

Sparks

Blog Post # 1

Have you ever had “sparks” around another person? Someone who seems so special? Another word for sparks is infatuation. The person is so unique, so special, they are unbelievably... right for me. If you are married, you almost definitely had sparks, and probably lots of them, with your spouse during the early days of your relationship.

Where do sparks come from? Our mind is a collection of behavioral habit patterns (i.e., scripts), or at a more basic level, associations between this and that. We see or hear something and it invokes a feeling-tone reaction (e.g., sparks), which may or may not lead to a behavior depending upon several factors such as strength of associations between stimuli and response, and what other activities you currently are engaged in.

Differences in associative connection strength among script elements creates situations where sometimes we react with just a simple habitual response, while other times a situation can trigger (via the associative links) elaborate fantasies that we replay over and over in our minds as sub-conscious/sub-vocal stories. We have many such stories; they play a major role in defining our identity and providing us positions from which we can relate to the world. This relating includes both how we interpret and understand events, and the generation of behavioral responses that we think are appropriate.

How does all this develop? It seems to begin with situations where we disown (or dissociate) our reaction to an event. A male child crying due to a disappointment is told sharply that it is inappropriate for a young man to cry (because the mother is embarrassed by the behavior). Another time a child encounters someone who bullies them and they hold their response inside themselves because they are frightened of what would happen if they stood up to the bully instead (i.e., they fear the possibility of physical pain). A different child is told that she is beautiful and wants others to reinforce this, but is told that it is inappropriate to ask relatives if she is pretty.

What happens to the energy associated with these situations? Does the disappointed crying child all of a sudden magically feel better? Does the fear associated with being bullied magically disappear? Does the desire to be perceived as beautiful just go away? No, the energy does not just go away. It becomes channeled into a fantasy that flows repeatedly through the individual's mind.

The energy of the situation is real: the emotion of being ashamed is real, the emotion of fear is real, and the emotion of desire is real. Since a young man should not cry, it must be someone else, perhaps a young woman or a child who cries when upset. Since the child is too afraid to stand up to the bully, it must be someone else who is not frightened. The energy associated with the situation must be experienced

somehow. So the ashamed child creates a new mental image and the energy is dissipated through a fantasy where the imagined image cries, and not the child. Or perhaps the bully situation is remembered differently, the child not only stood-up to the bully, the child chased them away, in their fantasy. This process of dissociating emotion from our main ego image and projecting it on to another image within our mind that we do not recognize/accept as our own self is one way we create unfounded stereotypes, as well as Samsara (i.e., the realms of being that sentient beings continuously travel through).

Frequently, when a fantasy is created it is played many times, over and over until the energy is dispersed. This repeated playing establishes and strengthens the associations between different parts of the story. It creates a behavioral script that binds together the component associations, so that when a similar situation arises in the future, the same story and method of dispersing energy is activated. In the repeated playing of the fantasy, the story is not always exactly the same. The theme is always the same (e.g., being bullied or crying), but details of the story vary slightly from one telling to another. The behavioral script that becomes active adapts itself to the particulars of the situation. Further, to activate the script, the situation does not have to be exactly the same each time. Rather, it just has to be similar enough to previously imagined situations to trigger the associations.

To a large extent, we are a collection of such scripts (aka schema). When we experience sparks, there has been an activation of one of these scripts. The image that activated the script may have been one that developed as a result of dating a specific person, or perhaps developed as the result of fantasies during adolescence (who was that TV star you always watched). We are not necessarily limited to only having one image/script for dating; we might have a few. Further, we have scripts that cover a range of behavior from dealing with conflict situations to seeking ego reinforcement behavior.

So what do you do when you have sparks with another person? Well if you are not married and looking for someone to date maybe you should follow the “path of least resistance” and let the thoughts flow. Let the fantasies develop on how this relationship could unfold and figure out a way to meet the person. Conversely, if you are happily married, it would probably be best to end the projection using Vipashyana meditation techniques.

The image you see is actually in your head. The external image (i.e., the actual person) activates a script. This activation is perceived phenomenologically (i.e., subjectively) as thoughts with a positive emotional component; the activation is perceived as “sparks”. One of the key components of the script, once again, is that it contains elements of yourself that you identify as belonging to someone else. You aren’t the one who cries during movies, the person in the mental image is. In actuality you are the one who cries in movies, but you don’t accept it, you project it outward onto to others often as a stereotype (e.g., “Blondes always seem to cry during movies”).

In the next post we will look at how Vipashyana meditation techniques can be used to transform this energy to make it part of the path.

Vipashyana Meditation and Behavioral Scripts Blog Post #2

In the last blog post, we introduced the concept of behavioral scripts and discussed how such scripts can control or influence our behavior. A behavioral script is a sequence of actions, or expected behaviors, for a given situation. A behavioral script develops from repeatedly performing the activity in the real world (in which case it is probably a skill) or in a fantasy (in which case it probably is a cognitive obscuration). In either case, the script is normally activated by the perception of an external situation. It is one's response to the situation. The behavioral script becomes a cognitive obscuration when the images/fantasy you have created is projected "outward". That is, instead of realizing that the fantasy is your reaction to the situation, you project your reaction onto an image that you consider to be outside of yourself. In this blog post, we discuss how to use Vipashyana meditation methods to cut through such behavioral thought patterns.

While there are many different methods of Vipashyana meditation, in general, there are two types: analytic and direct perception (Thrangu, 2003). In analytic meditation you analyze things, by thinking about them from different perspectives. The key word is thinking: It is appropriate to form mental questions and apply them to the problem. One must stay focused on the analysis, but one can shift analysis frames as needed.

In contrast, in direct perception, rather than trying to understand some concept or situation you instead watch where thoughts arise from and where they go, with the goal of understanding this process. Thoughts arise continually during this meditation, but the goal is to avoid identifying with the thoughts and images that arise and follow after them (i.e., not to let the fantasy flow), but rather to stay focused on the process of watching their arising and dissipation. Occasionally these two approaches are applied sequentially, analysis and then direct perception.

In most Buddhist teachings I have seen, these two techniques are normally applied to either external appearances and/or the location of the mind. With respect to external appearances an analysis might be conducted that demonstrates that whether a stick is longer or shorter than another stick depends on the length of the other stick, for example. This dependent origination reasoning is meant to help one perceive the relative nature of the reality.

With respect to the location of the mind, an investigation might be performed that tries to identify where the mind is located by applying direct perception questioning such as "Is the mind located in the heart region?" In direct perception meditation,

one does not generate thoughts (e.g., “where is the mind”), but rather rests “perception” on the question. That is, you focus on the question and do not follow after any thoughts that arise. If thoughts do arise (which they will) then you bring the your mind back to the question. In general, you try to rest your mind in emptiness while simultaneously keeping it focused on the question you are examining.

These methods can also be applied to our behavioral scripts. Let’s say that you are having sparks about a person. You smile when you see the person, they smile back at you and you start up a conversation... Or, alternatively, instead of following the thoughts, you instead analyze the situation by asking yourself, “Who does this person remind me of”? Typically, when sparks flare, there are fantasies (e.g., imagined conversations) that become active forming a script. You should focus on the fantasy, the inner dialogue, and ask, “What is behind this?”, “Where did this come from”? With some persistence, you should be able to recall a situation where you felt positive emotion towards someone who looked like the real world person. It might have been a parent, a teacher, or someone else. In a historical situation, for example, you might have known a teacher that you were really attracted to, but the ages were way wrong, so instead of acting out your desires, you created a fantasy within your mind instead. That script remained in your mind, to be activated when meeting someone similar.

Once you have found the original real incidents that gave rise to the fantasy and analyzed them enough to understand them, you then want to cut the thoughts off. You accomplish this by shifting your meditation to direct perception. In direct perception, you cut through the thoughts by first recalling that this is a fantasy that started in the past, and then just look at the thought elements. Don’t think about the arising thoughts (that would be an analytic meditation), but just look at them. They will quickly dissipate. A key aspect of this practice is not to identify with any of the characters in the script/story. If you do, then the thoughts will be off to the races, and you will start playing the fantasy again and again in your mind. Conversely, if you just look at the thoughts they will eventually subside.

Now why do we want to do this? In the next posting to the blog, we will discuss how cutting through habitual patterns helps you on the path.

Kleshas and the Path Blog Post #3

In the past two blog posts we have discussed how situationally activated thought patterns, known as behavioral scripts, can become active and influence behavior. We used the example of how having sparks (or becoming infatuated) with another person can lead to an increase of thoughts associated with dating. In addition, we have also discussed how Vipashyana meditation can be used to cut through these

behavioral scripts. In today's posting we discuss how cutting through such thought patterns helps you advance on the path.

A fundamental tenet of Buddhism is that all sentient beings can become a Buddha, because they possess Buddha Nature. Buddha Nature, however, is obscured in sentient beings by kleshas, which are mental states that cloud the mind and lead to unwholesome actions. The behavioral scripts we have been discussing are prime examples of kleshas. A behavioral script becomes active when the environment provides appropriate cues. The running of the script is experienced as a thought based fantasy that runs repeatedly through your mind (which may or may not lead to behavior depending on the circumstances).

One of the metaphors that are used to describe how Buddha Nature is obscured in sentient beings is that the Buddha Nature is the sun and obscurations are the clouds. The behavioral scripts we have been discussing describe the process through which clouds come into being and the Vipashyana meditation is the weather front that comes through and sweeps them away. Just as cloud cover can be thick or minimal, the "density" of obscuring thoughts can vary as well. Well-worn thoughts, or narratives that you strongly identify with (i.e., you strongly identify with one of the characters in the fantasy), usually require more effort to overcome. Typically you need to spend more time in analytic Vipashyana meditation analyzing the character to see what it represents. The goal is to quit identifying with the character and to cut through to the underlying brightness of Buddha Nature.

A second way that is used to describe progress and back-sliding on the path is moving towards or away from brighter lights. This descriptive approach comes from the bardo teachings of Padmasambhava. A bardo is a gap or a transition from one state to another. Often this refers to the changes that occur at death. The bardo teachings on death describe three distinct stages: the bardo of death, during which your physical and subtle bodies die and start to disband; the bardo of dharmata during which your conditioned being, or mind, dissolves and falls (briefly) into the ground (i.e., Buddha Nature); and, the bardo of becoming during which you begin the process that leads to a new rebirth.

During the bardo of dharmata you perceive very bright lights associated with the pure manifestation of the Buddha families. If you follow one of these lights you end up in a pure realm. In contrast, during the bardo of becoming you see six dull lights that represent the realms you can take rebirth in. These are the impure manifestations of the Buddha families and represent the six realms of Samsara. The white light is associated with the god realm, the red light with the jealous god realm, the blue light with the human realm, the green light with the animal realm, the yellow light with the hungry ghost realm, and the dark gray light with the hell realm. Moving towards one of those lights causes you to take rebirth in one of those realms and is the same as letting a behavioral script become dominant. The dominant script has the same emotional tone as the realm you are going to (e.g., angry, hell; pride,

Mike.young@cognition-only.com

god realm; ignorance, animal realm). These movements towards dullness and more mentation or brightness and less mentation represent movements along the path.

We actually encounter bardos all the time, not just during the death and rebirth processes. They arise when we have to change the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. For example we might lose our job, get divorced, become very ill, or have to move to another location. In doing so, we find that some of our stories we tell ourselves no longer apply. Any life change that forces us to look hard at our self-identity can trigger a bardo-like experience.

During one of these experiences, the thought energy associated with the story is freed up. Where does it go? If you are practiced in skillful means, you will try to redirect the energy into mindful awareness, which is experienced as increased “brightness” of the world, or warmth somewhere in your body. A less positive alternative would be that you will just let the energy run free and then be surprised when you run into that “perfect person”, or encounter a great new movement to join, or discover some great new music that perfectly captures the way you feel. In these cases the freed up energy activates a new behavioral script, one that may have been inhibited by another script, or just not as dominant. From one perspective, this is the energy of karma keeping us spinning through samsara. We have just exhausted one set of karmic propensities and activated another.

You can also trigger bardo experiences through meditation practice. For example, koans (questions or anecdotes that cannot be solved through logical reasoning) are used in the Zen tradition to disrupt our clinging to behavioral scripts as a fundamental component of our self-identity. Koans can be used to demonstrate to individuals that no matter how smart they are, their intelligence cannot solve the koan. If an individual has as part of their identity that they are very smart and can solve any problem, they will soon discover that they are not really that smart at all, forcing an adjustment in their identity script since working on the koan cannot be approached in the normal problem solving manner. However, if the individual lets go of the script, then it frees up energy that can be transformed into greater awareness and brightness.

In sum, there is an inverse reciprocal relationship between “brightness” and thoughts. As thoughts decrease, brightness, or awareness (rigpa), increases. Cutting through ego scripts is one way to achieve this and to progress along the path towards Buddhahood.