

Making the Best of It

Sensory information hurtles upon our eyeballs at the speed of light, crashes into our eardrums at the speed of sound, and courses through our body and mind as fast as an electro-chemical signal can flash from one neuron to the next. How do we deal with all this data without getting overwhelmed? By blocking out most of it, and stepping down the voltage on what little is left.

The brain freezes the world into discrete mind moments, each capturing a barely adequate morsel of information, then processes these one by one in a linear sequence. The result is a compiled virtual world of experience, more or less patterned on what's "out there," but mostly organized around the needs and limitations of the apparatus constructing it. It is like the brain and its senses are hastily taking a series of snapshots, then stringing them together into a movie called the stream of consciousness.

The Buddhists have a pretty good word to describe this system: delusion. It doesn't mean we are stupid, only that the mind and body are designed (so to speak) to distort reality in some very fundamental ways. For starters, each moment of consciousness creates an artificial node of stability out of a background that is thoroughly in flux. As the flip-chart of mind moments rapidly unfolds, we weave all sorts of narratives about the way things are, filling in the blanks with various assumptions, projections and aspirations. Taking these as real, we go on to seek gratification and security to a degree the constructed system cannot support. The ensuing dissatisfaction is organized around the notion of "myself," who is both the one who wishes things were different than they are and the one who suffers when they are not. We are hardwired, in other words, to misconstrue the nature of reality by obscuring the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness of it all.

There is another way the amount of data we need to process at any given moment is even further reduced. Most of what comes in to the system does not even reach the threshold of consciousness but is relegated to the unconscious. The precious resource of conscious awareness is generally apportioned only on a "need to know" basis. When first learning a task, such as playing the piano, we have to "think about it" and "try" consciously to make our fingers go where they are supposed to go. But as the right connections are made in the brain and among the muscles of the fingers and hand, the patterns subside into lower levels of consciousness and, after a while, it feels as if we are playing "automatically."

Because this process works so efficiently, it is not long before most of what we do in our lives can be accomplished without having to be very conscious of it. You would think this frees up our mental energy for some really creative things, but alas this is too seldom the case. More often than not consciousness is used merely to seek out the things that please us and strategize about how to get more of them, or it is used to disparage the things that displease us and to conspire to avoid, ignore, or destroy them. We wind up using our conscious mind to pursue new ways of desiring things to be different than they are, while the unconscious mind is relegated the task of maintaining whatever habits we happened to have stumbled into in previous endeavors to change what was happening. The Buddhists have a good word for this, too: dukkha.

Much of meditation has to do with learning to use consciousness as a tool for transforming our unconscious, where all the underlying dispositions abide. Paradoxically, we can only change what we are not aware of by becoming more aware of something else. That is to say, our unconscious has been conditioned by all sorts of unwholesome patterns of response, and these are used to guide conscious behavior. By definition we are not aware of most of these, but become aware of the suffering they cause in the course of lived experience. By training conscious awareness on an innocuous object such as the breath, we strengthen its ability to open to more and more of the information available to the senses in present time.

As the mind fills with direct sensory experience, which it does when practicing mindfulness of the body, for example, it empties of desire for things to be otherwise than they are. Mindfulness means being present to whatever is happening here and now: when mindfulness is strong, there is no room left in the mind for wanting. With less liking and disliking of what arises, there is less pushing and pulling on the world, less defining of the threshold between self and other, resulting in a reduced construction of self. As the influence of self diminishes, suffering diminishes in proportion.

It is natural and inevitable that we are always working with an imperfect model of reality. It makes a difference, however, to understand the limitations of our constructed system, to see more clearly the consequences of it being both unskillfully and skillfully employed, and to use this knowledge to maximize the well-being available for ourselves and all those around us. The Buddhist word for this is wisdom.

—Andrew Olendzki