

The Convergence of Buddhism, Cognitive Science, and the Meaning Crisis

The Growing Confluence between Buddhism and Cognitive Science

- Interest in the connection between Buddhism and cognitive science is growing, leading to the "mindfulness revolution"
- Mindfulness is becoming popular and can be seen in bookstores, academic discussions, and the public at large

The Interest in Wisdom and Ancient Philosophies

- Wisdom is a hot topic in psychology and cognitive science
- People are seeking wisdom through ancient philosophies like Stoicism
- The hunger for wisdom is evident in the popularity of books on these topics

Psychedelics and Transformative Experiences

- Increasing public and academic interest in psychedelics and their potential for transformative experiences

- Psychedelics have been shown to help with treatment-resistant addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Mystical experiences within psychedelic experiences can lead to transformative changes in people's lives

The Importance of Meaning in Life

- Meaning in life is becoming a significant topic of discussion
- Meaning in life is predictive of well-being and overall life satisfaction
- People are seeking a deeper understanding of what makes life meaningful

The Dark Side: Mental Health Crisis and Loss of Trust in Institutions

- Suicide rates are spiking, and mental health crises are becoming more prevalent
- People are losing trust in public institutions, including politics, the judicial system, and religious organizations
- Nihilism, cynicism, and frustration are becoming more common

The Role of Mythology and Entertainment in Reflecting the Crisis

- Zombies, superheroes, and other mythological figures are popular in entertainment, reflecting a sense of being stuck
- People are constantly talking about crisis, collapse, and apocalypse, which has become pervasive in our culture

The Meaning Crisis: A Unifying Explanation

- The positive and negative factors mentioned above point to a unified explanation: a profound meaning crisis
- The meaning crisis is interdependent with other crises, such as environmental and socio-economic crises

Cultivating Wisdom to Realize Meaning

- Wisdom is about realizing meaning in life and becoming aware of it
- Practices like mindfulness can help cultivate wisdom and self-transcendence
- Self-transcendence is a core human need and is connected to meaning, wisdom, and altered states of consciousness

Altered States of Consciousness and Their Connection to Meaning

- Altered states of consciousness are deeply connected to meaning, wisdom, and self-transcendence
- Humans and other intelligent organisms seek to alter their consciousness, e.g., through shamanism, ritual, flow states, and psychedelic experiences
- Mystical experiences within altered states can lead to transformative changes in people's lives, known as awakening experiences or quantum change

Understanding the Meaning

Crisis and Awakening from It

The Importance of Meaning

We're going to explore the cognitive scientific account of what enlightenment is and why it alleviates suffering from lack of meaning. This has always been a perennial threat since the Axial Revolution. We'll discuss the connection between meaning-making and our capacity for self-deception and self-destruction. The issue of foolishness, which is different from ignorance, will also be touched upon.

Existential Experience and Meaning Crisis

We'll delve into topics like absurdity, alienation, futility, and horror, which are relevant to people's existential experience of a meaning crisis. We'll also explore the idea of meaninglessness, and why more people experience despair.

Cognitive Science and Meaning

Understanding the metaphor of meaning in our lives will lead us into the cognitive scientific investigation of meaning and meaning-making. We will discuss different types of knowing, some of which have been lost due to the meaning crisis. The ancient ways of knowing have been reduced to a belief-centric approach, which is why our culture is so focused on ideologies.

The Role of Therapy and Psychedelics

Therapy and psychedelics play a significant role in recovering lost kinds of knowing and transforming our sense of self and realness. We'll talk about how they are used to address the meaning crisis.

Structural Functional Account of Meaning

By exploring the structure, cognitive processes, mechanisms, and functions of meaning, we can understand how it can fall into dysfunction. We will combine historical accounts and structural-functional perspectives to inform, constrain, and enable each other, ultimately proposing a response to the meaning crisis—an awakening from it.

The Upper Paleolithic Transition

The Upper Paleolithic Transition around 40,000 BCE marked a significant change in human history, with the emergence of art, music, and enhanced cognition. The development of projectile weapons during this time required an increased development of the frontal lobe area, which is crucial for enhancing intelligence.

Conclusion

By understanding the history, cognitive science, and various aspects of meaning, we can awaken from the meaning crisis and address its interactions with mental health, environmental, and socio-economic crises. This is not a simplistic solution, but rather a complex and difficult undertaking that requires rigorous and rational argumentation.

The Cognitive Evolution:

Rituals, Shamanism, and the Development of Human Cognition

The Upper Paleolithic Transition and the Birth of Complex Cognition

- The Upper Paleolithic Transition (30,000 to 60,000 years ago) marked an explosion of human culture and cognition, giving rise to art, music, sculpture, and more.
- This period saw a radical change in human cognition, which was influenced by factors such as near-extinction events, climate change, and more.
- To survive, humans diversified their diet, moved to the coasts, and formed broader trading networks.

Trading and Initiation Rituals: Enhancing Perspective and Emotion Regulation

- Trading rituals enabled humans to communicate and form relationships with strangers, which was essential for the formation of broader trading networks.
- Initiation rituals were created to demonstrate commitment and loyalty to a group, often involving risk, threat, or sacrifice.
- These rituals helped enhance perspective-taking and emotion regulation abilities, which were crucial for trading and maintaining group cohesion.

Shamanism and the Rise of Altered States of Consciousness

- Shamanic rituals, which were pervasive among hunter-gatherer groups, involved cultivated practices for altering consciousness and tapping into enhanced mental and emotional abilities.
- These rituals were based on the concept of exaptation, in which cognitive processes developed for one purpose are reused for another.
- Shamans, as archetypal figures, played essential roles in providing healthcare, reducing discord, and enhancing hunting abilities in their groups.

The Cognitive Benefits of Rituals and Shamanism

- Rituals and shamanism contributed to the development of human cognition by:
- Enhancing perspective-taking abilities, which improved trading relationships and communication.
- Developing emotion regulation abilities, which helped individuals cope with difficult situations and maintain group cohesion.
- Exapting existing cognitive processes for new purposes, such as using enhanced mental and emotional abilities in shamanic rituals.
- Encouraging the exploration of altered states of consciousness, which may have led to further cognitive development.

In conclusion, the evolution of rituals and shamanism played a crucial role in the development of human cognition during the Upper Paleolithic Transition. By enhancing perspective-taking, emotion regulation, and the exaptation of cognitive processes, these practices laid the foundation for the complex cognitive abilities and cultural achievements that define humanity today.

The Role of Shamanism in Enhancing Human Cognition

The Upper Paleolithic Transition and Shamanism

- The Upper Paleolithic Transition marked a sudden explosion in human cognition.
- No significant hardware change occurred in the brain during this period.
- It is more likely that a software change occurred, with shamanism possibly playing a significant role.

Psycho-technologies and the Human Brain

- Technology refers to the systematic use of tools.
- A psycho-technology enhances brain operations.
- Literacy is an example of a psycho-technology.
- Psycho-technologies enhance the software of cognitive machinery.

Shamanism as a Set of Psycho-technologies

- Shamanism consists of psycho-technologies for altering one's state of consciousness and enhancing cognition.
- Shamanic practices include sleep deprivation, singing, dancing, chanting, imitation, social isolation, and sometimes the use of psychedelics.
- The goal is to disrupt the normal way of finding patterns in the world to overcome self-deception.

Disruptive Strategies and Awakening Experiences

- Disruptive strategies help people to have awakening experiences, which are radical transformations in one's sense of self and reality.
- Shamanism involves disruptive practices and attentional practices that disrupt everyday framing, leading to enhanced insight.

Types of Insight Gained Through Shamanism

- Shamans gain insight into patterns in the environment that others might not notice.
- They also gain "mind sight" into other people.
- Participatory knowing allows shamans to "become" an animal, like a deer, enhancing their tracking abilities.

The Shaman as a Multi-faceted Individual

- Shamans combine the characteristics of rock stars, therapists, and artists.
- They can enhance a person's ability to trigger their own placebo effect, leading to better health outcomes.

The Connection Between Shamanism, Meaning Making, and Wisdom

- Shamanism involves manipulating the meaning of things to tap into various types of knowing and altered states of consciousness.
- Shamans are considered wise people, with the word "shaman" meaning "one who knows" or "one who has insight."

In the next part of this series, we will explore more about how shamans enhance their cognition and the importance of this in human meaning-making.