**Chapter 3. Promises and Pitfalls**

Three centuries after Rene Descartes, the 17th century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist who said, “I think, therefore I am,” the importance of conscious awareness predominates over our life. The bias towards this mode of thinking overshadows other modes, namely intuition and nonconscious processing. However, the supremacy of conscious awareness is being challenged *(Chapter 2)*. Recognition is growing that nonconscious activity, driven by the contingencies of the moment, is of similar if not of greater importance in how we respond to events and problems. Nonconscious processing may itself be composed of different aspects, although it’s unnecessary to consider them all because the troublesome monkey mind is a product of a specific subset, one that includes the interpreter and its rational and conscious attempt to understand and respond to the world. Those are the aspects of mind that are considered in this chapter.

***Active and Passive Awareness***. Researchers associate conscious awareness with different levels, types, or states, including self-aware, minimally aware, perceptual, situational, introspective, observant, error-correction, etc. One unorthodox way to simplify this complexity is to categorize the distinct types into two major categories: active and passive awareness. Active awareness refers to taking actions in response to what you perceive. You step outside, observe that it is raining, and recognize the necessity to wear a raincoat and retrieve the umbrella. This active and appropriate response to circumstances includes the error-function aspect of monkey mind. This morning you feel stressed about the job interview with the prestigious firm you have dreamed about. Your mind is imagining numerable circumstances that could go awry and diminish your chances of getting the job. The choice, or error-correction, is to cut-off this active barrage of conceptual thinking, calm the mind, and focus on all the preparation you have done. Another example of active awareness and error-correction is trying to correct my implicit biases since I wish to be a better person, or at least return to the better person I thought I was. The role of active awareness, then, is to respond flexibly, to correct, when the automatic actions of nonconscious activity require correction. In this way, active awareness helps to smooth out, deal with errors, disturbances, and glitches in your perceptual experience.

In contrast, passive awareness has a more observant, aesthetic, and unmediated quality to it. This awareness is what observes and enjoys a beautiful sunset or a moving musical performance. In passive awareness, no action exists beyond the perception. J.F. Martel, a Canadian author, screenwriter, film, and TV director captured the difference between passive and active consciousness well. He observed that “Sensations are the immediate data of consciousness. Before the intellect reorganizes it according to general ideas, reality is a sensuous affair through and through. That’s why it isn’t wrong to speak of aesthetic experience as unmediated. There is always a moment, before the intellect does its thing, during which reality reveals itself to us directly. Something exists before we name it, before we attribute a function to it, before we subordinate it to our ideas, beliefs, and judgments—before ‘we’ come into play at all as rational subjects. This is what I call the Real. It isn’t generic reality but the raw Real that comes to us in works of art.”

Both active and passive awareness constitute internal, pre-configured plans that are future based and memories that reflect the past. Hence, the pleasure of a beautiful sunset occurs because of the associated emotions of watching such a sunset with a loved one and the pleasant memories of previous ones.   
 ***Error Correction and Creativity***. Error correction is a normal aspect of active awareness, but monkey mind arises when the mind gets stuck in this mode. Getting stuck in error-correction mode is the mind’s version of saying, “If the only tool is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail.” Meaning that if your only tool in your toolbox is the monkey mind, then every situation looks like a problem that needs correction. Consider, however, what life might be like if you did not perceive everything in terms of problems or errors needing correction. In that state of mind, you could use the disagreement with the boss as an opportunity to show her how much you care about the company. Or, you could view the paper due in class as a chance to learn something new and not a burden. Imagine the psychological relief this more positive attitude could bring, and how much more smoothly and creatively life might run.

As a group, creative individuals perceive problems as opportunities rather than seeing them as burdensome. Glitches and unexpected events become opportunities to learn, grow, improve, or change in ways that leaves them better off than before these problems occurred. In reality, this change in perspective changes nothing other than the *interpretation* of the information you are processing. Sometimes, unexpectedly, the new interpretation comes as an intuition or dream. The story of August Kekule, a German chemist in the mid-1850s obsessed with the structure of carbon-based compounds is a good illustration. The problem for him was that no one could figure out how carbon atoms organized themselves to form these molecules. Kekule claims that one day he dozed off and had a dream. In the dream he saw atoms whirling and dancing before his eyes. The atoms reassembled themselves into long rows, moving about in snake-like motion. As he watched the snake dance, he observed the snake began devouring its own tail. After waking up, Kekule saw the vision as an opportunity to resolve the problem of the structure of the carbon molecules. The vision of the snake eating its own tail led Kekule to imagine the structure of the benzene ring—a chain of six carbon atoms organized in a circle, as a ring. Because of this foundational intuition, science today regards Kekule as a principal founder of the chemistry of carbon-based compounds. As Louis Pasteur noted, “chance favors only the prepared mind.” By this, Pasteur probably meant that an intuition would only be properly interpreted by a mind mentally focus on the task at hand and prepared to be enlightened by the results.

Monkey mind arises and remains active when every situation is perceived as a problem, the solutions are unrecognized, and the mind continues to apply error-correction strategies to resolve the issue. When that approach fails, monkey mind ramps up the frustration, stress, and fear, and this failure further motivates the problem-solving approach. This positive feedback loop gives energy to the obsessive, inner-critic –– the unhinged interpreter of the monkey mind. How the mind gets stuck in problem-solving mode is speculative, although in *Chapter 8*, I describe in more detail factors that feed this turbulence. The greater interest is whether you can do something about it. The insight to keep in mind is that the solution to the psychological challenges is embedded in the activity of the mind, but because this solution is not recognized, attended to, and remains unimplemented, the madness continues.

In the chapter on self-parenting (*Chapter 11*), I treat the monkey mind as an undisciplined child that has not learned all the tools in her toolbox and needs to learn how to use them all. Thus, one solution is to grasp the problem as an opportunity to learn and grow. The problem is even more directly addressed by changing the primary reason for monkey mind, which is getting stuck in the past and future (*Chapter 12*). That solution is to focus on present-moment perception using mindfulness meditation, an effective method for changing this aspect of thought while bypassing thinking itself. That is the power of this technique. If the particular problem is emotionally wrenching so you cannot dissociate from such a strong emotion to observe and experience mindfully, then a strategy to distance yourself from the problem may be necessary before trying other solutions. Consider the following *Question-to-Ponder* and then try the following *How to Cultivate an Intuitive Mind* exercise before moving on.

**QUESTION-TO-PONDER**  
*Do you have a problem that is vexing you? Identify it. Why can you not resolve it? And how would its resolution affect you?   
  
Write anything related to the problem and its resolution that comes to mind.*

**HOW TO CULTIVATE AN INTUITIVE MIND**  
***Distance Yourself From the Problem***

*You often have a self-centered view of the world, leading you to imagine all the negative ways a problem could affect you. This might explain why you become a better chess player when you are observing a game rather than participating as a player.  
  
Therefore, pretend that the problem is unrelated to you. Put distance between you and it. Visualize yourself as an observer and not a participant. You will do well in tempering emotions so they won’t interfere as much by accepting the problem objectively. Imagine that the problem is happening to a friend: “My friend Mary is unemployed. I feel for her but she needs to stop whining, dust off her resume, and start submitting it to other companies.” This distancing helps you avoid (or minimize) the ego-based emotional reactions that arise.*

***The Brain’s Perspective***. A biological function of conscious awareness appears to be dealing with problems, deviations, and errors that interrupt the flow of nonconscious processing. Active, conscious awareness has evolved for this specific purpose and dominates in those situations. When a problem occurs giving rise to this problem-solving aspect of mind, nonconscious processing recedes, giving way to the error-correction methods of the dominant conscious awareness. Nonconscious processing continues to work in the background, but persistent issues become magnified in awareness and this increased focus affects daily life because the additional stress, fear, and anxiety further obscure the normal activity of mind. This negativity impacts the ability to function well. If the effect on mood, deliberation, and behavior persist, then more severe psychopathology can arise. And psychopathology forms the basis for disorders like autoimmune and emotional maladies, depression, anxiety, heart problems, addictive behaviors, suicidal ideation, and even schizophrenia. In a genuine sense, rational, conceptual, logical awareness suffers from the “dis-ease” of monkey mind.

To understand this psychological relationship from a fresh perspective, it is helpful to consider what neuroscience research has to say about it. While the full story of the human brain is still being written, enough is available to conclude that the popular understanding of what the ego and personality are and how they relate to monkey mind is very rudimentary. Experience and intuition are the primary sources of information about the overlap and association between personality, ego, and monkey mind. The word ego has become an overused word and has lost most of its significance in daily conversations. As a result, there is only minimal understanding of what the word refers to and the magnitude of its power. In the present context, ego refers to impulses, biases, conceptual thought, and actions that are most responsible for producing and perpetuating the monkey mind.

Scientists focus these views a bit by assuming that the ego, personality, and monkey mind have a neural basis. Francis Crick, who along with James Watson discovered the structure of the DNA, wrote a book in 1994 titled *The Astonishing Hypothesis*. In it, Crick opines that “a person’s mental activities are entirely due to the behavior of nerve cells, glial cells, and the atoms, ions, and molecules that make them up and influence them.” Many neuroscientists have concerns with this extreme view—that we are our biology—but the definition captures the essence of a modern neuroscience perspective concerning the relationship between mind and brain. This strict materialism serves as a good starting assumption.

**QUESTION-TO-PONDER**

*If personality (your sense of self), ego (the self-esteem or sense of self-importance), and monkey mind (obsessive rumination) have common origins, what aspects of personality (nervousness, fear, calmness, certainty, inability to act, etc.) do you associate with monkey mind? Do you recognize these traits as unchangeable or as something you could alter?*

***Seat of Personality***. Barbara Lipska lost her mind in 2015. She describes her unusual experience in the book, *The Neuroscientist Who Lost Her Mind: My Tale of Madness and Recovery*, published three years later. At the time of her tragedy, Barbara was a neuroscientist and Director of the Human Brain Collection Core at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland. If anyone should have recognized the changes that her brain and personality were going through, it was Barbara. But she did not. Barbara had been “an energetic, determined, ambitious researcher, devoted to her work, family, and running marathons.” But the year 2015 brought her grim news—a diagnosis of brain cancer. As expected, she started taking medications for it.   
 What was unexpected was that the cancer therapy started her on a downward spiral of change into someone else, and as she describes it, “not someone she liked.” Her description of her new personality is heart wrenching, “She was angry, cranky, demanding, insistent, unreasonable, intolerant, and sometimes a danger to herself and others. She made bad decisions. One day, she tried to walk home alone from a supermarket. She got lost, urinating on herself, eventually hitching a ride home to a house she couldn’t recognize or point out to the driver. She was mean to her beloved grandkids, and rude to medical personnel who tried to help her. She saw menace in situations that were nonthreatening, and missed the real dangers of insisting on doing the things she’d always done, like driving.”  
 Looking back, Barbara is uncertain whether the cancer, the medications, the stress in her life, or all three produced her personality changes. What she is certain about is that the injury to her brain occurred in her frontal lobes. Malfunctioning of the frontal lobes led to a loss of what she knew as “herself.” She lost control of this sense of self and “all the rules about where and when to do certain things, and how to communicate, became irrelevant to her.” As she explains, “They were inaccessible, for all practical purposes nonexistent.” In a passage in her book, Barbara sums up the uncertainty of her experience and the magnitude of the consequences when the brain no longer works as expected. She explains that “Despite all my years of studying brain disorders, for the first time in my life, I realize how profoundly unsettling it is to have a brain that does not function.”  
 When the malfunction occurs in the frontal lobes, the area of the brain just behind the eyeballs, the consequences are severe. The left frontal lobe is the same area necessary for Gazzaniga’s interpreter, the ongoing internal narrator of one’s life (*Chapter 2*). The frontal lobes are the seat of the personality and equally important, the seat of monkey mind. I discuss these associations in more detail in *Chapter 6*.

Barbara’s descent into mental illness because of treatment for metastatic cancer is extreme, and yet the journey is also a journey of recovery and a return to sanity. A brain that does not function and has a direct effect on the most intimate aspect of being, on who and what you are is a poignant story. Barbara’s story points to the constraints imposed by our biology. But her determination not to give up and to bring the disorder under control overcame that biology. Her story is one of hope and of the power of Original Mind to overcome extreme difficulties.

***Process of Individuation***. As previously described *(Chapter 1)*, wiring up the brain with its 100+ billion neurons and 10X the number of support cells takes a long time. Neuroscientists estimate each neuron connects or contacts an average of 10,000 other cells. This ability to contact so many others means that the total number of synaptic connections made between neurons is astronomical. Achieving this level of connectivity makes normal development a slow process, taking the first 20-30 years of life to complete. Within that time frame, and for many reasons still unknown, the frontal lobes get connected last. One likely factor is that for nerve fibers to function well and conduct brain signals properly, an insulation protein called myelin must cover them. This myelination is much like insulating standard wires to properly conduct electricity. Myelination is a slow process and the reason teenagers show reduced cognitive control and exhibit impulsive sex, food, and sleep habits well into their twenties.

Awareness of the normal activity of the mind, but in particular the interaction between conscious and nonconscious mind manifests early in development. Carl Jung proposed that a sense of self occupies the center of the personality (the personal identity) and that ego occupies the center of consciousness, of awareness. Thus, ego is the esteem or self-importance developed towards the larger self, and can be seen as humble, arrogant, important, unimportant, intelligent, or stupid. Jung argued that from birth every individual has an original sense of wholeness (self), and with maturation around the ages of 2-5 years, a separate ego crystallizes out of that original unity. He called this process ego-self differentiation or individuation. The schism in the personality that this individuation process generates brings with it several problems.

According to Jung, individuation is a psychological process that emphasizes the “importance of the individual psyche and the personal quest for wholeness.” Jung saw the lifelong process of differentiation of the ego out of each individual’s conscious and unconscious elements of self. For him, individuation, the sense of the unique personality, is the primary task of human development. His ideas about ego-self separation give a useful psychological basis to the ego-based personality that manifests in monkey mind and in conscious awareness. This also provides a useful perspective on how the self relates to nonconscious activity.

When I turned three, I recognized the separate existence that developed between me and my siblings. The awareness caused a sense of disappointment that was earth shattering, as I recognized that when I wished to play, my older sister didn’t express the same desire. Prior to this awareness, I lived a kind of undifferentiated world, as if what I wanted was what everyone else wanted. At three years of age, however, my sister and I became separate beings with separate thoughts. Much later, during undergraduate training in psychology, I learned that this separation or individuation is a normal process that all of us undergo at an early age. The process reflects the expression of what psychologists call a theory of mind, or the ability to distinguish self from others, and to know that others have different thoughts. Theory of mind develops in childhood and continues for the next 20+ years. For me, this maturational process of individuation marked an unambiguous beginning of a psychological separation from my siblings and others, an onset of distinctiveness, and the sense of a unique individuality.

**QUESTION-TO-PONDER**

*What memories do you have of individuation and the development of a theory of mind? Do you recall a time before you became an individual self (before individuation)? How old were you when these changes occurred? What was the world like?*

***Ego as Virtual Me.*** As I developed a theory of mind and my personality matured, I began to associate ego with a “virtual me” (meaning a false, phantom-like, and not an authentic identity). This sentiment began with the sense of a growing distinction between the real me (my Jungian self) and my developing ego. I recall, for example, wondering why I acted a certain way around some friends and differently around others, and still in a unique way with family members. I felt like a chameleon, adopting the traits of those around me to get along and please them. Slowly this dense constellation of thoughts, expectations, and perspectives coalesced and hardened, and I experienced this created reality as the actual me. However, questions about the real me continued from these early experiences.

A virtual me, or false self as some have described it, develops in all individuals from responses to the earliest experiences following birth. Many of these past experiences have to do with questions about safety and the nature of the environment you find ourselves in, “Is this a safe place?” When the environment is not safe, innate defense mechanisms, expectations, and postures are engaged that protect the fragile personality. Indeed, for a sizeable portion of infants everywhere, the world is not a very safe place. According to the World Health Organization, every year about 2.5 million babies around the world die within their first month of life. Thus, psychological defensive strategies to survive malnutrition, diseases, indifference, abuse, etc. develop early in life. The result of engaging these defense mechanisms and developing a sensitivity for your place in the world is what the virtual me is.

Hence, the virtual me evolves as a necessary creation of the mind trying to protect itself from events that could inflict psychological injury. Its function is to deflect harmful energies, including the childish and cruel behavior suffered at the hands of siblings, parents, and strangers. Personally, the virtual me provided a defensive shield protecting me from the taunting behavior of bullies during middle grade school. Later, this shield helped softened the blow from the uncertainties while developing a professional career. For others, this self-protective virtual me safeguards them from truly great harm, like mental and physical abuse. While I was fortunate not to experience serious injuries, my story shows how necessary this protection is for everyone. Because it is necessary, I prefer to call it “virtual” rather than “false” since there is nothing false about ego.

As my capacity for language and for knowing myself and the world grew, the virtual me grew. The personality reflected became more vocal and more identified with who I was. I learned to rationalize, reason, and generalize information to keep the stories consistent with my past and present experiences. The attempt to keep things logically consistent via my interpreter strengthened the virtual me. Events in my environment, especially those that created uncertainty, further fostered this reinforcement and made the virtual me increasingly more real. While the virtual me developed and grew in strength, my real self receded into the background. The moment-to-moment changes I experienced fed this growing separation. Then, beginning in my early 40s, awareness of this separation gulf and the unfolding dysfunction created a midlife crisis that later morphed into a spiritual crisis.

Everyone is different and there are many reasons for midlife crises, including the recognition that you are mortal and death becomes real. These growing questions can lead to a reevaluation of life choices. For me the crisis was more about the apparent absence of meaning or significance in my life and in what I was doing as a career. Psychologists suggest that following ego-self separation, a return to a conscious rediscovery of the original unity occurs. The result may lead to a resolution of this separation. This return to self, or return to Original Mind, follows a perception of unity, and typically happens during the second half of life.

Questioning my choices overlapped with my growing concern about the meaningfulness of life and the conflict manifested as a midlife and spiritual crisis. The eventual outcome was a resolution and transformation in my perspective. I experienced a reconciliation of ego-self differentiation and a recognition of my true self and original nature. I describe this personal experience and its link to monkey mind and Original Mind in more detail in the last part of the book (*Chapter 13*).

**QUESTION-TO-PONDER**

These are questions that get to the heart of how well you know yourself and who you are.

* Are you experiencing an adolescent, mid-life, spiritual, or other crisis?
* What is the essence of that crisis?
* Do you know your true self?
* Do you distinguish between true self and ego self?
* Do you act differently when in the company of other people? At work? At home?
* Do you reflect the mood of those around you?
* Are you sensitive to your own needs?
* What do you enjoy doing when no person is watching?
* If you had no fear or financial concerns, what would you do?
* Whom do you love unconditionally?

***The Mind’s Conjoined Twins***. Based on my studies of the mind-brain and personal experiences, I recognize that normal waking consciousness has at least two aspects or impulses that relate directly to monkey mind (*Chapters 4 and 5*). The AAECC and AFRAID impulses represent two sides of the same coin, though not associated with the two different brain hemispheres. While both impulses are energetic, one impulse is more erratic and associated with monkey mind, while the other is calmer and more controlled and associated with Original Mind. The active, adaptable, energetic, curious, and creative or AAECC impulse exhibits a playful character and an urge to engage the world of ideas and forms. This open, positive, and outwardly-oriented energy provides the motivating force for Original Mind. The other aspect, the shadow side of AAECC mind is the avoidant, fearful, resistant, arrogant, inflexible and distrustful or AFRAID impulse. You cannot undo, only block the playful and calm AAECC impulse. In contrast, the AFRAID impulse, linked to conscious awareness, rational deliberation, the ego, and interpreter, is under conscious control.

As Daniel Smith in his book *Monkey Mind: A Memoir of Anxiety* describes it, ego-based processing is thinking that is “solipsistic, self-eviscerating, unremitting, vicious, destroys unity and produces a mind capable of scattered deliberation. Such thinking is also restless, whimsical, fanciful, inconstant, confused, indecisive, and uncontrollable.” This AFRAID or ego-based inclination operates in the past and future modes. The AAECC impulse, in contrast, while similar in energy, differs in its other, present-centered nature, and selfless attachment. Comparable to conjoined twins, The AAECC and AFRAID impulses share commonalities, yet show distinct qualities and create different opportunities and problems for the individual.

While both compulsions are engaged in the normal course of life, the fears and pressures of modern day-to-day living create an imbalance. Modern pressures include interactions with a greater diversity of people. They involve comparing oneself to impossible standards of beauty, social interactivity, or accomplishments. They reflect increased levels of specializations, increased efficiency of everything, and an increased pace of life. These modern pressures engage the AFRAID more than the AAECC impulse, with the consequence that Original Mind recedes into the background of a harried life.

Michael, a graduate from the Wharton Business School, is a typical example of someone living the modern lifestyle. After graduating from business school, Michael landed a prestigious job with a six-figure starting salary. He found himself in need of a nice car to take clients around town and bought himself a 2020 BMW 7 Series luxury car. He then realized that to be truly successful, he needed a sizeable house to entertain his clients. To decorate this large house, he found the need to buy expensive furnishings and paintings. Sadly, all the material objects Michael accumulated to satisfy his life requirements did nothing to improve his quality of life. In fact, the more money he made, the more objects he seemed to need and get, the less happy he felt. Michael’s story is an all-too-familiar story. Michael felt afraid of failing and did whatever was necessary to maintain appearances. By the end of the second year on the job, Michael began suffering from depression, anxiety, and fatigue. To deal with the psychological problems that were making him miserable, he started therapy with a recommended psychiatrist who could help him keep up with all this pressure through counseling and medication. Like Michael, many individuals turn to drugs, legal and illegal, and to even more destructive behavior.

AFRAID-based thinking produces suboptimal and irrational behaviors that result in mental and physical fatigue, depression, anxiety, and stress. Similar to an exhausted gymnast, problems arise just from the constant rumination and the flitting of mind from thought-branch to thought-branch. Jennifer Shannon in *Don’t Feed the Monkey Mind* describes anxious individuals who go through life as if “hooked up to an IV drip of fear.” That is Michael’s case. The overwhelming, chronic, and deleterious challenges from this burden destroy brain cells and their connections. These cells and branches become dry, brittle and literally die from the lack of nutrients and support. Resisting, avoiding, distracting, and pacifying the AFRAID impulse only encourages and compounds the problem— “what we resist, persists.” For people like Michael, the only real answer is to train the mind to concern itself less with appearances, with pleasing others, with being fearful, and to focus more on curiosity and creative outcomes. The result of this change is a more positive, creative, and fulfilled life.

**QUESTION-TO-PONDER**  
*What is your basic personality impulse?*

* *Is the urge an energetic, curious, and creative (or AAECC) impulse?*
* *Is it an avoidant, fearful, resistant, arrogant, inflexible and distrustful (or AFRAID) impulse?*

*Which of the following traits describes you? Introvert/extrovert; social/antisocial; passionate/uncaring; passive/active; talker/listener; artist/scientist; skeptic/believer.*

*List other aspects of your personality that reflect these basic impulses and ascertain which list is longer. Does the list reflect real differences or simply more attentiveness to one personality type?*