

Conditioned Consciousness (1 of 5) Agitation/Calm

October 10, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

dukkha, liberated, contrasts, mind states, layers, attachment, hindrance, ouch, restlessness, foolish, wise, self, attunement, treasures, spectrum, boundaries, localized, chapel, nourishment, settle

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This will be the first talk in another series on consciousness following last week's talks. I will talk about how different factors of the mind (or mental activities) can affect the quality and characteristics of consciousness (how we are aware of being conscious). If the purpose of these talks does not quite work for you overall, don't worry too much about it. I think what I teach will be of value in other ways.

What I'd like to do is to set up the idea of contrasts: contrasting mind states will have different effects on how we feel aware and how we have a sense of what it is to be conscious. To the degree to which we have a

sense of consciousness, I would suggest that sense can be affected by these contrasting mind states.

Today, the talk is about agitation and calm. Agitation can be coarse, while many people associate meditation with becoming calm. What is not widely known and recognized is that as we become calmer in meditation, we start uncovering deeper and deeper layers of agitation – quieter, more subtle layers that are invisible to us in ordinary states of mind. In fact, some of the states that we recognize as deeper, more subtle agitation might seem like calm states when compared to ordinary agitated states of mind. But when we are deeply calm, we can still see there is a little bit of agitation, tension, or pressure.

Learning to recognize the contrast between calm and agitation, and learning to accept agitation so that we can be aware of it carefully and fully, are important parts of this path to freedom. To emphasize this, one of the classic teachings of Buddhism is that agitation (sometimes referred to explicitly as “agitation,” sometimes “restlessness”) is the last attachment, the last hindrance, the last piece of *dukkha* (“ouch,” suffering) that remains before a person becomes fully liberated. In fact, you have to be fully liberated to let go of the last vestiges of restlessness and agitation. So, if you have some agitation in your meditation, it certainly means you are not fully awakened, but it also means

that you're human. It is part and parcel of being human. How to be with agitation is an aspect of being human that we are working with and becoming wise about.

Calm can arise in all different stages of meditation. There are many different varieties of it. My first really palpable and impactful experience of calm, before I was interested in spirituality, happened when I was 18. I went into a little Catholic chapel in France, and inside the cool ancient chapel with stone walls, this calm descended immediately. Maybe it had to do with the cool, clear, crisp air, the history of the chapel, the atmosphere there, or the associations I had with it – who knows. But I felt the calm settle into my body. I was stunned by it, and I lingered with it for a long time.

Much later, I found myself agitated in rush hour traffic on the Bay Area freeways, and I decided, “Well, I’m here for a while, and I have better things to do than be agitated.” I found a simple modicum of calm to settle into by being still, settling into the seat of the car, looking around at the other drivers, and wishing them well. This was nothing dramatic, nothing that I would want to linger in, nothing I would call “spiritual,” but it was available, and I was content with that.

On the path of liberation, one advantage of calm is that as we become calmer, we are able to see more clearly. As we become calmer, we have access to more

wisdom, skillfulness, and understanding of where to go from here. This includes knowing how to not feed the agitation – how not to get agitated because we're agitated, but rather, to support and nourish the calm: to "feed the calm," in the language of the Buddha. He says that the nourishment for calm is calm. If you do not have any calm, you can't nourish yourself with it, but if you recognize some degree of calm within, even a small degree, then that calm is the food for becoming more calm. In the same way, agitation is the food for more agitation.

So the ability to see the contrast between calm and agitation gives us the wisdom to know which one to attend to the most – not to ignore the agitation, but to learn to tend to the calm enough that we can be calmly aware of the agitation. That way we are not feeding the agitation.

Each of these – calm and agitation – has a different effect on how we experience consciousness (how we experience being aware). Agitation can make our awareness agitated. Agitation is a kind of movement that feels uncomfortable, and so it is localized. You can feel it in a certain place, and it tends to ground, settle, gather, or tie consciousness to a bounded, smaller, tighter place within. Sometimes we are so agitated that it is really hard to even know we're aware. To tune into

what consciousness is like when we're agitated is impossible. It is almost like consciousness is absent.

Calm can have a location in the body, but it tends to have soft boundaries. It tends not to move and jump around so much. It tends to have smooth, relaxed, or porous boundaries that spread out through the body. Sometimes calm, especially mental calm, can feel as if it has no boundaries – so much so that the calm can feel like it is in the room. Even if the room we are actually in is agitated, because our calm is so strong, it spills over into our sense of the room – how we are aware of the room.

One of our most precious resources and treasures is our capacity for attention: our awareness of being conscious. Its characteristics and availability, and the way it supports us can vary a lot depending on how agitated or calm we are.

Today there are two things that you might consider doing. The first is to become attuned to the presence of agitation and calm. Just that attunement alone, that recognition, might be enough. You don't have to fix anything, but what happens when you see agitation and calm clearly? You might find yourself shifting unintentionally in a positive direction just through the clear awareness of them. If you can be calmly aware of your agitation, what happens then? What shifts then? I

am not going to suggest that you become aware of the calm in an agitated way, but if you did that, that would have a different effect.

The second thing to do is to see if you can notice what your sense of being conscious and aware is like.

Sometimes you're more agitated and other times you're more calm. Does your sense of what awareness is, or its location, its qualities, or its characteristics, shift and change depending on where you are on the agitation-calm spectrum?

Finally, I'll say that as we go deeper in this exploration of calm and agitation, one thing we can discover is that a lot of the agitation we experience is connected to our idea of self – our idea of me, myself, and mine. This is one of the ways to get a handle on, or to put a big question mark next to, our agitation: not to make it such a reified thing, but to realize that what is agitated is our idea of self. As we get calmer, our idea of self shifts and changes as well.

The relationship between consciousness and self is one of the fascinating things to discover. We could say that to assert the self is to be agitated. To forget the self is to be calm and wise. To assert the self is to be agitated and foolish. To forget the self is to be calm and wise. Thank you very much. I hope your exploration of calm and agitation makes you wiser.

