



**Mind 101**  
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**Talk 1 What is the Mind?**

*The important thing is consciousness. You must give your full attention to consciousness itself and then all the secrets will be revealed to you by consciousness. If you are interested in the world, then it means that you are not interested in consciousness. If you are only interested in consciousness, then consciousness will unmask all the secrets, and then you will know what you are.*

-Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

The mind is something that many of us have taken for granted. As human beings who have evolved over time, there is no owner’s manual. We are unaware of much of what the mind does such as keeping our heart beating and our lungs breathing. We tend to think of the mind when we have stressful thoughts, headaches, or strong emotions. For some of us, the mind communicates with us like a voice in our head. For others, it may appear like intuition or our bodies giving us sensory signals.

Pondering the mind begs the question, “Who are you?” What role does the mind play in your being?

In this series, we will be exploring the mind and our relationship to it. I will be using the term mind rather than brain because the mind is much more than that and there is still a lot that scientists don’t understand how it functions particularly consciousness. 2600 years ago, the Buddha, whom I consider to be one of the first neuroscientists, postulated some important principles that current scientists are confirming today using technology such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and functional MRI (fMRI). With his teachings as a base, I will be including some recent scientific findings to help us understand.

Where does stress come from? It is coming from the mind, not the external world. The mind is creating the bodily sensations and the thoughts.

Matthieu Ricard notes: "So long as we are slaves to the dissatisfaction and frustration that arise from the confusion that rules our minds, it will be just as futile to tell ourselves "I'm happy! I'm happy!" over and over again as it would be to repaint a wall in ruins. The search for happiness is not about looking at life through rose-colored glasses or blinding oneself to the pain and imperfections of the world. Nor is happiness a state of exaltation to be perpetuated at all costs; it is the purging of mental toxins, such as hatred and obsession, that literally poison the mind. It is also about learning how to put things in perspective and reduce the gap between appearances and reality. To that end we must acquire a better knowledge of how the mind works and a more accurate insight into the nature of things, for in its deepest sense, suffering is intimately linked to a misapprehension of the nature of reality."<sup>1</sup>

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Pondering the mind begs the question, "Who are you?" What role does the mind play in your being?

### **What is the mind?**

The mind is often understood as a faculty that manifests itself in mental phenomena like sensation, perception, thinking, reasoning, memory, belief, desire, emotion, and motivation.<sup>2</sup> This, however, does not include the interaction of the mind with our bodily functions such as breathing and heart rate.

The mind is not just your brain and nervous system. Evan Thompson<sup>3</sup> notes: "From the perspective of life-mind continuity, the brain or nervous system does not create mind, but rather expands the range of mind already present in life. The expansion is linked to multicellularity and movement over distance. An organism that is made up of many cells, and that moves quickly over distances, must be able to coordinate sensing and acting, while holding together as a structural unity. The nervous system makes this possible. It links sense organs and nerve endings to effectors (muscles, glands) within the body, thereby integrating the body, holding it together as a structurally complex and mobile unity. Sense-making here takes the familiar form of animal perception, action, and emotion."<sup>4</sup>

For the sake of this training, we will consider several functions of the mind:

1. It maintains our body functions through managing our energy stores by automatically predicting and preparing to meet the body's needs before they arise. The scientific term is *allostasis*.
2. It protects our survival.

3. It receives sensory input from the six sense organs: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and the mind. Yes, the mind receives sensory input from itself as it conditions sensory inputs from the other five sense organs.
4. It processes sensory input.
5. It communicates to us via sensations in the body (body tones), perceptions, and mental formations.

Let's start with the first two functions.

### **What the mind does.**

Lisa Feldman Barrett, a noted neuroscientist a scientist at Northeastern University and Harvard University, has written two books based in her research about the mind.<sup>5</sup> In recounting a history of our understanding about the mind, she notes: "For the bulk of human history, the most learned members of our species have wildly underestimated the human brain's capabilities. This is understandable, since your brain occupies only about 2 percent of your body mass, and it looks like a blob of gray gelatin. Ancient Egyptians deemed it a useless organ and tugged it out of dead pharaohs through the nose.

The brain eventually earned its due as the seat of the mind, but it still received insufficient credit for its remarkable abilities. Brain regions were thought to be primarily "reactive," spending most of their time dormant and awakening to fire only when a stimulus arrives from the outside world. This stimulus-response view is simple and intuitive, and, in fact, neurons in your muscles work this way, lying still until stimulated, then firing to make a muscle cell respond. So, scientists assumed that neurons in the brain operated similarly. When a gigantic snake slithers across your path, this stimulus was thought to launch a chain reaction in your brain. Neurons would fire in sensory regions, causing neurons in cognitive or emotional regions to fire, causing neurons in motor regions to fire, and then you'd react. The classical view typifies this mindset: when the snake appears, a "fear circuit" in your brain, which is usually in the "off" position, supposedly flips into the "on" position, causing preset changes in your face and body. Your eyes widen, you scream, and you run away."

She goes on to note that this stimulus-response view, while intuitive, is misguided because the brain's 86 billion neurons are always active, stimulating each other without a need for an external stimulus. The intrinsic activity in your brain is not random; it is structured by collections of neurons that consistently fire together, called intrinsic networks. Think of the networks as teams with each neuron doing what is needed to accomplish the goal. The goals vary from keeping you alive by making sure that heart is beating and the lungs are breathing but this intrinsic network activity is also the source of dreams, daydreaming, imagination, mind wandering, planning and other thoughts. This includes the emotions that arise.

Dr. Barrett concludes: "So, returning to our original question: Why did a brain like yours evolve? That question is not answerable because evolution does not act with purpose -- there is no "why." But we can say what is your brain's most important job. It's not rationality. Not emotion. Not imagination, or creativity, or empathy. Your brain's most important job is to control your body—to manage allostasis (energy management)—by predicting energy needs before they arise so you can efficiently make worthwhile movements and survive. Your brain continually invests your energy in the hopes of earning a

good return, such as food, shelter, affection, or physical protection, so you can perform nature's most vital task: passing your genes to the next generation."<sup>6</sup>

Additional confirmation on how the neural networks operate is reported by Christopher Mims: "In her research, Tatiana Engel, an assistant professor of neuroscience at Princeton University, uses the same kinds of networks of artificial neurons that are behind most of what we currently call artificial intelligence. But rather than using these to better-target ads, or to generate fake images, or compose text, she and her team use them to interpret the electrical signals of hundreds of neurons at once in the brains of animals.

Dr. Engel and her team then go a step further: they train networks of artificial neurons to perform the same tasks as an animal – say, a swimming worm. They then find that those artificial networks organize themselves in ways that reasonably approximate the way they're organized in real animals. While neural networks in the brain are vastly more complicated, the result of this simulation is a model system that is both close enough to its biological equivalent, and simple enough to teach us things about how the real brain works, Dr. Engel says.

One key insight this yields is that the actual substance of thought – the patterns that constitute the mind you're using to read this sentence – is dynamic electrical activity in our brains rather than something physically anchored to particular neurons.

In other words, in contrast to what neuroscientists once believed about how we make decisions, there are no "eat the chocolate" neurons and "don't eat the chocolate" neurons. Thinking, it turns out, is just electrical signals zooming about inside our heads, forming a complex code which is carried by our neurons."<sup>7</sup>

To repeat what Dr. Barrett found: the mind evolved to help you survive, not to make you happy or peaceful. The mind is only concerned with enhancing your survival and genetic transmission.

Regarding safety, the human brain has evolved over time to detect threats. In the Buddha's Brain<sup>8</sup>, Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius note that over time, our ancestors developed three strategies for security (survival and protection):

- creating boundaries between themselves and the world,
- maintaining stability, and
- approaching opportunities and avoiding threats.

So, these are the guidelines that the mind uses to protect you although you can see that when carried to the extreme, they can be harmful and cause stress. We need to be aware that the mind's purpose is keeping us safe and understand that we don't always have to follow advice that the mind is giving us.

Creating boundaries, while useful and necessary in some instances, can cause isolation which has been shown to be detrimental in many respects. For example, social isolation can cause problems with mental health, sleep, executive control, self-reported health, health care utilization, cognitive functioning, immune functioning, neuroendocrine functioning, inflammation, and mortality.<sup>9</sup>

Maintaining stability is important but seeking permanent stability (security) is not possible due to the impermanence of all things. In fact, this quest for security can breed the stress of insecurity. As Alan Watts notes in the *Wisdom of Insecurity*, “this insecurity is the result of trying to be secure, and that, contrariwise, salvation and sanity consist in the most radical recognition that we have no way of saving ourselves.”<sup>10</sup>

And finally, approaching opportunities is important but it is impossible without taking some risk of threats. When avoidance of threats is carried to an extreme, one would not seek any opportunities at all.

So, the mind plays a central role in our staying healthy and secure but what role does it play in how we experience life? What impact does it have on our cognitive life as we live our lives having relationships with others, dealing with emotions and stress and reacting to various situations?

Are we the mind? Stay tuned!

### **Mindful Inquiry**

This week when you notice that stress is arising, what is your mind telling you through your bodily sensations and thoughts? Is it trying to make you happy, or it is concerned with your survival? What is the mind telling you to do?

1. Keep observing when stress arises and what you feel in your body and thoughts. Can you see that you can only experience life through the mind? As you go through life this week, how does this change your perspective? How does this change your stress?

## Talk 2 The Mind: Processing the Pure Experience

In the last talk, we explored the functions of the mind in maintaining our body functions through managing our energy stores by automatically predicting and preparing to meet the body's needs before they arise and protecting our survival.

### Key points

The mind evolved to help you survive, not to make you happy or peaceful. The mind is only concerned with enhancing your survival and genetic transmission.

Our ancestors developed three strategies for security (survival and protection):

- creating boundaries between themselves and the world,
- maintaining stability, and
- approaching opportunities and avoiding threats.

The remaining functions that we are going to explore are the mind:

1. Receiving sensory input from the six sense organs: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and the mind.
2. Processing the sensory input
3. Communicating to us via sensations in the body (body tones), perceptions, and mental formations.

### Life can only be experienced through the mind.

An experience is defined by Oxford Languages as practical contact with and observation of facts or events. It is often assumed that we directly experience the external world. **This is not true.**

The Buddha noted that for us to experience something, it is necessary that one or more of the six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind (yes, the mind is a sense organ in the teachings) make contact with a sense object (tangible objects, visible objects, sounds, smells, tastes, and mental objects (thoughts/memories)). This interaction creates what is called **form**. **All** of our experiences begin here via one or more of these sense organs. However, although our sense organs are constantly sensing, **we are not aware of this form at this point**. The mind gets the first shot at form through what we will call mind consciousness. When all three factors (sense organ, sense object, and mind consciousness) are connected, the mind (not you) becomes **aware** of what is called a **pure experience**. The experience is pure because our mind has not altered it (conditioned) at this point. Note that it is impossible for you to be aware of a pure experience because our mind communicates this experience to us **after** it processes (conditions) it.

### How the mind processes the pure experience

After the mind is conscious of the pure experience, it seeks to identify it by first comparing the pure experience with our stored memories<sup>11</sup> and beliefs to identify it. This is a very quick process. It also means that the mind is trying to **predict** the identity and other characteristics before communicating it to us. For example, instead of being aware of the pure experience of a sound, the mind communicates to us the conditioned experience identifying it as the bark of a dog or the whistle of the wind. The mind also communicates other characteristics via the body and thoughts. More on this later.

Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett goes into more detail noting that in order for the mind to make sense out of an experience, it has to draw upon memories and beliefs to compare. *“To understand why this is the case, let’s take your brain’s perspective for a moment. Like those ancient, mummified Egyptian pharaohs, the brain spends eternity entombed in a dark, silent box. It cannot get out and enjoy the world’s marvels directly; it learns what is going on in the world only indirectly via scraps of information from the light, vibrations, and chemicals that become sights, sounds, smells, and so on. Your brain must figure out the meaning of those flashes and vibrations, and its main clues are your (memories of) past experiences, which it constructs as simulations within its vast network of neural connections. Your brain has learned that a single sensory cue, such as a loud bang, can have many different causes— a door being slammed, a bursting balloon, a hand clap, a gunshot. It distinguishes which of these different causes is most relevant only by their probability in different contexts. It asks, which combination of my past experiences provides the closest match to this sound, given this particular situation with its accompanying sights, smells, and other sensations?”*

*And so, trapped within the skull, with only past experiences as a guide, your brain makes predictions. We usually think of predictions as statements about the future, like “It’s going to rain tomorrow” or “The Red Sox will win the World Series” or “You will meet a tall, dark stranger.” But here, I’m focusing on predictions at a microscopic scale as millions of neurons talk to one another. These neural conversations try to anticipate every fragment of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch that you will experience, and every action that you will take. These predictions are your brain’s best guesses of what’s going on in the world around you, and how to deal with it to keep you alive and well.”<sup>12</sup>*

It may seem that you are directly observing the experience, but scientists have shown that this is not true. Dr. Barrett notes: “Your brain also uses prediction to initiate your body’s movements, like reaching your arm out to pick up an apple or dashing away from a snake. These predictions occur before you have any conscious awareness or intent about moving your body. Neuroscientists and psychologists call this phenomenon “the illusion of free will.” ..... It’s called an illusion because movement feels like a two-step process—decide, then move—when in fact your brain issues motor predictions to move your body well before you become aware of your intent to move. And even before you actually encounter the apple (or the snake)!

If your brain were merely reactive, it would be too inefficient to keep you alive. You are always being bombarded by sensory input. One human retina transmits as much visual data as a fully loaded computer network connection in every waking moment; now multiply that by every sensory pathway you have. A reactive brain would bog down like your Internet connection does when too many of your neighbors are streaming movies from Netflix. A reactive brain would also be too expensive, metabolically speaking, because it would require more interconnections than it could maintain.”<sup>13</sup>

So, it is important to realize that the world that we may think is external reality is really in our mind. We can never experience external reality because we cannot experience anything without the mind as a go between. Each of us has a different awareness depending on what each of our minds predicts for us. For example, if you are in a group and a person approaches, each member of the group may have different views of this person because of because of the differences in their memories.

Please note that although you cannot directly experience the pure experience, you can discern the conditioning that the mind has communicated to you. Using the example of the person approaching you, you can realize that the sense object that the eye made contact with was just an image. Likewise, what the mind communicates to you as the barking of a dog is just a sound.

In summary, the mind's role is to predict and communicate to you its version of external reality based on comparison with your stored memories and beliefs in order to keep you safe.

### **Mindful Inquiry**

1. Keep observing when stress arises and what you feel in your body and thoughts. Can you see that you can only experience life through the mind? As you go through life this week, how does this change your perspective? How does this change your stress?



### **Talk 3 The Mind: Consciousness and the Three Characteristics of Experience**

#### **Consciousness**

Let's take a closer look at awareness or consciousness. Patrick House, a neuroscientist, in his book, *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Consciousness*, notes in his introduction that "One can have a full and vivid life without giving a second thought to the makings of the first [consciousness]. And yet, even though everybody knows what consciousness feels like, it remains central to the greatest unsolved scientific and existential mysteries we will probably ever face: What is it? And how did it get here."<sup>14</sup>

And finally, he notes, "What does it mean to translate consciousness when some people see images in their mind's eye but others, called aphantasics, "see" nothing? What does it mean that there are twenty amino acids that make up all of life on Earth and that, depending on the context (like each ideogram), can take on separate roles? What does it mean that some people have more kinds of light-responsive cells in their retina, which may allow them to discriminate more colors than others, or that some of those same people see dresses as white-and-gold striped and others see the same dress as blue-and-black striped? Or that some people remember things and can replay them just as they lived them while others see memories replay as if they were broadcast on a television one hundred feet away?

What does it mean for the ability to talk about the human mind, as if it is only one thing, that one person (James Joyce) described the inside of his mind as a "grocer's assistant" while another (Albert Einstein) claimed to be able to visually imagine the speed of light as a teenager? Or that when the first description of the "stream of consciousness" was used, to describe a work by the novelist Dorothy Richardson, she strongly objected to the phrase, saying that consciousness to her, instead, "sits stiller than a tree"? Which of all these versions of consciousness is "correct"?

Nobody is wrong, but in a way, everyone is, because their version is theirs alone. So, too, must we start at the simplest, most literal translation of consciousness to have any hope of grasping it. The character-by-character translation. The one and only thing we know for certain for every one of us. That there is something that it is like to be us. That's it. Everything else is unknowable excess. One of the beauties, and frustrations, of talking about consciousness is that everyone can know only their slice of the world. We have many tools, like language, gesture, and theory of mind, to try to jump into others' heads, but at the end of the day we can only ever scratch the surface of what really goes on inside."<sup>15</sup>

In other words, a conscious being knows that they are conscious, but they cannot know that any other being is or what is on their mind. Your "reality" is unique to you and is extremely hard for scientists to study because no one else can truly know who you are.

As you continue this training, be mindful that we can be only aware of what appears in our mind which in part is composed of our own stored memories and beliefs. No one else is exactly like us. We cannot assume that anyone thinks the same as we do.

#### **The Mind's Communications to you**

Once the mind makes its best guess prediction, it communicates that to you in three ways: feelings, perceptions, and mental formations.

Before we move on to feelings, perceptions, and mental formations, you need to know something about the characteristics of the communications that the mind transmits to you. The Buddha taught that all of the mind's communications regardless of their sense origin share three common characteristics."<sup>16</sup> These three attributes are called the Three Characteristics of Existence.<sup>17</sup> They are **impermanence, dissatisfaction and selfless nature**.

### **Impermanence**

To paraphrase the Buddha's teaching: Impermanence, the first characteristic is constant change. Nothing ever stays the same even for a nanosecond. For example, thoughts and memories arise in our self-consciousness and fall away. A similar thought or memory may reappear, but it is not the same. Because of impermanence, the second characteristic is that no thought, memory, perception, or sensation can generate lasting peace and happiness. For this reason, all experiences, if we try to hold on to them, are eventually found to be unsatisfactory and stressful. And finally, because experiences are inherently stressful, the third characteristic is that all phenomena are of selfless nature. They are not who we are; we cannot own or possess them.

It is important you realize the truth of the three characteristics. The only way to realize this is to experience them for yourself. You might start by asking yourself, "Is there anything in life that is not impermanent?" Is there anything in life that doesn't have the potential to be stressful," and Is there anything in life that is a permanent part of me?"

Putting it another way, Matt Flickstein notes: Paradoxically, we *can* recognize what is not true. Permanence is not true. Satisfaction based upon sense experiences is not true. Having or being a self is not true.

Here is a contemporary example of the beneficial use of meditation and the realization of impermanence:

"In Game 3 of the NBA Finals, Nikola Jokic and Jamal Murray broke all sorts of records. They were running the most foundational play in the sport: a pick-and-roll.

Murray, who meditates between games, has said that his mindfulness practice helped him stay patient during a drawn-out rehabilitation process and a slow start to his return season. "Life is going to happen. Stuff is going to happen," Murray said. "Just got to keep the mental fortitude to bounce back in whatever it is, and stay strong. This too shall pass—it goes for everything, negative and positive."<sup>18</sup>

### **Experiencing Impermanence**

Seated and with eyes closed, touch the seat of whatever you are sitting on. Now listen for any sounds. What happened to your awareness of the touch of the seat? Your sense base, the hand, is touching the sense object, the seat, but your consciousness has moved on to the sense base, ear. The experience of the seat arose when consciousness was present with it and the experience fell away when consciousness left. Do you get the impermanence?

### **Inability to Give Lasting Satisfaction**

Since no experience is permanent, we cannot count on it to give us lasting satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Sometimes we believe that satisfaction or dissatisfaction is permanent but that is because we have attached to the memory of the experience and allow it to keep recurring in our mind. However, each recurrence is not the exact same experience. With satisfying experiences, we gradually develop tolerance to the recurrent experiences with less satisfaction each time. This results in a craving for more pleasurable experiences. With dissatisfactory experiences, the recurring memories may be more intense over time as fear sets in. However, we must be aware that we are experiencing different recurrences. The original experience has fallen away.

### **Experiencing inability to provide lasting satisfaction**

Go back to your awareness of the seat and try to stay with it. What is the texture? What is the temperature of the seat? Note that when you are determining the temperature, you are no longer experiencing the texture. Your consciousness has shifted again! So, touching the seat is not one but many experiences. Can you see the inability to provide lasting satisfaction with touching the seat?

### **Selfless Nature**

Jack Kornfield notes: "Deep meditation can untangle the sense of identity. There are, in fact, many ways in which we can realize the emptiness of self. When we are silent and attentive, we can sense directly how nothing in the world can be truly possessed by us. Clearly, we do not possess outer things; we are in some relationship with our cars, our home, our family, our jobs, but whatever that relationship is, it is "ours" only for a short time. In the end, things, people, or tasks die or change or we lose them. Nothing is exempt.

When we bring attention to any moment of experience, we discover that we do not possess it either. As we look, we find that we neither invite our thoughts nor own them. We might even wish them to stop, but our thoughts seem to think themselves, arising and passing according to their nature.

The same is true of our feelings. How many of us believe we control our feelings? As we pay attention, we see that they are more like the weather-moods and feelings change according to certain conditions and are neither possessed nor directed by our consciousness or desires. Do we order happiness, sadness, irritation, excitement, or restlessness to come? Feelings arise by themselves, as the breath breathes itself, as sounds sound themselves.

Our body, too, follows its own laws. The body which we carry is a bag of bones and fluid that cannot be possessed. It ages, gets sick, or changes in ways we might not wish it to, all according to its own nature. The more we look, in fact, the more deeply we see that we possess nothing within or without."<sup>19</sup>

### **Experiencing selfless nature**

Bring to mind a situation that you were angry about. Can you reproduce that anger? Is it exactly the same as when you first got angry? Is that anger a part of you or does it just come and go?

In summary, Silvia Boorstein notes: "And even when we begin to practice for the very first time, when we close our eyes for the first five minutes, there is such a lot of dharma (wisdom) to learn. One sits

down, closes one's eyes, and sees that there is a lot going on! Isn't it true that there are twitchings and pulsings that you weren't aware of? If you pay attention for just five minutes, you know some very fundamental dharma: things change, nothing stays comfortable, sensations come and go quite impersonally, according to conditions, but not because of anything that you do or think you do. Changes come and go quite by themselves. In the first five minutes of paying attention, you learn that pleasant sensations lead to the desire that these sensations will stay and that unpleasant sensations lead to the hope that they will go away. And both the attraction and the aversion amount to tension in the mind. Both are uncomfortable. So, in the first five minutes, you get a big lesson about suffering: wanting things to be other than what they are. Such a tremendous amount of truth to be learned from just closing your eyes and paying attention to bodily sensations."<sup>20</sup>

### **Mindful Inquiry**

1. Throughout the week, look to see if anything is permanent. When a stressful experience arises, look to see how long it lasts and pay attention to the emotions that arise. Are you those emotions or do they just come and go?
2. Can you see nothing can give permanent satisfaction or dissatisfaction?
3. Can you see the selfless nature of everything that arises?

#### **Talk 4 The Mind: Feeling and Perception**

As noted in the last talk, we can only experience life through the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind). Once a sense organ comes in contact with a sense object and mind consciousness is present, the mind becomes aware of this experience. The mind compares this experience with your memory stores and communicates with you in three ways: through the body (feeling), through the mind via thoughts (perception) and through mental formations (emotions) which will be discussed in the next talk.

The feeling communication through the body is not strictly an emotion but rather a sensation that can either be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We call this sensation: body tone. Perception is the thought that identifies the experience and judges it.

#### **Feeling**

Let's say that you see a person approach you with whom you have had an unpleasant experience in the recent past. What is happening is that your eyes (sense organ) have made contact with the image of this person (sense object) walking toward you. With mind consciousness joining in, the mind is aware of this image. At this point, you are unaware of the image. The mind compares this experience with your stored memory of the unpleasant meeting earlier and your previous negative perception of that experience. The mind then transmits to the body an unpleasant feeling and a nanosecond later generates an identity and negative thought to you (perception). The mind is doing this to protect you, not to make you angry or upset.

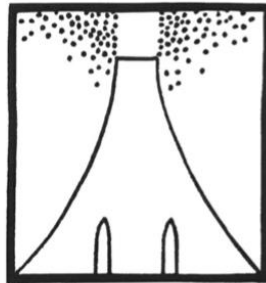
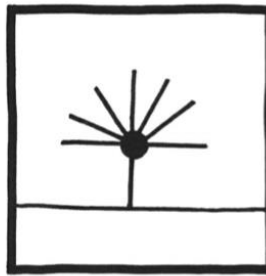
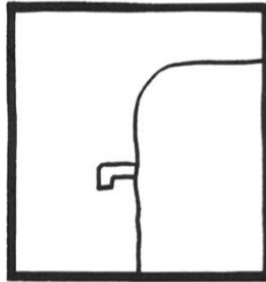
Unpleasant feelings (body tones) can be overwhelming. As noted previously, these feelings have the three characteristics of impermanence, inability to provide lasting satisfaction and of selfless nature. We can then realize that our feelings are not "us"; they arise and fall away just like all other phenomena. So, when an unpleasant feeling arises, we know that is just a sensory impression and will fall away to be replaced by another. Joseph Goldstein noted that "we don't need to analyze, judge, compare, or even particularly understand why these feelings are happening. It's simply to know that pleasant feeling is like this, unpleasant feeling is like this, neutral feeling is like this."<sup>21</sup>

So, feelings are the first thing that the mind communicates to you from that experience that it became aware of.

#### **Perception**

Perception is defined by the dictionary as the state of being or process of becoming aware of something through the senses, and/or a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something, **a mental impression**. We will define perception as a mental impression (identification, recognition, discrimination, assessment) of something that the mind communicates to us after conditioning. Note that perception is dependent on memory for identification. If we have no previous memory of what we have originally sensed, the mind can't identify it.

Here are some images that the mind probably can't identify for you. Look at the images before reading further.



What is the perception that the mind is communicating to you about each one?  
Drawing a blank?

These pictures are doodles. The first one is a submarine going over a waterfall. The second is a spider doing a handstand. The third is a skier going down a ski jump as seen by the jumper. Now that you know this, look again. The next time you see these, the mind will give you these perceptions.

Look at this next drawing.  
What do you see?



Can you see a young woman and an old lady?

Again, the mind gives the perception of one or the other first. Once you are able to see both, this is stored in your memory awaiting the next time you see this image.

As with these examples, the mind is doing its best to identify what is seen to protect you in case there is danger. However, the point is that the first prediction that the mind gives you may not be the correct one. For example, imagine that you are walking down a hill to a dock on a lake. Looking at the dock, you are startled that you see a coiled snake there. Then, taking a second look, the mind communicates that it is really a coiled rope. So, you can see that depending on the prediction, stress can arise.

In summary, the mind, once in contact with mind consciousness of a sense organ in contact with a sense object, immediately sends signals to you via feeling (body tones) that can be unpleasant, pleasant, or neutral depending on the mind's comparison with your stored memories. Next the mind communicates through thoughts its best guess as whether it is unpleasant and the identity. But on first pass, the mind may not always be correct.

### **Mindful Inquiry**

1. Throughout the week, pay attention to your feelings and perceptions particularly when you experience stress. Can you see that stress is caused by memories and beliefs that the mind has found in your stored memories that not only allows identification but can cause stress?

## **Talk 5 The Mind: Mental Formations and Reactions**

### **Mental formations**

Mental formations is the third factor that we need to understand about how we experience life.

After the mind communicates feelings and perception, it then creates and communicates mental formations (sometimes called impulses). Mental formations are all sorts of thoughts and emotions. The emotions run the gamut from what we term positive (joy, pleasantness, etc.) to what we term negative (anger, ill-will, sadness, worry, grief, etc.) If the mental formations are negative ones and strong enough, we might react with words and actions.

Using the previous example of you seeing a person approach with whom you have had an unpleasant experience with in the recent past, we noted that what is happening is that your eyes (sense organ) made contact with the image of this person with mind consciousness transmitting that to the mind. At this point you are unaware of seeing that person. The mind compares this experience with your stored memory of the unpleasant meeting earlier. The mind then transmits to the body an unpleasant feeling and generates a perception (mental impression, judgement) that this is a person who is unpleasant (or worse). Mental formations then arise from the mind such as anger and you may react by speaking unskillfully to that person or even physically threatening them.

Afterwards, you might feel remorse for what you have said (but you can't take it back). You don't remember that all of this started with your eyes seeing this person and your mind providing you with a conditioned experience based on your memory of the previous encounter.

### **Negative Reactions**

In response to what the mind is predicting as a negative experience, we can react as to what we think, say, or do. In terms of what we think, we talk to ourselves (mental talk). For example, "I am so angry. I want to get revenge." Talking to ourselves can lead to mental proliferation where we go over and over the experience without seeing the situation clearly and coming to a plan of action. Mental proliferation is fuel for allowing more negative mental formations to arise and we may react by confrontation or avoidance (flight or fight). If the reaction is confrontation, we may say things and do things that we will come to regret. Note that what we do may include negative body language (facial expressions, contractions, impatient gestures, etc).

This process happens so fast that we often say or do something that we regretting later. When this happens, we need to recognize that we are only human. While we can't undo the situation, we can learn by being aware of our unskillful behavior and try not to repeat it in the future. And, if we need to clean up the current situation by apologizing or forgiving, we do that too.

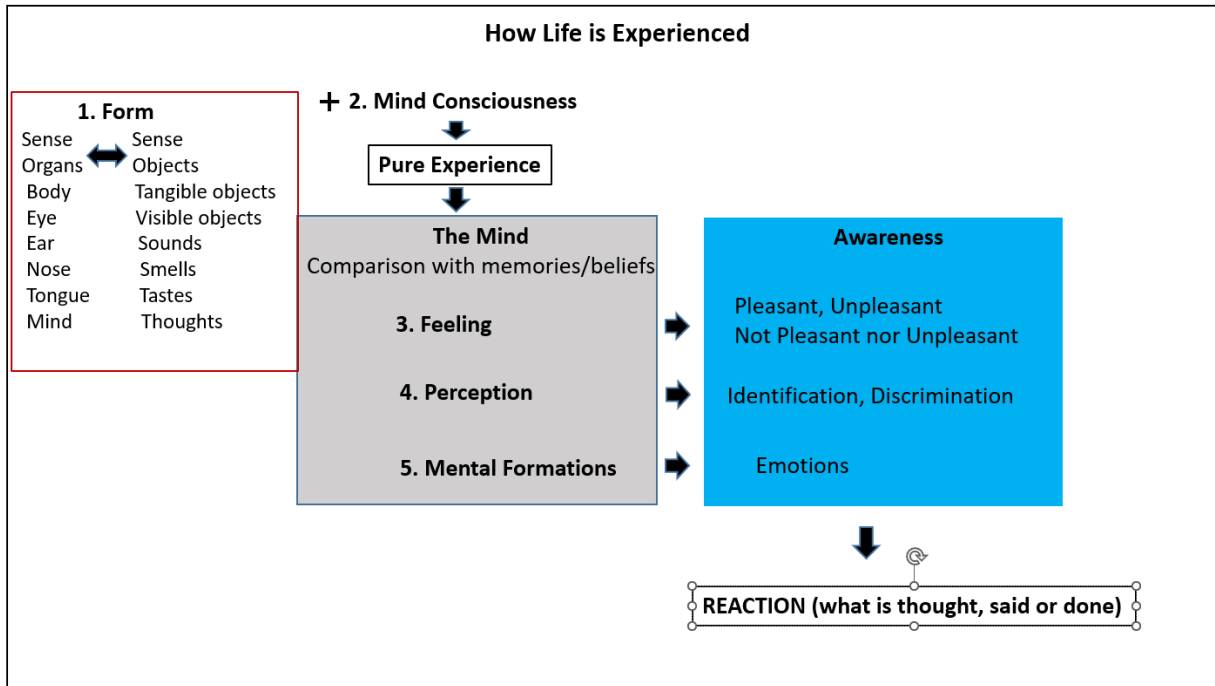
### **Putting it all together**

Let's visually review the process of how life is experienced.

In the diagram below, the important factors are numbered. The experience starts with form combining with mind consciousness to create the pure experience and transmit it to the mind. The mind compares



this data with the stored memories and beliefs. It then makes its best guess (prediction) and communicates the feeling, perception, and mental formations to our awareness. And this leads to a reaction (what we think, say, or do).



Now that we understand the process, what can we do to avoid unskillful reactions? The answer is deepening our awareness through mindfulness and using the pause as mentioned in Talk 2: Victor Frankl reportedly noted:

*“Between stimulus and response, there is a space.  
In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response.  
In our response lies our growth and our happiness.”*

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a noted Buddhist teacher,<sup>22</sup> said: “There are two aspects of mindfulness: first, to remember what causes suffering and needs to be avoided, and what brings happiness and needs to be accomplished; and second, to be constantly vigilant lest we fall under the power of delusion.”

He went on to say: “In turn, this will lead to mastering the mind. In our ordinary condition, when a thought of hatred arises, we have no idea how to deal with it. We let that thought grow and become stronger. This could eventually lead us to seize a weapon and go to war. It all began with a thought, nothing more. Look at the succession of thoughts that lead to full-blown hatred: The past thoughts are dead and gone. The present thoughts will soon vanish. There is nothing graspable in either of them. So, if we examine the thoughts in depth, we cannot find anything truly existing in them. Under scrutiny, they vanish like a big heap of grass set ablaze. Nothing will be left of it.”<sup>23</sup>

To halt this process, as soon as we become aware of an unpleasant feeling or negative thought, we can take a breath pause and investigate through mindfulness the what is. In general terms, the what is is that you are experiencing an unpleasant body tone and a negative thought. The mind is trying to tell you something to protect you. You may not need protection. Rather than just go along with the mind's prediction, you decide just to deal with the situation without stress.

### **Living with all experiences**

What we have learned is that the mind will continue to communicate conditioned experiences to us, both pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. We can learn from each experience. Think of our awareness of experiences as guests as Rumi notes:

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

— Jellaludin Rumi

Translated by Coleman Banks

**Remember: You are not the mind. You must develop and maintain your relationship with it. This is an ongoing Mindful Inquiry for the rest of your life.**

### **The Mind: Summary**

#### **Talk 1**

The sole purpose of the mind is to keep us safe, not happy.

## Talk 2

Life can only be experienced through the mind.

The mind conditions experiences by comparing with stored memories and beliefs in order to communicate predictions to us.

## Talk 3

Consciousness creates a unique reality for each individual.

It is extremely hard for scientists to study consciousness because no one else can truly know who you are and what you are thinking.

All of the mind's communications to you via sensations and thoughts have the three characteristics of impermanence, inability to provide lasting satisfaction and are of selfless nature.

## Talk 4

The mind communicates to us via feelings – bodily sensations that are either pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The mind communicates to us via perceptive thoughts that are its best guess as to identity and judgment.

The mind may not be correct in identification and judgement especially on the first pass.

## Talk 5

Depending on the type of feeling and the perception generated, the mind communicates mental formations (emotions)

From these three communications, we may react to what we think, say to others, or do.

After all, we are only human and while we can't undo the experience, we can learn by being aware of our unskillful behavior and try not to repeat it in the future. And, if we need to clean up the current situation by apologizing or forgiving, we do that too.

**Remember: You are not the mind. You must develop and maintain your relationship with it.**

## Mindful Inquiry

1. Pay mindful attention to the feelings (bodily sensations), thoughts (perceptions), and mental formations that arise and warn you of stress. Try to pause before you react and pay attention to your thoughts before saying or doing anything. This is challenging work and remember that you are only human as you practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Ricard, Matthieu. Happiness (pp. 23-24).

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind>

<sup>3</sup> [Evan Thompson](#) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia and co-author of The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience (1991)

<sup>4</sup> [What is Mind?](#) Why better understanding the mind lies at the heart of addressing some of today's most daunting challenges

<sup>5</sup> Barrett, Lisa Feldman How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain and Seven and ½ Lessons about the Brain Mariner Books

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, Lisa Feldman. Seven And A Half Lessons About The Brain (p. 10). HarperCollins

<sup>7</sup> Mims, Christopher Artificial Intelligence Is Teaching Us New, Surprising Things About the Human Mind:Thought is ever-changing electrical patterns unconnected to individual neurons. Meta is working on a system to read your mind WSJ April 1, 2023

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- <sup>8</sup> Hanson, Rick, and Richard Mendius. 2009. Buddha's Brain: the practical neuroscience of happiness, love, and wisdom. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications. P. 26.
- <sup>9</sup> Hawkey LC, Capitanio JP. 2015 Perceived social isolation, evolutionary fitness and health outcomes: a lifespan approach. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 370: 20140114. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2014.0114>
- <sup>10</sup> Watts, Alan W.. The Wisdom of Insecurity (p. 9). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.
- <sup>11</sup> Our memories aren't just confined to the brain. Evan Thompson notes: "Technologies, particularly writing and computers, have provided a new kind of external memory, extending personal and cultural memory. For many of us, this can be illustrated by imagining how unmoored you'd feel if you lost your mobile phone. Biological memory and external memory together make up a hybrid cognitive system. Memory extends beyond what's contained inside the individual head." [What is Mind? - Mind & Life Institute \(mindandlife.org\)](http://www.mindandlife.org)
- <sup>12</sup> ibid
- <sup>13</sup> Barrett, Lisa Feldman. How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain . Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- <sup>14</sup> House, Patrick. Nineteen Ways of Looking at Consciousness (p. 2). St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid pages 10-11
- <sup>16</sup> [samyutta nikāya 22 connected discourses on the aggregates 45. Impermanent](#)
- <sup>17</sup> Dhamma-niyāma Sutta (AN 3:137) Thanissaro Bhikkhu [https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN3\\_137.html](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN3_137.html) Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22:59) Thanissaro Bhikkhu [https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN22\\_59.html](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN22_59.html)
- <sup>18</sup> [It's Basketball's Simplest Play. The Denver Nuggets Made It Unstoppable](#) WSJ June 8, 2023 by Robert O'Connell
- <sup>19</sup> Jack Kornfield A Path with Heart [No Self or True Self?](#) P. 198
- <sup>20</sup> Silvia Boorstein [Body as Body](#)
- <sup>21</sup> Goldstein, Joseph. Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening. Sounds True p.85
- <sup>22</sup> Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (c. 1910 – 28 September 1991) was a Vajrayana master, scholar, poet, teacher, and recognized by Buddhists as one of the greatest realized masters. He was Head of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.
- <sup>23</sup> Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche [An Investigation of the Mind](#)