

*Resting  
in the Waves:*

*Welcoming the Mind's  
Fluidity*

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Easing Awake Books

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Published by Easing Awake Books, 2020

Carmichael, CA 95608

<https://www.easingawake.com>

ISBN: 978-1-7350737-0-5 paperback

ISBN: 978-1-7350737-1-2 e-book

I am grateful for

- The cover image created by Jens Troeger using [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com) photos by Roberto Delgado Webb and Erika Varju
- Permission to use “The Little Duck” by Donald C. Babcock, The New Yorker, © Conde Nast.
- The patient and careful editing of Daia Gerson

The “Simple Dynamism” section (pp. 75-80) did not appear in an earlier version of this book.

Unless noted otherwise, *sutta* translations are from Bhikkhu Bodhi through Wisdom Publications (199 Elm Street, Somerville, MA 02144).

Printed in the United States

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## *Fluidity of Mind*

Sometimes we don't know what we know. Someone asks me, "Was Jill there the other night?" I say, "I don't think so." But I pause, relax, and let images of the meeting drift into memory. "Oh yes, she was in the third row on the right."

The knowledge that she was present was stored somewhere inside. But it took a while for me to access it.

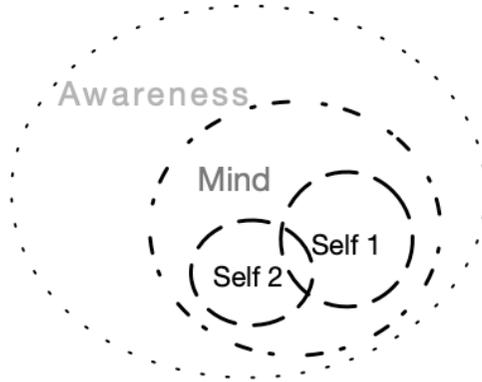
There is a lot that we know without knowing it. A growing body of research documents how information, attitudes, feelings, and inclinations affect us even when we can't bring them into conscious awareness. But with the right tools — hypnosis, meditation, drugs, mental exercises, patience, etc. — we can sometimes access data stored in the shadows of the mind.

There is no hard line between what we know consciously and what we know unconsciously. Information, attitudes, and more come in and out of the shadows all the time. And there is no hard line between what we know consciously or unconsciously and what we don't know at all. We can potentially learn new things anytime.

## *The Mind Is Not the Self*

Awareness, the mind, and our various selves mix and flow together and interact with one another in ways suggested by the diagram on the following diagram.

I use the term *awareness* to refer to all that we know consciously and unconsciously, explicitly and implicitly, knowingly and unknowingly. It is a vast landscape that extends beyond the horizons of the mind.



I use the term *mind* to refer to what we know or remember consciously. At first, Jill was in my hidden awareness, but not in my mind. After reflecting, she came to mind as being at the meeting. The boundaries of the mind are quite fluid. What we know we know can expand and contract.

I use the term *self* to refer to the small subset of the mind with which we currently identify and through which we perceive.

One of the reasons various selves can be so fluid is that each draws a small sampling from the mind and the mind draws from the vast field of awareness. The self that sings a silly song to a child draws on a different set of memories, attitudes, feelings, and inclinations than the self that balances the checkbook. The self that argues politics draws on a different set of factors than the self that comforts a friend.

Some of the selves may mingle and overlap, but they aren't the same.

In this chapter we step back from the small, fluid self and look at the larger phenomena of the mind and its fluidity.

## ***The Mind Is Not the Brain***

The brain has what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead calls "simple location" — we can find it in objective three-dimensional space and time. We can point to where our brain sits inside our skull.

But the mind doesn't have simple location. Thoughts, worries, inspirations, and images are real, but we can't point to where they are.

For example, have you ever seen a blue chicken?

Neither have I. But now there is an image of a blue chicken in my mind and I'll bet there's one in yours. It's real, but it doesn't have simple location. I can't see your chicken and you can't see mine. They exist in the subjective realms of the mind and its imagination, not in the shared objective external world of the brain.

There is a connection between the brain and the mind. Synaptic activity in various parts of the brain correlates with various subjective experiences. But the connection is mysterious — we have no idea how it works. We don't even know which is the cause and which is the effect. Does the thought of a chicken cause a certain pattern of neural firing? Or does the neural firing create the thought? We don't have a clue.

Happiness, contentment, wisdom, and well-being arise within. They don't have simple location. So if we want these qualities, we must work with them internally in the mind.

## ***Four Ingredients***

As we discussed earlier, when we openly and clearly see the processes of the mind-heart, we see four ingredients or factors that shape its content and workings:

1. The world around us
2. Wired-in proclivities
3. Personal history
4. Willpower

Let's look at each of these.

### ***1. The World Around Us***

The first factor is the world around us. It has a huge influence on the mind. To put it bluntly, *we have very little control over what enters or leaves the mind*. We may like to think we're in charge, but we aren't. We have a little influence, but not much effective power.

For example, don't think about that blue chicken — put it out of your mind...

Try a little harder...

The harder you try to get rid of it, the more vivid it becomes.

Where did the bird come from? ...

It came from me. More precisely, when you read my words "blue chicken," it showed up uninvited in your mind. Now, it's like the man who came to dinner — you can't march it to the door and throw it out.

There are two strategies for getting rid of the chicken. One is to concentrate on something else — perhaps a green gopher. If you zero in hard enough, one-pointed focus will

push the chicken away. But it takes a lot of effort and may leave you tired and irritable.

I practiced one-pointed concentration on the breath for twenty-five years. Sometimes the strain left me irritable: If someone broke my concentration, I didn't like it.

Another strategy to get rid of the chicken is to just let it be, without making a big deal of it. Relax with it in a friendly way. In a while, the chicken may fade. But whatever the case, the amiable attitude allows the mind to ease up, open, and feel better, whether the chicken stays or goes.

The lesson of the blue chicken is that we don't have much control over the mind. But with a welcoming attitude, we have some influence.

We can thank Mother Nature for minds we cannot control. Consider two prehuman ancestors strolling through the primordial forest several million years ago. They spotted a saber-toothed tiger in the distance. The sight was upsetting.

One of them had the ability to put the disturbing thought out of his mind. He focused on the sunny sky and the food they were looking for. The other was paranoid. In his distress, he couldn't stop thinking about the tiger.

Which one's DNA do you think we inherited?

The first lived a short, happy life and was eaten before she/he reproduced. The second had a long life mixed with pleasure, pain, and many children. We are her/his descendants.

Evolution bred into us minds that reflect the world around us whether we like it or not. If our minds misrepresent the world, we are like bats flying without sonar.

We aren't always thankful for minds we can't control. The cultural stereotype proclaims the value of independence — we want to be the captain of our ship. But as captain, we actually only have a little influence. We can set the sails and turn the rudder. But the nature of the ship, the ocean, the winds, and the weather have a greater effect.

And quietly we have derogatory words for people who ignore their surroundings: “out of touch,” “narcissistic,” “not grounded in reality,” “crazy,” “self-centered,” “lost in their own world,” and so on.

If we are lost in our inner, subjective experience, we are less likely to survive and reproduce. So we've been bred to be affected by what goes on around us. The world “out there” has a strong impact on the flux and flow “in here.” Sometimes the impact is wholesome. Sometimes not so much.

*When a sensation (e.g., the sound of a bird or a car) enters your meditation, how often do you get absorbed in the perception? How often do you push it away? How often do you just observe?*

Though the forces of evolution gave us responsive minds, they also gave us many biases. This brings us to the second ingredient of the mind.

## ***2. Wired-in Proclivities***

To support our survival and reproduction, our minds need not perceive with total accuracy. It can be an advantage to exaggerate some impressions and ignore others. Some distortions may be upsetting. But if they don't interfere with survival or reproduction, evolution doesn't care because our genes get passed along anyway.

In other words, as the mind maps reality, the map may be distorted. We have no control over these biologically based biases. They happen, and vary from one person to another. But if we understand distortions as distortions, we needn't be fooled by them.

The most obvious distortions and omissions are the result of the limitations in our sensory equipment.

For example, bats emit high-frequency squeaks, which bounce off objects around them. Their sensitive ears use these echoes to map the vicinity. They can track and catch a flying mosquito.

I can distinguish the difference between the acoustics of my garage, a room of stuffed furniture, and an ocean bluff. But track and catch a mosquito in the dark? I'm comparatively deaf.

My cat has great long-distance vision. But like most cats, she's farsighted – close objects appear blurry. However, her sense of smell is vastly more acute than mine. When she enters a new yard or room, she carefully sniffs to create a map based on odors. She takes one whiff of a person or animal and remembers it accurately years later.

I can distinguish the aromas of fresh-baked bread, a sweaty friend, and a mown field. But using fragrance to discern whether the animal hiding in the bush is a cat, squirrel, chipmunk, or dog? Forget it.

I find it hard even to imagine a map of the world based on sounds or smells. The operative word here is *imagine*. We humans are visual creatures. Most of us have five physical senses but rely heavily on sight. We think more in terms of images than sounds, smells, tastes, or touch. From miles

away I can easily see the difference between a seagull, a hawk, an airplane, and a blimp.

We like to think our visual maps are complete. But in truth, they include only a tiny spectrum of reality. We translate this selective sensory information into thoughts that represent the world. These maps are sparse representations.

Other distortions are not based on sensory information but on the perception of threats, enticements, or confusion. These give rise to liking, disliking, and ignorance. Let's look at these proclivities.

### *Threats*

As we create thought-maps, we distill and distort them further. If something is perceived as a threat, the mind highlights it. The threat might be physical, social, or emotional. Rather than using a red highlighting pen, the mind uses attention-grabbing emotions: fear, anger, disliking, or other aversive qualities. This is not something we can control. If something could potentially be a threat, uncomfortable emotions will arise automatically. They just happen.

For example, I was in the kitchen musing about something when my hand brushed against a hot grill on the stove. Instantly the musings evaporated as awareness honed in on my throbbing finger.

The shift from daydream to injury was instantaneous. I didn't reflect, *Hmmm. Maybe I'll come back to these musings later. For now, I think I'll see what's going on with that burning sensation.* Rather, attention shifted immediately and reflexively.

Burns, cuts, bumps, bruises, or anything that threatens the integrity of the body grabs our attention by highlighting it with negative emotions.

The evolutionary advantages of these wired-in reactions are obvious. There are rare neurological disorders in which people don't feel pain. Their instinct to avoid injury is stunted. They don't do very well in the world.

When asked, "Why do we suffer?" the Burmese meditation master Sayadaw U Tejaniya quipped, "We need the motivation."

The threat can be physical or social. We are creatures who rely on others. The "Visual Cliff" experiment illustrates how deeply social instincts are bred into us.

Researchers built a table with a big hole in the middle.



They covered the table and hole with plexiglass. Then they placed a baby on the plexiglass and let him crawl around. When he came to the hole, he faced a paradox. Visually the hole looked like a cliff he was about to tumble off. But tactilely, it felt solid. The scientists wanted to know how he would deal with the ambiguity.

All the infants solved the problem the same way: They looked for their mothers. If the mother looked upset, the baby backed away from the apparent danger. If the mother was calm, the baby crawled over the visual hole.

This social instinct has an obvious evolutionary advantage. Intelligent creatures require a more complex brain, and a complex brain requires a long time to mature. Simpler creatures, such as bees, are born as adults. But intelligent animals require years for their neurology to fully develop.

As a result, during infancy and childhood, we are relatively helpless. The strong social instinct to look to others for cues is one way we manage. Even more important, parents have strong, wired-in instincts to look out for their children. Without these social instincts, the parents' DNA in their kids would die out before it reproduced.

Anything that disrupts our social bonds can signal threat and trigger aversive emotions that grab our attention. Even the look of disapproval in the eyes of a friend can set off our inner alarm.

### *Enticements*

If there are no discernible physical or social threats, aversive emotions may remain quiescent. Our inner alarm is quiet.

However, if something around us can support our health or reproduction, our neural system highlights it with attraction, liking, or other pleasant feelings. Good food, soothing music, a stimulating story, a potential sexual partner, and more can suffuse the body with pleasure and urge us to move toward the source of pleasant feelings.

Neuroscientists find that we are four times more sensitive to threat and pain than to enticements and pleasure. When our distant ancestors had to choose between running from a giant wolf or reaching for a piece of fruit, those who ran away survived better than those who grabbed the food and ignored the predator.

So fear and aversion have a stronger impact than attraction and liking.

Threats and enticements — dangers and attractions — are the most obvious distortions. There are many subtler biases that have served evolutionary purposes too. Anytime there is distortion in our perception, there is some tensing or tightening behind it.

### *Confusion*

If there are no obvious sources of threat or nurturance, but something is ambiguous, the mind highlights it with curiosity, confusion, or tentativeness. These encourage us to look more closely.

### *Liking, Disliking, and Ignorance*

In Buddhism, these three kinds of distortions are called hatred, greed, and delusion — or liking, disliking, and ignorance. They are deeply automated. That is why it's so hard to not think about a blue chicken: Trying to get rid of the chicken is an aversive action, which tells the mind there is a threat. The threat draws attention to the chicken even if this is not our conscious intent. And if we find this frustrating, that is more threat.

But if we relax and let the thought be there, the inner alarm quiets down. In time, the mind loses interest and the thought fades.

Notice that turning the alarm off is not the same as ignoring the signal. Seeing a man running toward me with a big stick sets off a threat alarm. If I try to ignore the alarm, it doesn't work. If I look more closely and see that he is smiling and the stick is just a baton from a relay race, I realize my fear is a distortion. I can relax and the alarm quiets.

It is wise to pay attention to alarm signals — not just to the situation but to the signal itself and what is causing it. If it points to a real threat (e.g., I left the stove on), then we can deal with it. But if it's a false alarm, we will see the distortion as distortion. That allows the mind to relax.

In the text, the Buddha describes the source of suffering in the Second Noble Truth with the Pāli word *taṇhā* — a subtle or obvious tightening of the body, emotions, or mind. If we can relax that tension, the distortion dies down.

*By simply observing the flow of experience, notice when the mind highlights some things and dismisses others. As you notice the emphasis, does the tension in it soften by itself? If not, see what happens when you intentionally relax.*

### **Cognitive Bias**

So far we've looked at distortions based on sensory limitation and on distortions from the big three wired-in signals — aversion, attraction, and confusion.

But there are many smaller cognitive biases. For example, we tend to trust the opinion of someone we like more than someone we dislike. We tend to believe mass media has a stronger effect on others than it does on us. We tend to believe we can discern other people's motivations better than they can discern ours. We tend to give more credence to information that supports our views than to information that undermines our opinions. There are hundreds of cognitive biases that have been researched and documented.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, lists hundreds of carefully researched cognitive biases. Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) gives detailed explorations of many of these.

We cannot remove many biases and distortions. They are wired in. However, if we are aware of the bias, we can adjust appropriately. We can recognize that our perception is slanted and not be taken in by it. We can't avoid bias, but we don't have to be fooled by it. And with practice, the biases may weaken too.

*Which proclivities (impersonal reactions in your mind) are difficult to notice as they arise? Which are easy? Which seem personal? Which are impersonal?*

### **3. Personal History**

There are other distortions that are not as deeply wired in but are nonetheless powerful. These arise out of our personal history.

I grew up in a family where there was little abuse but some emotional abandonment. It shaped my system. Today, my responses to an abusive remark tend to be well measured and with little distortion. But my responses to emotional abandonment can be exaggerated. Despite years of therapy, meditation, and reflection, it's still easy for me to feel left behind or ignored.

However, today I find it easier to recognize these reactions without getting carried away. It's easier to see the biases as biases and not be taken in by them. I still feel them, but take them less personally. They have subsided, but the flavor lingers.

There are entire libraries on personal psychology and the myriad ways life experience can alter our perceptions and motivations. For the purposes of this writing, I'll just mention that being aware of these forces and seeing them realistically is important to spiritual freedom. We may never unwind them completely. But by understanding and

respecting their nature, process, and effects, we are less taken in by cognitive distortions. Cultivating this clarity is part of living a mature spiritual life.

*What in your personal history may distort how you perceive the present? What are some of the distortions? How can you deal with them wisely?*

#### **4. Willpower**

It is difficult to overestimate the effects on our minds of the world around us, wired-in proclivities, and personal history. These forces are mostly beyond our control. But we are not completely bound by them. This brings us to the fourth ingredient of the mind: willpower. Willpower can lift us beyond the constraints of environment, biology, and life experience.

Western cultures put great emphasis on will. But it is puny compared to the first three ingredients. Empirical research suggests that will operates like a muscle. If we use it heavily over a short period of time, it tires and weakens. If we use it modestly over a long period of time, it grows stronger.

For example, most diets require some effort. If I'm surrounded by family and friends who are on the same diet or are supportive of my dietary aspirations, it is easier for me to stay with it. However, if I visit relatives for the holidays who are drinking, eating rich foods, and consuming sweets, it takes more effort for me to stick with my program. There is a greater likelihood that my willpower will be used up and I'll start eating foods that are less healthy.

Will is a precious resource that is best used humbly, wisely, strategically, and patiently. Many of the Buddha's teachings and practices from Dependent Origination to

agenda-less awareness to the benefits of supportive community rely implicitly or explicitly on conservation of effort. The Buddha never suggested we use will as a blunt-force instrument to force ourselves to lean one way or another. Rather, will is used sparingly and intelligently.

There are many practical implications for conservation of effort that we'll explore in later chapters.

*How much willpower do you use in meditation? When is this unwholesome and generating more distractions? When is it wholesome and contributing to peace and clarity? When is it both?*

## ***Increasing Fluidity***

As the mind relaxes and becomes more perceptive, experiences of both the self and the mind become fluid. Part of what makes for a healthy mind and a healthy self is fluidity of awareness — the capacity to adapt easily to changing circumstances.