

Personal Statement

During my anorexia I knew I would not die unless I starved for many days so I questioned why I felt so hungry. I realised I could stop intense pain by switching my attention to my studies. Through this observation I learnt that the purpose of the mind was not to seek truth, but rather to bring about behaviour. It no longer became my highest point of inquiry and I began to see my mind as separate from myself. I remember being very scared of it and believed the only way to keep it under my foot was to be hyper alert towards sensory input as this is what it responded to.

Under intense starvation, I became highly sensitive towards thoughts and outer sensory input. I experienced intense emotional reactions towards both and in response exerted a lot of effort to constantly monitor my thoughts and my sensory input. I worked backwards and primarily attempted to control my attention rather than my behaviour. I isolated myself and after I completed one intended task I would immediately move onto the next one. I did not allow uncontrolled sensory input and I gave myself no time to think as any uncontrolled thoughts could lead to extreme behaviours.

During my time in hospital my friend gave me a book on Buddhism. Buddhism has explored the mind in detail and one theory that stood out to me was the idea that the mind is stream of impermanent mental events rather than a substantial self.

Before entering university, I researched and contacted numerous researchers at the university of Sussex, home to the centre for consciousness science. I was given a few different opportunities and chose to help a PhD student on his study on how subliminal communication can affect our perception. The aim of the study was to assess whether interpretation bias could be modified outside of conscious awareness using a subliminal training paradigm. The study acknowledged and supported my belief that each tiny moment of sensory information holds great power in affecting our perception of reality.

Whilst ill, my mind would often decide on a goal and cut out everything at the expense of that goal. A few hours later I longer cared for the goal. I did not have any values or consistent purpose and began to feel as though I was multiple different people depending on the time of day. Eventually I realised I was none of these personalities and the Buddhist idea that the mind is just a machine directing itself at a goal at any moment in time made sense. In neuroscience terms, as separate circuits are activated our purpose changes as we carry out the different tasks of our day, however as we believe we have a self, we often search for one purpose to give our lives a sense of meaning. My purpose always falls in the context of conditions. Is there a self that responds to conditions or do the conditions create the self?

The world is filled with so much sensory information. I pursued meditation as it acknowledges the significance of attention and helps you realise it on an experiential level. I attended a 10 day vipassana meditation retreat consisting of 10 hours of meditation a day. It was held in silence so

outer sensory input was cut out and I primarily spent my time studying the sensory input of my mind that no one else had access to. In some ways it was similar to hospital, which also cut us off from the outer world however it was a period of active study as we had to be alert to what was going on in our minds and observe it as if it were non-self. I continued this pursuit and spent a month at a temple in South Korea studying how Buddhists approach the sensory world. The mind is a sixth sense organ in Buddhist theory and thoughts are another form of sensory information. Information from the senses is integrated to create your perception of reality in each moment.

I would like to study sensory information processing and how we decide what we pay attention to. I am also interested in how much of attention is a choice, how much of it is "top down" versus "bottom up". Mental health issues stem from attending to the wrong things and one can become completely aware of this yet still misdirect their attention. It appears we have all the choice when it comes to attention, but memory deficit in each moment is the larger issue which can be a problem if your mind by default focuses on unhelpful things. You've got to have excellent control over your attention to remind yourself in every moment to think more skillfully.

The mind seems to be goal directed and therefore always has an intention regardless of whether you are aware of it or not. I want to know how attention interacts with the goal directed mind. Is attention switching the activation of a different circuit and therefore also a switching of intention whether you are aware of it or not?

We pay attention to the information we believe is most important. Attention generates emotion, which I am interested as this leads to volition. I am interested in whether you can have action without reaction or in more technical terms, action without volition. How meditation changes reality perception is interesting as it promotes a more objective understanding of the world. Objectivity involves a widened attention. In mindful meditation you practice paying equal attention to your thoughts as you do to other sensory information, one is not more important than the other. By deeming mental events as the penultimate sense it becomes the highest point of inquiry and you listen to it over other sensory information. All of us believe we have a self and therefore pay more attention to our thoughts other than other sensory stimuli. I am interested in how the Buddhist perception of the world affects action and volition.

I am also interested in the flow state. In mindful meditation, the world still exists, you just aren't affected by it as you see it objectively. In flow, the outer world disappears from attention so you aren't affected by it. It is not objective yet the sense of self in time disappears in both. Does the perception of time require a perception of self?

I am interested in gaining an understanding of the human mind rather than an understanding of myself. It is not important to find out what I like and dislike as if my mind is unique. Understanding my unique psychology has its values but I am more interested in understanding the commonalities we share that derive from ancient brain structures we all share. Psychology

explores the differences we share, neuroscience explores how we are the same. We are all mostly the same.