thought it would make us happy the last time around and it didn't. Well, we try it again and again. In other words, it's Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing but expecting different results." ¹

To be aware of this process as each experience arises and to avoid suffering and making unskillful choices, we must learn and practice mindfulness. "We often make mistake. If we take them as an opportunity to learn rather than a reason to go into strong guilt or strong denial, we can benefit from them. The more clearly you see and understand what's going on right now, then the less likely it is that the choices you make right now are going to cause harm in the future.

So instead of focusing forward or backward, we learn something from looking back and then focusing back on Now as much as possible because everything comes out of right here. So as you go through life, try to bring as much attention as possible to the quality of mind that underlies your decisions right here, right now. Make it as skillful as possible, remembering past mistakes, remembering past right decisions and learning how to live skillfully with the results of both."

² This diagram provides more detail on the hindrances.

Hindrances to Mindfulness			
Hindrane	Feeling	Perception	Mental Formations
Desire	pleasant	gain, praise, fame, sensual pleasure	transient happiness
Aversion	unpleasant	physical pain; unpleasant thoughts of pain, loss, criticism, disrepute; unpleasant situations; I am the victim,	transient unhappiness, anger, rage, etc.
Dullness/Drowsiness	unpleasant	sleepiness, lack of mental and physical energy	withdrawal, denial, procrastination
Restlessness/Worry	unpleasant	fear	agitation, anxiety, worry, turmoil
Doubt	unpleasant	confusion, uncertainty	indecision, uncertainty

³ Here is the link to the Guide and a section on the Hindrances. <https://www.whitehallmeditation.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Practice-of-Mindfulness-A-Guide-10012018.pdf>

What are some of the obstacles to practicing mindfulness?

As we react to experiences by suffering, we can recognize our reactions fall into several categories of states of mind that we slip into and which negatively affect our mindfulness. These states, called hindrances, obscure the mind making it difficult to truly be mindful and investigate the suffering. The five hindrances are:

- Desire
- Aversion
- Dullness and Drowsiness
- Restlessness and Worry
- Doubt

Just as we investigate an experience with mindfulness, we can do the same when the one or more of the hindrances arise. Analayo states, “By turning a hindrance into an object of meditation, the mere presence of awareness can often lead to dispelling the hindrance in question.” (Analayo. Perspectives on Satipatthana, p. 193). Our investigation includes examining the process of conditioning: the feeling, perception and mental formations that arise with the presence of each hindrance. Each hindrance will be discussed below including a description, what happens in the process of conditioning and how mindfulness can be used to dispel it.

Desire

The Pali word for desire in the Satipatthana Sutta is chanda which means “willingness to have sense pleasure.” As we experience sensual pleasurable experiences (such as that which gives us happiness in terms of pleasure, gain, praise and fame), the hindrance of desire arises when we get attached to getting more than what is needed. Instead of enjoying what we have, we focus on the anticipation of getting more. We cannot be satisfied. For example, when eating, strong desire may cause us to eat quickly because we are focusing on the next bite rather than enjoying the one that is in our mouth.

The process of conditioning includes:

Feeling – pleasant

Perception – gain, praise, fame, sensual pleasure

Mental Formation – transient happiness

Mindfulness helps us to recognize that we have slipped unconsciously into wanting. For example, we are in a buffet and are influenced by the attractive appearance and smells of food. We feel compelled to eat regardless of our need for food. We are deluded because we assume that eating will lead to lasting happiness. To prevent future arisings of desire, we can strive to be more mindful and as the Buddha noted, guard our sense doors by not exposing ourselves to conditions that will lead us into wanting. As with the buffet, we anticipate desire and take mindful steps to avoid it controlling our behavior.

Aversion

The Pali word for aversion is patigha which means “striking against.” Bhikkhu Bodhi notes it as the attitude of resistance, rejection or destruction. These condemning states can include violent rage and hatred, anger, ill will, animosity, annoyance, irritation, fear, sorrow and grief. The chief perceptions of aversion are:

- Physical pain
- Unpleasant thoughts
- Unpleasant situations
- Being the victim

The Buddha noted that aversion arises because we aren't getting what we want, or we are getting what we don't want. Or we fear that we won't get what we want in the future or that we will get what we don't want in the future. We want life to be other than it is.

The process of conditioning includes:

Feeling – unpleasant

Perception – physical pain; unpleasant thoughts of pain, loss, criticism, disrepute; unpleasant situations; I am the victim

Mental Formations – transient unhappiness, anger, rage, etc.

Mindfulness allows us to identify that we have slipped unconsciously into aversion. The ultimate preventative measure for aversion is practicing loving kindness (metta in Pali). This practice of generosity wishes that all beings including ourselves be happy and peaceful. This act focuses on the potential good rather than the faults. “It's important to realize that all aversion does not fall away with our first loving wish. The Bodhisattva (the Buddha) spent years, and whole lifetimes, cultivating and purifying this quality. But as we practice it, recognize it, and become more familiar with it, metta (loving-kindness) begins to arise more and more spontaneously in our lives. It becomes the way we are, rather than something we do. As loving-kindness grows stronger, both for ourselves and others, we feel more

tolerance, are a little less judgmental, and slowly and gradually start to live in a growing field of benevolence and goodwill. Here is where metta (loving-kindness) as a dissolver of aversion also becomes the ground for wisdom. The more loving and patient we are with difficulties and disturbances, the less lost we are in reactivity. Our choices and actions become wiser, which in turn leads to more happiness, more mettā, and greater freedom.”³

Dullness and Drowsiness

Dullness is mental laziness and drowsiness is physical laziness. When dullness arises, our mind is sluggish, dull and confused. When drowsiness arises, we feel a lack of energy that can come from withdrawing from experiences with resultant feelings of discontent, boredom or depression, over indulging such as with eating and drinking, or over exercising. We lack drive and energy and just want to lie down and nap. We lack the will to investigate our experiences.

The process of conditioning includes:

Feeling – unpleasant

Perception – sleepiness, lack of mental and physical energy

Mental Formation – withdrawal, denial, procrastination

Mindfulness allows us to realize that we have slipped into dullness and drowsiness as a way of withdrawing from the investigation of suffering. Goldstein notes dullness and drowsiness can be the tendency to withdraw from difficulties. He compares it to keeping a car in reverse gear, never going forward but always pulling back. Dullness and drowsiness can occur when we meditate and get so relaxed that we slide into it. This state can be very relaxed and comfortable, but it is not insight meditation. We lose our concentration and fall into laziness. “Insight requires energy, vigor, and sharpness.”³

Dullness and drowsiness arise from an imbalance of concentration and energy with energy being low. When we feel drowsy, lazy or dull, we need to investigate the cause. We can ask, “What is this experience I’m calling sleepiness or dullness?” and pay mindful attention. If we aren’t mindful, we might just withdraw further and further. With mindfulness, we can often experience a surge of energy or take steps to increase our energy.

Restlessness and Worry

The Pali word for restlessness is uddacca which means agitation, excitement or distraction. Restlessness is literally “without rest.” The Pali word for worry is kukkuccha which is the mind state of regret (remorse) or anxiety. We worry about what we did or did not do.

Restlessness manifests in the body as a physical sensation described by many as “jumping out of one’s skin. The mind is distracted with various kinds of thoughts. It is truly an inner turmoil with the mind tossed about by agitation. Restlessness can be more subtle posing as distracting thoughts during tasks or in meditation. Worry can manifest as general anxiety about the future. Worry is a form of fear, anticipation or uncertainty about what might happen in the future. Worry can also manifest as guilt, regret or remorse about what we might have done or not done in the past.

The process of conditioning includes:

Feeling – unpleasant

Perception - fear

Mental Formations – agitation, anxiety, worry, turmoil

The cause: an imbalance of concentration and energy with concentration being low. Concentration focuses our energy. Insufficient concentration means that the excess energy can lead to distraction and restlessness. We pay undue attention to our thoughts. In other words, we tend to think too much (mental proliferation).

“Whenever we feel the mind is not settled on the object, not at rest, we can become mindful of the restlessness itself. Notice the physical energies in the body. Notice the difference in the emotional tone between restlessness and worry, so that you can distinguish one from the other. Restlessness feels more scattered; worry feels more anxious. As we become mindful of these states of mind, rather than being lost in them, the mindfulness itself starts to bring the factors of concentration and energy into balance.”³

Use your mental zoom lens. “Focus the mind more precisely on a particular object like the breath, or we become quite precise in moving about, strengthening the quality of composure in our movements. Both actions help to calm all the obsessive thinking in the mind.” (Goldstein, Joseph. *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, p. 137)

Doubt

There are two kinds of doubt. The first is a skepticism that leads to inquiry and investigation. In the case of the teachings, this kind of doubt is wholesome. The Buddha encouraged all to investigate for themselves and to discard what was not true for them. The second kind of doubt is the unwholesome mind states of uncertainty, wavering and indecision that immobilize us. With these mind states, we don't have the motivation to inquire and investigate. Instead we remain stuck and our practice can be at a standstill or even abandoned.

Doubt can arise in three areas regarding our practice. We might doubt the relevance of the teachings, the path of practice, and our ability to practice.

The process of conditioning includes:

Feeling – unpleasant

Perception – confusion, uncertainty

Mental formations – indecision, uncertainty

We practice mindfulness so that we can know when doubt is present. Knowing that uncertainty is present, we can begin to remove doubt is by investigation.

⁴ De Mello, Anthony. *The Way to Love: Meditations for Life* (p. 119)