
The Sage

Ancient Wisdom
For Modern Time

Dr. Tim Ong

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By Dr. Tim Ong

One early Saturday morning, while my wife, May, and I were walking up a hill near our neighborhood in Bandar Sungai Long, we chanced upon an elderly couple sitting and chatting lovingly with each other at the top of the hill.

It was a beautiful day, with the sun rising as dawn gradually and gently turned into a slow quiet morning for the inhabitants of Bandar Sungai Long. From the top of this hill, we were able to enjoy a lovely picturesque view of the township as well as the many hills surrounding it. The morning air was fresh and crisp.

The elderly couple turned and greeted us as we approached.

“Beautiful morning, isn't it?” greeted the man.

He has a youthful look despite his age, which I estimated to be in his eighties. His hair was completely white and well trimmed, which gave him a distinguished look. His moustache and beard were also white, and he reminded me of an old wise Chinese sage.

“Yes, it is.” I replied as my wife and I joined them.

“Do you come here often? I don't recall seeing you here before, although I must admit that I don't take my morning walks as often as I would like to. I assume you live around here.”, May asked.

“Oh, no, we are not from around here. We are just visiting some relatives here in Bandar Sungai Long. We like the morning air here.” replied the old man.

“So do we.” replied May. “Sometimes, the view here is so beautiful as the sun rises that it almost feels like a spiritual experience. It is so quiet and peaceful.”

“Yes, nature can often evoke such spiritual experiences, but spirituality is such a personal thing, isn't it? No two persons ever experience the same spiritual experience. Even people who profess to be in the same religion experience their spirituality differently. And you are a ...?”

"I am a Buddhist." I offered.

"And what does a Buddhist believe in? What is a Buddhist?" he asked.

"A Buddhist is one who believes in the teachings of the Buddha - one who learns and puts into practice the dhamma as taught by the Buddha," I replied.

"And what is the dhamma?" he asked again.

"The dhamma is the teachings of the Buddha. It is the absolute truth."

Gently he probed. "So which is it? Is the dhamma the absolute truth or is it the teachings of the Buddha?"

"The dhamma refers to both the absolute truth and the teachings of the Buddha. It is what the Buddha taught."

"But the dhamma cannot be both. It has to be either the absolute truth or the teachings of the Buddha. It cannot be both." the old man said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, a little confused now.

The Absolute and the Relative

"You see, if the dhamma is the absolute truth, then it must be all encompassing and all embracing. The absolute truth is unchanging, yet it is the source of everything we see and experience in this paradoxically ever-changing universe. Since it is all encompassing and all embracing, it is the One. The moment you split it into two, it is no longer all encompassing."

"So, the moment you labeled the dhamma as the Buddha's teachings, your mind automatically and unconsciously created two categories – Buddhists and non-Buddhists. As soon as you did that, your mind is no longer residing in absolute truth but in relative truth. This is why everything in this universe is called relative truths and we are living in a relative universe. "

"Our mind tries to make sense of the world we live in. In order to do that, it gives names and labels to everything. It wants to categorize everything and to put everything in its proper place. This is all very useful and practical, but in doing so, it also affects a split from the One. It creates a sense of separation from the One.

The absolute truth has no duality but our discriminating and judging mind, in naming and labeling everything, creates a world of duality – a world of polarity. From this discriminating mind we see good and bad, beautiful and ugly, hot and cold, big and small, rich and poor, and all the other contrasts and everything in between.

This is not to say that the discriminating mind is faulty. It serves a useful function. It helps us to make sense of the world we live in. However, it is equally important for us to be aware of its limitation. Our discriminating or judging mind prevents us from experiencing the absolute truth, which is free from duality – free from polarity. It is the discriminating mind that creates preferences and personalization. The discriminating mind personalizes everything in what is essentially an impersonal world. This is how the self is born.”

“And do you know why it is important to know this?”

“Why?” I asked, intrigued.

“Because when you understand this, you will understand and see that it is your discriminating mind that causes sufferings, not the universe. The universe is impersonal. Everything in it is impersonal. It is your discriminating mind that makes it personal.

That is the reason why I challenged you to define the word dhamma. When you see dhamma as absolute truth, there is no division. There is only the One. However, when you see dhamma as the Buddha’s teachings, you immediately categorize the world into Buddhists and non-Buddhists, even though you are not consciously aware of it. The same thing happens each time you label someone as a Buddhist, a Christian, a Hindu or a Muslim. You split them into Us and Them. This kind of thinking is exclusive, not inclusive, and what is exclusive cannot be the absolute truth, which is all inclusive.

The reason the world appears to be chaotic is precisely because of this type of discriminating thinking. It is not the naming or labeling that causes trouble, but the personalization. By personalization, I mean splitting into Us versus Them. It is also this habit of the mind to personalize our experiences that brings us sufferings. What happens when we personalize our experiences is that we cling to them as mine – this is my experience, this is my anger, this is my body, I am sad, etc. When we believe in this personalization, we forget that the universe – and everything in it – is impersonal.

Look at how we even personalize the concept of God. In some scriptures, they made their God angry and vindictive, which is nothing more than a projection of their own qualities unto God. Instead of raising themselves to the qualities of God, they humanize their God with their own imperfect qualities, thus debasing their God.”

By now, I was absolutely fascinated by this wise elderly man. I wanted to learn more from him. I looked at my wife and could tell that she was equally amazed by his wide knowledge and was as eager to learn.

Understanding God

“So, what is your understanding of God? You know, in Buddhism, we do not believe in a creator God as the supreme being. We see God as Brahma in one of the many realms of existence. The Buddhist scriptures talked about 31 planes of existence that can be grouped into 3 big groups called the Realm of Senses (Kammaloka), the Realm of Form (Rupaloka) and the Realm of No-Form (Arupaloka). Brahma, a god residing in the Realm of Form erroneously believed himself to be the creator of the universe because he was the first being in existence that he could perceive before the appearance of other beings. He was, however, not aware that there are even higher realms beyond his own realm.”

“I’m glad you asked that question. It gives me an opportunity to clarify something that has been a source of misunderstanding for many who seeks the spiritual path,” he answered with a smile as he looked at his wife. His wife nodded her head understandingly, as if giving him permission to continue his discourse.

“I am well aware that the Buddhists have a different understanding of God compared to those professing other religions, such as the Christians, the Muslims and the Hindus. This is actually a good example of how words and names can actually be a problem when they are not properly understood.

Communication is only possible when the words used confer the same meanings for everyone. For example, when we say “house”, we understand what it is. The same goes for words like car, eyes, body, today, tomorrow, etc. With these words, we all share the same definitions. That is what makes communication with these words possible. However, when it comes to the word “God”, the Buddhists alone have a different meaning with the rest. I am not sure whether they do this out of ignorance or whether it is a subtle way to make their religion superior to others. Whatever the case may be, by holding on to a definition of God that is

different from the rest, it creates problem in communication with others of different faith and can easily lead to misunderstanding.

I believe the Buddhists are not entirely to blame for this situation. Since some of the scriptures in the other religions humanize their God with human qualities like anger, vindictiveness and prejudices, it may seem to the Buddhists that the only Being that fits those descriptions is the Brahma god of the Buddhist cosmology. Furthermore, the word "brahma" itself is shared by both the Buddhists and Hindus, and the Hindus refer to their God as Brahma. This just makes it all the more likely for words to cause confusions.

So, to answer your question, I must first define the word God. For the definition of God, I like to borrow a verse from the Tao de Ching, which says that...

"Something there is without form yet complete, born before Heaven and Earth"

I assume Heaven and Earth here to refer to the godly realms as well as our own earthly realms. This is our own relative universe. However, there is another realm or dimension that our five physical senses cannot perceive, nor any of our scientific instruments can detect, yet it is very real. It exists and is complete. It is whole. It is unchanging and undifferentiated. It is also from this that everything in our own universe comes about. Thus we can also say that our entire universe is born out of this.

From another perspective, we can also say that this "thing" exists in all things since everything is submerged in it. A simple analogy is the water in the ocean and everything in the ocean. The water completely envelopes and embraces all things in the ocean. Yet this "thing" is not really a thing.

This is what I believe God is.

Its essence is inert. It is impersonal. Yet it is omnipresent and is beyond time and space. The Buddha says it is indescribable with words, which is true, because it is emptiness, yet not empty. It is nothing, yet not no thing. Scientists like to use the word "potentiality" to describe it. In the Tao de Ching, it is said that it is because of its emptiness that it is useful. Indeed, it is because of this emptiness that everything is possible.

An aspect of this "Thing" that gives it the creative power is what we called, labeled or named the Mind. Mind creates things out of this "emptiness", thus from the undifferentiated comes the differentiated. From the One springs the many."

I was still not quite clear with his explanation. “So, is God the same as Mind? Or is God this “Thing” that you mentioned? And what about Nibbana?”

“Well, there are very subtle differences and it all boils down to how you define each words. That is why it is said that words and names can actually get in the way of enlightenment. They can easily cause confusions.

For practical purpose, this is how I view them. This intangible, formless “Thing”, which is sometimes also called Spirit or Tao, and the Mind are so subtle and intimately linked that there is no difference whether they are one or two separate things. The Mind is needed to perceive this “Thing” and to create things out of its emptiness or potentiality. Thus, without the Mind, it makes no difference whether the “Thing” exists or not. And of course, without the “Thing”, which is the mother or source of all things, even the Mind cannot exist. In this way, we can say that the Mind is the first thing that is differentiated out of it.

Since the general population perceives God to be an eternal, all powerful (omnipotent) and omnipresent Being, I would say that this Mind-Thing entity would fit very well with their definition of God as they understand God to be. You will note that this definition of God is not the same as the Brahma referred to in the Buddhist cosmology.

With regards to Nibbana, I believe that it is simply a state of the Mind that is at complete rest. In this state of rest, it is free from stress or any disturbances. It is imperturbable. When the Buddha passed on to parinibbana, his body disintegrated while his mind returns to its original state of imperturbability. This is the zero state, the original absolutely pristine state, where there is no duality.

The fully enlightened mind is free from the personal discriminatory mental habit that is so pervasive in the defiled mind. It is free from personal judgment because it clearly sees that even this self is made up of a bundle of impersonal processes. What we call “I” is simply a body-mind aggregate that falsely perceives a permanent, everlasting and distinct self. Remember we said earlier that this is an impersonal universe. Everything in it is impersonal. Because of this false belief of a permanent self, we end up owning and claiming thoughts and feelings as our own when in fact they are nothing more than transient processes that come and go. This is the habit of our judging mind.

By reversing this deeply entrenched mental habit of the judging mind, we can undo the duality we ourselves created. In this way, we are able to see reality as it really is – impersonal, transient processes that come and go according to certain conditions and triggers. “

“But wouldn't this sort of impersonal existence be emotionless and mechanical? How could life be a joy if that is the case? How could life be worth living then?” I countered. “I wouldn't want to live a life like a robot, not knowing and understanding what an emotion is and how to live passionately.”

“Ah, this is where you are wrong,” said this wise old man. “The goal of spirituality is not to turn you into an emotionless robot. In fact, once you have known emotion, you cannot go back to a not knowing state. You can only transcend that state.”

I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that, so I asked him to clarify.

Transcending the Self

“Contrary to many popular beliefs, the spiritual path is not about eliminating the self. It is not about getting rid of the self or killing the self. It is about transcending the self. Right now, you are living your life from the perspective of this self, which is self-centered, fearful and judgmental. This self has a tremendous need to be loved and accepted, and it constantly fears for its safety and existence. That is because it cannot recognize its own true nature, which is already whole, complete and perfect. The goal of spirituality, in my humble opinion, is to transcend this narrow perspective, going above and beyond the self to a higher perspective that is all inclusive, all embracing, which is the absolute.

From this higher and more transcendental perspective, having overcome the judgmental mind, you are able to realize your true nature. You no longer see yourself as separate from the rest of the universe. You recognize your perfection and wholeness. You embrace everyone and everything as yourself, albeit a higher “self”. You live and function from the absolute where there is no duality. You recognize this “Thing” or Spirit, or Tao, or whatever you want to call it as real and the physical universe as nothing more than a manifestation or projection of the Mind.

Thus, it is said in ***A Course in Miracles***:

Nothing real can be threatened.
Nothing unreal exists.
Herein lies the peace of God.

In fact, from this higher transcendental perspective, you will be pleasantly surprised to know that you will be experiencing even more exquisite emotional states, that of the four Brahma Viharas – unconditional love, great compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. And was it not Thich Nhat Hanh who said that *fearlessness is not only possible, it is the ultimate joy!*”

The Principle of Correspondence

By now, both May and I were in awe at the apparently immense spiritual understanding and insights that this unassuming, sagely looking man possessed. There was more to come.

“You mentioned something about the universe being a projection of the Mind. Can you elaborate on that? I am not quite sure what you meant by that,” enquired May.

“What I meant by projection is that the entire physical universe is a mirror reflection of the Universal Mind. The Universal Mind is simply the sum total of all the minds of sentient beings in all the realms of existence.

If you see this in terms of data or information, then you can say that this physical universe is a mirror reflection of all the data manifested into physical reality. Using the worldwide web as an analogy, the Universal Mind is cyberspace. Each computer that is linked to the web represents the mind of a sentient being. How cyberspace turns out depends on the type of data or input each of these computers feed into the web. In other words, each of these computers are co-creating cyberspace every single moment. The cyberspace is a dynamically changing world. It is a wok in progress.

In the same way, we are co-creating the universe we live in.

On a more localized scale, we are constantly creating our own experiences in our life. Again we are doing this through our mind, through the thoughts and beliefs we hold. Just as the Universal Mind is reflected in the physical universe, our own mind is reflected in our personal experiences. Nothing in our life is due to chance. The people we meet, the events we encounter, our parents and siblings – all these are our own creations.

That is why there is a saying that goes:

As Above, So Below.
As Within, So Without.

In the Buddhist scriptures, there is an analogy of the moon and its reflection on a lake. Most people mistake the reflection on the lake to be real, and in this way miss seeing the real moon in the night sky. The real moon represents our mind while the reflected moon on the lake represents our external experiences.

In other words, the real cause of our experiences is our mind – the thoughts and beliefs we hold within – and our external experiences are simply the effects or results of those thoughts manifesting in physical reality. Remember the phrase “Mind is the forerunner of all states”? Well, it really is. There is no exception. And remember the advice “Good begets good. Bad begets bad”? Well, when you hold good thoughts within you, it is reflected outward in a good external experience. Likewise, when you hold bad thoughts within you, you get negative experience.

This is the immutable Law of Cause and Effect.”

The Law of Cause and Effect

“If this Law of Cause and Effect is such an immutable law, how is it that we still see bad people enjoying good lives while good people continue to suffer from injustice?” I asked, deciding to play the Devil's advocate. “In fact, sometimes good people wonder whether there really is a divine power at all, seeing how bad people seem to be getting away with all kinds of things.

Look at the world right now. Greedy politicians, businessmen and bankers are getting away with corruptions, cronyism, manipulation of the financial system and hoarding all kinds of money and opportunities for themselves while the hard-working, decent populace suffer in silence and indignation. It seems that there is no recourse for them except revolt, as is happening in the Arab world at this moment. People are desperate for some justice and fair play.

Elsewhere, others are fanning fear and terror through all kinds of atrocities and killings, holding on to power at all costs through fear and intimidation, and the forceful use of might.

It really makes it difficult for the lay person to believe that there really is divine justice, that good truly begets good, and bad begets bad.”

“Yes, this has always been a challenge”, said the old man, “but it is not because the immutable law is not immutable. It is simply because we are fooled by outward appearance. There are two aspects to this.

The first is the Time Lag phenomenon.

We are living in a realm of existence where there is a time lag between the cause and the manifestation of the effect. It is important to understand that every cause has its effect and every effect has its cause, and when we talk about cause, we are basically referring to our thoughts. Thus every thought of ours exert an effect on this universe in general and on our own life in particular.

However, the time between the thought and the eventual manifestation of its effect can vary from instantaneous to years and years from its initiation, depending on certain conditions. So, if your thoughts do not seem to be manifested into your life instantly or even in days or weeks, it does not mean that it will not be manifested. Perhaps it might be manifested years from the initiation of that thought but by then most people would have forgotten that they had that thought in the first place. So it seems to them that what they experienced has no link to their thoughts.

In The Secret movie, the message that came out of that movie seems to suggest that we somehow need to learn how to manifest with our mind in order for us to live our dream life. I am telling you right now that you are constantly manifesting, every single moment of your life. Manifesting is an automatic thing. You do not have to learn how to manifest as your thoughts will automatically be manifested. This is the nature of the universe. It is a natural process.

Our challenge is not that we need to learn how to manifest. Rather, our challenge is learning to manifest consciously. We need to be aware of our thoughts. Up until now, most of us have been manifesting our reality unconsciously. 99.9% of the time, we are not even aware of what thoughts we are holding in our mind. We have excessive fear, doubts, insecurities, anxieties, worries – and we are not aware that these very thoughts are being manifested into our physical experiences and reality.

If you were to examine carefully, you will see that most people make decisions based on these unconscious fear and worries. The sad part is that they are not even aware that their actions are motivated by fear, and that the more energy they feed their fear, the stronger their fear becomes and the more fear they spread to their family members, their loved ones, their community and the world

at large. Fear is like a relentless virus that is spreading like a plague on this planet.”

“That reminds me,” I interrupted, “of a patient who was so fearful of any surgical operation that she was willing to carry a huge fibroid in her abdomen for years rather than have it removed. The fibroid was as big as a soccer ball, yet her fear of surgery prevented her from opting for its removal. She related a story about her own friend who developed several severe complications as a result of undergoing a surgery, and therefore decided that surgery is too risky for her. Even after I assured her that such complications were exceptions rather than the norm, she did not feel safe enough to consider the option. When I examined her abdomen, it was like she was pregnant and ready to deliver any time.”

“That's right! And I suspect that she probably wasn't even aware of the fact that her decision not to remove her fibroid was motivated by fear. Very often, we repress our fear, and then rationalize with our logical mind that the choice we made was best for us. As a doctor, you can see that it was a poor choice. Sooner or later, she will need to have the fibroid removed. Wouldn't it be better to have it removed when it is still small in size and when she is younger and in good health rather than later when she is older and more fragile?”

“Yes, it would.”

“Another problem she is not aware of is that whatever you feed grows,” he continued.

“Sorry?” I asked, not comprehending.

What You Focus on Grows

“What I meant is that if you feed energy to your fear, it will grow bigger and stronger. Every time you focus on fear or make decisions that are motivated by fear, you make it stronger and more pervasive in your life. You end up with a persistent mental habit that seeks out fear in every situation, every person and every encounter. Is it any wonder that you begin to find that your life is full of fearful experiences? It is simply your fear, which is your thought and your cause, manifested into your physical reality. Your fearful experiences are the effects of those fearful thoughts.

So, if you want to live a fear-free life, learn to eliminate fear from your thoughts. Instead of fear, have faith in the universe and its universal laws. Know that if you

focus on positive thoughts, only positive results will manifest in your life. The more often you do this, the more likely this will eventually become a new mental habit in your life, and you will begin to focus more on positive thoughts than negative thoughts. Mind you, this is easier said than done, but the end result from this effort is well worth it. This is what is called cultivating the mind.”

“Remember I said that there are two aspects to properly understand the Law of Cause and Effect? The second aspect to understanding this immutable and important universal law requires that we see cause as cause and effect as effect, which is what we do not normally do. In fact, we normally do the opposite and see the effect as cause and the cause as effect.”

When he saw me raised my eyebrows and showed him a perplexed face, he continued.

“We experience our life at two levels.

Creation

The first level is the level of creation, or what some people called manifestation. Whatever we hold in our unconscious mind gets manifested into our physical reality. So what you encounter in your life – the people, event or circumstances – is largely dependent on the state or content of your mind. As your mind resonates a certain vibration, you are either attracted to certain people or circumstances or you attract these people and circumstances into your physical reality. Whether you are aware of it or not, you are constantly creating your reality. You cannot help it.

You are absolutely 100% responsible for everything that happens in your life. So it is not a question of whether we need to learn how to manifest or not, since we are constantly and automatically manifesting all the time. Rather, it is a question of whether we are conscious of what we are manifesting or not. Only when we are consciously aware of this process can we have a choice to manifest what we want.

No doubt you have heard of or even seen The Secret movie that was popularized by Rhonda Byrne. Many people who have watched the movie went back with the message that they can create or manifest what they want or desire. At least, that is what the message of the movie seems to be for most people. However, the truth is that creation or manifestation predominantly occurs at the level of the unconscious mind, not the conscious mind. So we do not create what we

consciously want or desire as much as we manifest what we unconsciously are. If you are predominantly fearful, you will attract fearful people, events and things into your life. Likewise, if you are predominantly loving, you will attract loving people, events and things into your life. Who or what you are is the sum total of your unconscious mind, for your unconscious mind is the much greater part of your mind.

The important thing to realize at this level of creation is that your thought is the cause, and what you manifest is the effect.

Perception

The second level is the level of perception – how we perceive our own creation.

Most of us perceive our experience as beginning from the point we encounter certain people, events or circumstances, not being aware that these people, events or circumstances are what we ourselves have attracted into our reality. Thus when we meet certain person we don't like, we blame them as the source of our unhappiness. Likewise, when we encounter people we like, we credit them with making us happy. In this way, our happiness or unhappiness seems to be due to people, events and circumstances outside of ourselves. They appear to be the cause of our emotions. Since we perceive this to be so, we react accordingly, which is to allow those external realities that we have unconsciously attracted into our life to dictate our thoughts, and therefore our emotional states.

This is what is meant by seeing effect as cause and cause as effect. Our thought content is the cause and the external reality an effect, but we experience it upside down or inside out, and see the effect as the cause of our thought and emotion. That leaves us totally merciless to the outer events, and thus disempowers us.

On the other hand, when we see things as they really are, which is that our thought content is the cause and the external reality an effect, then we have a very different outcome to our experience. Firstly, we do not see ourselves as victims of circumstances. We can see and understand why we are 100% responsible for our life. What it does is that it puts us totally in charge of our life. Secondly, it helps us understand why it is crucial for us to cultivate and master our mind, instead of continuing with the habit of creating our reality unconsciously on auto-pilot.”

100% Responsibility

“Wow, you mean I am 100% responsible for everything I experienced in my life? How can this be so? Sometimes I get irritated because someone intentionally said or did something to irritate me. They caused me to become irritable. It was not my intention to be irritable, and definitely not my wish to be an irritable person. They made me irritable. They irritated me. They are the cause of my irritation. How can I be held responsible for that?”, complained May.

“Young lady,” said the elderly man, which put a smile on May’s face, “you brought up a good point. Let’s examine it and see if it’s true that you have nothing to do with it.”

“As I have said earlier, we experience life at two levels - the level of creation and the level of perception. Now most people find it hard to believe that they create their own experience - that the people and event they experienced are attracted to them because of the content of their mind. So I proposed that we put this level of experience aside for now, although there are some very interesting quantum physic experiments that potentially provide scientific support and explanation for it.

Instead, let’s concentrate on the second level of experience - your perception. From this level alone, I can show you that you are not only 100% responsible for your experience but that you in fact co-operated with them willingly, albeit unconsciously, in your unpleasant experience.”

Seeing that May was about to open her mouth in protest, he continued.

“Now in medicine, and particularly in the areas involving the study of the mind such as in psychiatry and psychology, it is now generally accepted that our feelings are determined by the thoughts we hold in our mind. That is why they have therapy such as CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy). For example, in the situation that you described, this particular person appeared in your experience. In your perception, he intentionally said or did things to irritate you. In reality, you cannot really know if that is true. You simply believe that it is true. Because you believe it to be true and you don’t like it, you feel irritated by him.

This is the power of beliefs. Beliefs are simply what we perceive to be true. A belief need not be true to influence our feelings. Simply believing something to be true is good enough for it to become real to us, and thus affects our feelings. Every belief is intimately linked to at least a feeling. Sometimes a belief comes with a whole cauldron of feelings.

Now here is the amazing thing. Simply by changing our beliefs, we can change our feelings, and thus our experience. In fact, we sometimes do that without being aware of it. It's what Steven Covey called a paradigm shift. It is simply perceiving the same person, event or data from a different perspective. A shift in perspective changes the belief we held earlier.

Since no one can force us to believe in something, although they can sometimes cunningly influence us without us being aware of it, it follows that we are totally responsible for our beliefs. That is to say that even if that person you mentioned has the intention to irritate you, he cannot succeed in irritating you without you co-operating with him, and you co-operate with him by allowing him to influence the way you think. This happens because of your mental habits.

That is what I meant when I said earlier that he cannot irritate you without your co-operation. Your problem was that you were not aware of your role in co-creating that experience. Once you are aware of it, you immediately realize that you can do something about it to change your experience, and that realization is extremely empowering and liberating.

Emptiness

The problem we encounter with beliefs is that they come heavily invested with strong emotions. We are terribly attached to our beliefs. Once a belief is accepted, it is difficult to pry it out of our mind. It becomes like a program that automatically runs our life. Little wonder that a belief does not have to be true to strongly impact our experience and our life.

One way to help loosen our grip on our beliefs is to realize that a belief is merely a perception of reality. It is not reality itself. This is where a good understanding of the concept of emptiness as taught in Tibetan and Mahayana Buddhism comes in very handy. Once we understood the concept of emptiness, we realize that everything in this universe is empty of any intrinsic or inherent value. Whether it is matter (body) or mind (thoughts and feelings), there is no inherent value except that which we choose to give to it.

Take a diamond, for example. A diamond is highly valued by our civilized society, yet if we give one to a tribe somewhere deep in the Amazon jungle, they are likely to throw it away. They simply have no use for it. So the diamond has no intrinsic value. It is only of value because we perceive it to have that value. The

same is true of any object, person or event. It is also true of our thoughts and feelings, and in particular our beliefs.

An American psychologist by the name of Bruce di Marsico gave a very good example of this concept of emptiness. Take an event whereby a family of four - a father, mother, a younger girl and an older girl who is about to go to college in a different state. The family is sending her off at the door. The father has mixed feeling about the event. He is apprehensive about the prospect of his daughter on her own, yet feels excited for her to learn and grow on her own. The mother is positively worried and sad about her daughter leaving their home. The little girl is overjoyed at finally getting all the attention as well as getting the entire room all to herself. A stranger passing by watched the entire scene with a neutral feeling. Thus, the event itself is empty of any inherent value or quality. If it were not, then everyone should be experiencing the same feeling about the event. Clearly this is not the case. Each one is experiencing the event according to his or her own interpretation and perception of the event.

In fact, Bruce came up with five simple questions to bring about this realization of the emptiness of the beliefs we hold, and in doing so, made it possible for anyone to realize that his or her own happiness is entirely in his or her own hand. So, for example, if something or someone makes you unhappy, ask yourself:

1. What am I unhappy about?
2. What is it about that that makes me unhappy?
3. Why am I unhappy about it?
4. What would happen or what would it mean if I were not unhappy about it?
5. Why should it have to mean that?

Asking these simple questions forces you to take a hard look at your own beliefs, and invites you to challenge or replace them with something new. If you do this honestly and often enough, you'll be absolutely surprised by what you found out about yourself.

And if you are familiar with Byron Katie's work, you will realize that she uses the same principle of challenging our existing beliefs with great success."

"So, at this level of perception, or how we perceive and interpret what we perceive, we learn the same thing - that it is our thought that is the cause and our feeling the effect."

“The end result of this realization - that the thought is the cause and the external manifestation or feeling the effect - is that we see the importance of gaining mastery over our own mind. Only when we have gain mastery over our own mind can we manifest what we really want and find lasting peace and joy in our life. We realize that our inner unconscious mind must be congruent with our outer conscious desires. With this realization, we can then set ourselves on the path of mental purification and spiritual growth.”

Purify Your Mind

“Buddhism talks a lot about the mind,” interjected the elderly woman as she joined our conversation for the first time, “yet most people who called themselves Buddhists do not put in the effort to purify their mind. If you don’t work on your mind, you’ll never be able to root out all these false beliefs that are the root causes of our unhappiness.”

“Just avoiding evils and doing good is good but not good enough for a true spiritual seeker,” she emphasized. “Purifying your mind is the key to spiritual growth, insights and wisdom. And to purify your mind, you need two essential mental skills - mindfulness and letting go.”

“Meditation is an excellent method to increase self awareness and sharpen mindfulness,” I offered, trying to sound wise.

“You are so right,” she continued, “yet there are so many meditation practitioners who do not seem to know the difference between self awareness and mindfulness. It is not enough to simply be aware of your thoughts and feelings, which is what self awareness is. It is important to be able to witness or see your thoughts and feelings with a non-judgmental mind state. This is what mindfulness means - a constant, **non-judgmental** self awareness. Only with this non-judgmental attitude can we see things as they really are, and eventually realize that thoughts and feelings are simply thoughts and feelings. They are not personal. They are not our thoughts and feelings. Only our beliefs that they are ours make them seem so. Once you gain this insight, you will realize the truth of the Buddha’s teaching on anatta.”

“And then, it becomes easier to just let go,” said the old man.

I found myself feeling a little uncomfortable now, knowing that I was one of those Buddhists who constantly attend dhamma talks, join in intellectual discussions and generally appear to be well versed in the dhamma, yet found it difficult to

commit and put aside some time each day for meditation. I realized that I was feeling a little guilty and ashamed that I have not been putting my knowledge into practice.

As if knowing my discomfort, the elderly woman gently continued, “Book knowledge is satisfying to a lot of intellectuals but it is the true practice of purifying your mind that will lead you to the liberation you seek. Letting go of your false beliefs and fears is very liberating, and will lead you to peace and happiness. Once you have tasted it, your faith in your own spirituality will grow.”

Watch Your Motivation

“You know, while I like to be able to understand spirituality intellectually, I would much prefer some simple guidelines that will help me to put theories into practice. What would be some fundamental advice you would give to someone who wants to put all this understanding into practice in his or her daily life?” I asked.

“Once you have the right understanding, the next thing to do is to cultivate the right motivation. If your motivation arises from right understanding, then your motivation will always come from a mind that is tranquil and unconditional. This will translate into what most people called unconditional love. “, the woman replied.

“So, for my own practice, what I do is to watch my motivation whenever I say or do something. Is what I am going to say or do motivated by unconditional love, or is it motivated by fear? If it is motivated by love, then I know the result or consequence of that action will likely be positive for everyone concern. On the other hand, if it is motivated by fear - whether it is in the form of greed or anger - then I know that I have an error in thinking somewhere within my mind. In other words, I am not seeing things as they really are - empty and impersonal. Instead, I have gone back to my old mental habit of personalizing the people, events and things in my life, and assigning them with my own values. In other words, I am weaving a story around them. I am dramatizing them.

A good guideline that I used for myself is that whenever I am in fear, I am in error. By this I mean that fear only comes from an error in our perception and interpretation of what is out there - of seeing what is out there as the cause. This is a mistake we are constantly making because this mental habit of perceiving the world is deeply imprinted in us but this is not how the enlightened mind sees

the world. So a short and simple phrase like “When I am in fear, I am in error” serves as a powerful reminder for me to correct this erroneous view.”

I found myself so fascinated by this discussion and with these two elderly persons that I almost lost track of the time. I suddenly realized that I needed to get back home to get ready for work, and despite the fact that I would love to continue this conversation, I had to excuse myself.

As May and I were walking downhill towards our house, I turned back and asked the elderly man for his name, and he said, “Just call me Mito.”

“Perhaps we can see you two again tomorrow morning,” I said.

“Perhaps,” he replied.

On the way back, May and I agreed with each other that we were so fortunate to have met these two elderly strangers. We were awed by their clear understanding and wisdom, and were hoping that we would indeed meet them again the next morning. We were sure there would be more to learn from them. Besides, I was curious about the source of their knowledge. Where did they learn it from? How did they come to know so much? How else do they put this knowledge into practice in their daily lives? There were so many questions to ask.

Perhaps tomorrow....

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