



Wellness and the Mind

By Mas Vidal

The mind is one of the central elements of healing in yoga and ayurveda. The mind is where wellness begins. The mind can either be like a battlefield or a playground, like a friend or foe. When using the term “mind” I am referring to a domain of consciousness that connects us to the outer-physical world through the mechanisms of the sensory organs. Alternatively, the mind can also be drawn inward into a reflective state of awareness. On any given day the mind can change many times, shifting back and forth from its outer function to its inward reflecting state. This mind-shift is a repeated exchange between conditions or habit patterns and the inner awareness that is trying to filter in between our thoughts, habits and senses to guide us. The practice of yoga helps us to slow down and realize the senses play a domineering role on the mind due to various societal factors such as the media and the overall fast pace of the modern urban lifestyle. The foundation for wellness begins with management of the senses. The senses must be disciplined to better access the higher reflective mind for insight, understanding and establishing a balanced life.

It is also important to differentiate between the mind and the brain. The brain is basically a vital organ housed in the skull and includes billions of cell clusters that sit atop of the central nervous system. The brain is responsible for all neural functions, which means that all of the body’s systemic functions are managed and influenced by the brain via the central nervous system. To understand our body we must look to the mind. The body in essence is a mirror of our thoughts, with the brain sending neural responses produced by the amygdala, a part of the brain that is responsible for memory, making decisions and emotional reactions. Research has shown the efficacy of meditation with regards to reshaping the way the brain manages emotional experiences through its capacity to increase awareness.

The brain exists on a completely organic level to transfer information (communicate) in the form of thoughts and emotions to the body and vice versa the body sends signals to the brain, progress reports of its operations. For example, when your body requires food for energy and nutrition it fires off signals to the brain, or when there are hot and cold sensations it also sends a report to the brain so the mind can decide on whether to do something about it? The mind has access to an unlimited field of consciousness and intelligence. As an instrument of awareness it has the capacity for objective or unbiased ideas that are not tainted by habits and conditions of the subjective brain. The brain can either be programmed by the senses or through the field of higher insight, it just depends on the choices we make and the environment that we surround ourselves with. The senses are related to the ego as they influence each other and are stored in the brain as what we memory. Senses, ego and memory are intercorrelated and influence our belief systems and our attitude towards life in general. The point is to demonstrate the interwoven relationship between the brain and mind and how they influence wellness. The mind supports the brain like the breath sustains the body.

Life is a diverse collection of impressions, memories and ideas carried out by the mind through the repeated cycles of karma and rebirth or samsara. Cyclical practices as carried out in Sramanic religions such as Buddhism and Jainism influenced the later Hatha yoga system that is anchored in sadhana or disciplinary practices used to purify the mind-body synergy, a concept I expand on much further in my book Sun, Moon and Earth. Vedantic-yogic thought adheres to the principle that we are not the body or the mind although sub-branches of yoga such as hatha yoga and upavedas like ayurveda teach us how to nurture a sound mind-body relationship to produce true wellness or sattvabuddhi. Wellness involves a purified intellect that produces knowledge and a lifestyle that is not deluded by the ego-senses and conditional thinking.

Karma and the Brain

Science and spirituality are current trends now but the reality is that these two subjects have been intertwined for much of the last century going back to the time of Einstein and his theory of relativity. The concept of yoga as having a scientific basis was being taught by great yogis like Vivekananda, Yogananda in America and by Swami Kuvalayananda in India who was known as the yoga scientist. The law of karma as one of the central tenants of yoga and eastern philosophy in general, has taught countless practitioners to change their mind in order to change their life, just as Swami Sivanana said “be good, do good” and this came from a trained medical doctor. Science can help us understand the molecular-cellular framework behind life and how all things come into existence although it can also become an obstacle to our spiritual unfoldment because science lures in thought and too much thinking can become a distraction from experiencing our true nature as a sentient being. The reprogramming of the brain is known in the field of neurobiology as neuroplasticity and measured by the mind's capacity to attain present moment awareness. This means that the structure of the brain and how it functions in processing experiences can be managed and reprogrammed through greater awareness, as a result of having more attention or increased insight. Karma means action and actions are rooted in the nature of our thoughts. Insight allows a person to understand the root-force behind their actions, thus allowing their inner vision to guide them through *viveka* or the discriminative power of the higher mind (buddhi). *Viveka* not only helps us to discriminate between good and bad choices, it provides insight into the true nature of our existence. It is the doorway to cultivating greater understanding and compassion.

The Mental Battlefield

Great yoga scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita teach us that our inner battles are reflections of our outer battles. Conflict and war can only be eradicated with compassion by cultivating ahimsa (non-violence) in the mind. The mind exists in stark contrast to the ego which operates on patterns of the senses. The mind in its outer function (manas) can serve to connect us to life or bind us, causing pain and suffering and on the other hand the mind's inner function (buddhi) can produce freedom and a sincere mental attitude of inter-dependence. Our thoughts are shaped through many life factors ranging from family upbringing, education and society, although the most influential is the karma acquired over many lifetimes (prarabdha karma). Over thinking can be confusing and at times leave us in a deep sea of worry and fear or if they are positive, thoughts can be inspiring and produce great initiative. Overcoming the mental battlefield begins with compassion and ends in meditation, a freeing device from mind cluttering thoughts. Compassion is measured through self expression and it shapes our view of the world. Compassion is listed as the first principle in the Eight Limbs of Yoga of Patanjali as ahimsa. Mental afflictions (kleshas) produce habit patterns that are often hidden from us and are always changing depending on who we are with, where we are and what we might be doing. Although they can become clearer and easier to understand when we can reflect, through calm introspection and meditation.

Ego is a term that describes the mind's relationship to "things". What are these things? These things are thoughts that blow through the mind as responsive functions of the brain. For example, if we are standing outside and we are enjoying a clear and beautiful day, we usually feel good, inspired, clear and all the qualities that come from a sunny day. Then the wind begins to blow and we start to feel a little different, perhaps cold? Then more wind, gusting stronger and stronger, it blows like a whistle and even an occasional howl and now dust fills the air, we begin to squint our eyes, we see less and our feelings change and a new mood is upon us. As the wind continues to blow the sky becomes covered with clouds and now the shiny warm sun disappears, it's darker where we are now and we do not feel as drawn to being outside and we want to leave this place, we feel uncomfortable and perhaps even agitated and restless and so we move away to another place where things may feel better, calmer, clearer, brighter, but where? We're not sure, and we may even start to feel unsafe, confused etc.. So does this mean that we have no more light, no beauty, no ability to see, to enjoy or feel good? Not at all, it means that what's happening on the outside in this playground or battlefield of life is uncontrollable and unpredictable and has only temporarily come upon us and taken us away from our light, our truth, our true "being" state. Therefore, the mind at times can be like the wind blowing thoughts through the playground of our minds, thoughts that we sometimes hinge to, or cringe and we lose site of who we really are...the luminous Self.

When we can patiently calm the winds of thought (by observation, breath-control, mantra, meditation, lifestyle practices or creative expressions) we can stay ever present with the light of our spirits. That which is changeless is who we really are, that which changes is born of *prakriti*, the divine manifestation. We should learn to enjoy, discover and embrace the dance of mother divine whether inside or outside and stay with our spirit, now and forever...Then the eternal sound of the heart can bathe us with liberty. The two sides of this world reflect two very opposing aspects of our mind. Wellness is ultimately far beyond the mind in the oneness of spirit beyond duality. Read, write, meditate and procrastinate no more, wellness is the very essence of our being, it is our birth right to attain this state and embrace it forever.