

Positively Empty

Meditation is often seen as the way we put our inner world of thoughts and feelings in order, like through therapy. Yet, what we may discover is that these mental phenomena are not truly an inner world. The apparent inner world of thought and feeling is dependent, moment-by-moment, on the outer world. What happens when we withdraw the mind from the senses in meditation is that the inner world begins to fall apart. We can then be trying to make sense of these fragments, looking for meaning in them in relation to the outside world, interpreting them in various ways, only to find the apparent inner world elusive and unstable. (On another level, we may have been assuming that the brain contains this inner world of memory but it does not hold any such thing. The brain is an extension of our sensory system, a sense base.)

Our memory, imagination and dream-world, which we may have taken to represent our inner world, are actually not independent of the senses and their input – our imagined inner world relies on our feelings (it is actually often an expression of them), and our feelings in turn rely on our sense contact with the world to be generated. It is then in the absence of sense data that these feelings generate thought and new feeling, creating the illusion of an inner world. This creation is then compared with or projected onto the outer world which in turn fills in the gaps in our inner representations. Hence our subjective and objective experience mixes and creates delusion within the mind. We are making something out of our experience through our delighting in it.

All this we find out in another way when the mind truly withdraws from the senses and the bodily impressions, because at that time we find emptiness. What is also highly significant is that this is a blissful emptiness; we find that emptiness is a very positive experience, the mind is positively empty. This is so significant because from here on we see this emptiness as a true or higher happiness compared to the happiness from sensory input.

Introducing the terminology of dependent origination: The karma of our human existence is such that the mind is pre-programmed (saṅkhāra) to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and this through an ignorant assumption (avijjā) that sees this as the path to happiness. This is the way that the mind gets drawn into the world of the senses (viññāṇa) and of form (rūpa). The worldly mind then develops this sensory system into a highly sophisticated sense base (āyatana). This leaves us in a predicament where, although all our experience is essentially subjective, it is all reliant on the objective world. There is a sense then that none of our inner experience has any independent existence. Indeed being merely an interpretation of the outer world, which is unstable and illusory, it ultimately has no meaningful connection to the material world. Thus a mind that has not gone beyond the senses is without a refuge.

So we have to overcome this karma by meditating and letting go of it all to discover our refuge and our happiness in emptiness beyond the senses. What we may then discover is that there is the potential of developing a truly inner world within this emptiness, a world of inner religious vision and intuition associated with an outer world which is viewed with dispassion. This is the way the mind can examine and understand without making anything out of sense experience and hence avoid confusing subjective and objective. Furthermore the emptiness, as it detaches more and more from the world, becomes a transcendent base for consciousness and hence our refuge.

I offer this for your reflection.

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