

How Thoughts Are Not Facts

As humans develop their sense of being in the world through experience and the way we learn to consider the transactions between inner and outer realms, we come to learn and believe in a “self,” which belief is strengthened by every event and transaction. In Buddhist Psychology, there is a process described, which amounts to the equivalent of the above-mentioned, in terms of the repeated patterns of perceptions, conditionings and associations which underlie what we come to believe in as a solid and permanent self. The part of our consciousness that is parsed through and uses the discriminatory functions of judgment at times skews emphasis based on the illusive preponderance of habit attached to a fixed and solid self. Skillful application of awareness in practices such as mindfulness offer us glimpses into the illusion inherent in this commitment to the belief in solid and permanent self concept. It is useful to venture alongside of such applications and the insights they provide to some parallel insights already existing in Western psychology. One such insight can be found in the concept of reification. Reification occurs when a person treats the abstract as though it were concrete. At times reified concepts are applied to the unwittingly provide what seems to be a substantial reality where there is none. The Western psychological concept of reification describes the set of mental events by which people unwittingly elude themselves into creating a substantial reality out of a concept, or a belief. It amounts to “believing is seeing.” In the Eastern Yogic traditions, Pantanjali stated, “thoughts have no substantial reality.”++ In Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, one can find a more modern and succinct description, “thoughts are not facts.”+

Unfortunately this often happens to psychology clinicians once they have diagnosed a patient and then see the patient’s life predominantly through that lens, interpreting the patient’s behavior in terms of that narrow focus. For the patient, disruption in the usually believed “solid self” can be a fearsome and anxious plague. Such disruptions often occur in depression. “I am not the person I thought I was; I feel like I’ve lost myself...”

In some forms of reification we take the concept of the solidity of the self and use our thoughts and belief structures to gradually support the conditions that become our proofs of the validity of the thoughts we have assumed about self. In the course of our daily conduct, if all seems well, there is a strengthening of these assumptions as proof of their reliability. When depression occurs, it seems to dispute the basic validity and reliability of that self we have believed to be an unchanging element in the field of changing awareness. Depression then appears to be an obstacle to our fleeting balance, thus shifting the sense that this particular self has the value it once had established.

What if obstacles and the imbalance they bring provide unique glimpses into a vehicle of awareness that has the potential to intimate to us the nature of consciousness? Disruption of a sense of solid self, and a continuous world that the self travels in might then reveal the narratives and concepts that are taken for granted due to being out of awareness. If these narratives and concepts that are being taken for granted are observed without judgment they gradually seem to dissolve. In the absence of such observation they may seem to take on their own reality. This kind of processing pattern is strongly steeped in our culture, and when it is repeated enough becomes a basic learning pattern. The learning pattern becomes an associative process out of awareness. We then may not recognize that a concept used to describe an aspect of perception has become an entrenched albeit inaccurate pattern predictor. The intersubjective Psychologist, Donna Orange, has described this in intersubjective terms as prejudice.*(see reference below). In terms of inner work on the recovery from Depression, it may be useful for us to continue to examine the interplay of the assumptions our collective and individual reified concepts of self and the world. I would suggest that these concepts when they are reified repeatedly, condition associative processes that cloud the awareness of what is present in the here and now. Depressed people then often attempt to analyze their way out of the pain generated by the sense of the loss of self (the self that is showing signs of not being as solid as was once believed). Such analysis amplifies incapacity to resolve the pain, often a further “proof” of inadequacy. What Mindfulness addresses

in regard to these disruptions is that aside from the fact of the disruption of the sense of a solid self, a disruption in reification is also occurring. Such disruptions might then make way for other perspectives to emerge by also interrupting patterns of assumption. This kind of disruption is referred to in mindfulness practice as “spaciousness”. Such moments that contain the potential for insight tap into the faculty enhanced during meditation, which meditation teacher and psychologist, B. Alan Wallace calls “meta-attention”, a form of self awareness**. In the open space of inner quiet learning potentials can prevail. First there is a quiescence, in which a rest from pressure can restore a sense of balance. When the mind is restored to balance, the experience of insight is possible. So in this view obstacles can be worked with more patiently, and Depression can be seen as a signal that invites us to rebalance. Our thoughts are in and of themselves insubstantial and immaterial. The very belief that our thoughts are facts is a valid subject for our contemplative reflection, and may assist us in unraveling the mystery of the conditions we believe we are in.

+Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression, A new approach to Preventing Relapse, Zindel V. Segal, J. Mark G. Williams, John Teasdale, (2002 The Guilford Press), New York

++ The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Translation and Commentary by Sri Swami Satchidananda, (1990, Integral Yoga Publications), Yogaville, Virginia

*Emotional Understanding, Studies In Psychoanalytic Epistemology, Donna M. Orange, (1995 The Guilford Press), New York

**Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge, B. Alan Wallace,(New York: Columbia University Press, 2007

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