



Today I'd like to talk about the nature of our mind or consciousness. This understanding is a very important foundation for our attainment of complete liberation. It's very practical, not philosophical or metaphysical, and it's related to this passage of the Heart Sutra: “The Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, when deeply practicing *prajnaparamita*, realized that all five aggregates are empty and became free from all suffering and distress.”

There is an old Korean lady who from time to time calls 911, saying that a couple of young people tried to break into her apartment in order to sexually assault her. The past several times, a policeman was dispatched to check around her apartment, but nobody was there but her. And so, they realized she is not mentally healthy. She was drafted into the Japanese military camp during the Second World War in order to work as a sex slave. She worked there for a couple of years, and it was a huge trauma to her. Without checking whether all the doors or windows were securely locked she could not go to sleep. When she sees young men in their early twenties, especially in dark uniform, she would become very surprised and scared. Think about that: that incident happened more than fifty years ago. Why does this memory constantly pop up in her mind and continue to hugely affect her life?

Our childhood trauma leaves a big impression in our minds, working just like a seed planted in our minds. When it meets a certain condition—some moisture, sunshine, etcetera—then it sprouts. Just like when this woman would see a young man in his twenties, that bad memory would arise in her mind.

They say that in order to escape the trap, we need to study the trap. So let's think: what is the nature of our mind? What is our consciousness, which is the source of all our suffering and distress?

We have to think about our body. It's constantly changing. Each and every moment, many cells are born and die, continuously. The body you had when you entered in this meditation hall is



already different from the body that you have right now. But you don't think you're essentially a different person even though you have a different body. Even though you have a different occupation or a different relationship, you may think that you essentially remain the same person.

But what about our minds? Many people believe that we have some unchanging entity—whether you label that as a soul or a spirit—some permanent substance where our experience belongs, where our body and mind belong. That's why we causally use the expression “my body” or “my mind.” But what does that mean? We propose some invisible entity where our mind and body belong.

To understand the nature of our mind, it helps to know the Buddhist approach, where our mind is classified into eight kinds or eight layers.

The first is five-sense consciousness. When our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body come in contact with some form, sound, smell, touch, etcetera, then some sensation arises: vision sensation, auditory sensation, tactile sensation, etcetera. When we see some object we can recognize: *That's yellow. That's black.* When we touch something: *That's cold. That's soft.* These five sense consciousnesses are mostly objective.

But apart from our sense consciousness, we have feelings, emotions, impulses. These are a little different from the five-sense consciousness. For example, when a person sees someone who is beautiful, some feeling, some romantic feeling, can arise. Or some thought or impulse can arise: *I should ask her out.* This type of consciousness is called mental consciousness. It is the sixth consciousness.

But there is another level of consciousness. When we investigate our thoughts, emotions, impulses, then we can discover there is some pattern or some root. When we see into our dreams



or worries, disappointment or concern, behind these there lurks our sense of self. Our idea this of ego entity is the root of many wandering thoughts, desires, concerns, etcetera. For example, when I meet some church elder, a very good impression or memory arises—because when I was a Protestant a very long time ago, a church elder taught us the bible in a very compassionate way. But in my uncle’s case some resentment arises, because he lost a lot of money to a church elder. The church elder borrowed a lot of money and ran away.

Thus, in each of our minds there is a built-in program or system which can produce different outputs in the same situation. This built-in program or system is called ego consciousness or individual consciousness. So it is the seventh consciousness. Our sense of self is just like a computer program. For example, when I turn on my desktop automatically MS Word pops up, because I installed the MS Word as the start-up program. It’s installed in that way. Likewise, when we receive some information, depending on our program—our ego consciousness—different reaction arises. This is the ego consciousness.

But it is very important to know that this program of ego consciousness is not fixed. Our individual or ego consciousness is not some fixed entity or program. It’s constantly changing. Our personalities are changing depending on, for example, what kind of education we have and with whom you have relationships.

Since the ego consciousness, our sense of self, does not have a self-substance, it’s empty—empty of inherent existence. It’s devoid of intrinsic nature. In Buddhism, it is called *empty*. It is empty. When the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, when he realized five aggregates of the body-mind are empty in nature, he became free from all suffering and distress.

We can start from intellectual or conceptual level: When we deeply understand the empty nature of our self, then we can be free from all suffering and distress. That is so-called “enlightenment,” or awakening.



When the program is erased so that your hard drive is clear and empty, that's who you really are. That is the eighth consciousness, called the universal consciousness, primal awareness. It's important to note whatever consciousness it is, whether it is of the first five sense-consciousnesses, mental consciousness, or ego consciousness, it exists just like a river or wind, which constantly comes and goes. It exists as a flow, not an entity.

We can speak of a river only with a reference to the continuity of the stream. Our consciousness is not fixed thing with substance. Our sense of self is some misleading notion, a set of mental images that is habitually or artificially posted to the flow of our consciousness.

In other words, our sense of self is a mental construct, not reality. That's the meaning of the emptiness of the five aggregates. It takes a lot of time to contemplate the empty nature of our mind, just like animals that live in cages, trapped in cages in the zoo. We human beings are trapped in our sense of self, in our notion of selfhood. How can we be freed from that prison? We are freed when we clearly see that the cage does not exist, it is created by the mind. That is the start of attaining complete freedom.

In that sense, meditation is very important. In whatever Buddhist tradition, meditation is the foundation of all kinds of practice. But meditation is not enough.

Along with meditation, we need to contemplate our true nature. What is the nature of our mind? We seek to sever the root of suffering and agony, happiness and suffering. All of this arises from our mind. In other words, in order to be free from all suffering, then we have to realize the nature of our mind clearly.

They say that in this world there are many problems—but the problem is just our ego, our “I.” A Zen master said, “Even though this world has many problem, there are just one problem—that's the human mind.”

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When we really see into the empty nature of our mind and body, then we can be free from suffering, free from shackles and attachments. That's a key for contemplation, along with our meditation practice: What is the nature of our mind, the nature of who we really are?

Thank you.