

Making Sense of Things

by Piya Tan

What is experience? Let us examine this in a practical way. First of all, we can only experience things BY WAY OF our six senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. WHAT we can experience are only their respective sense-objects: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and thoughts.'

According to Buddhist psychology, there are various stages in our experience: we sense, perceive, conceive things, and then deliberate on them, more or less in that sequence. "Sense" here refers to an external object that stimulates a sense. When this happens, we at once try to make sense of it. We give it meaning, by naming it: green, or music, or fragrant smell, or warm touch, or an idea.

Most of us have no control over how we experience things: they are reflex actions. Once we give meaning to our experience, we react to them. A slimy green toad: I don't like toads. Ah, that music brings back a sweet memory of an enchanted evening. Oh, that fragrance, it makes me sad, as it reminds me of someone I lost. How warm the cat's fur feels. Hmm, I'm jealous, how I hate this idea. And so on.

How we present ourselves publicly is another matter. We rarely act as we "feel." We wear mask for the occasion. For most, life is a stage of masked performances.

How we feel is how we like, dislike, or don't care about an experience. As mentioned, for most people, this is a reflex action. We tend to act, or rather react, autopiloted by our past experiences.

The meanings we attribute to things are almost always based on past experiences and memories. We almost never look at a thing as it is in the present moment. When we like something, it proliferates itself into desire or lust (we want more of it). When we dislike something, it proliferates itself into hate (we push it away). When we ignore something, it proliferates itself as ignorance and fear. Hence, our biases of greed, hate, delusion and fear.

So, we first perceive a form or shape, and we name it blue, green, dog, man, and so on. Then we immediately refer it to the mind which adds its own meanings. So there is a further complication (papanca). The mind, too, is a sense-organ and generates similar meanings, and these are called concepts, such as I, you, mine, beautiful, ugly, happy and so on. All such truths are of course relative.

In fact, all truths are relative.

There is the truth of suffering, countering the truth of non-suffering;
there is the truth of the arising of suffering, countering the truth of letting go;
there is the truth of ending of suffering, countering the truth of samsara; and
there is the truth of the way, countering what leads us back into suffering.

(The notion of “ultimate truth” was invented by post-Buddha philosophical Buddhism.)

Discovering the “truth” or the “ultimate truth” is only the beginning of our spiritual liberation. The final goal of liberation is when we are truly at peace, beyond conceptions of truth and untruth.

This freedom from suffering arises when we begin to see directly into the true nature of impermanence. This understanding slows down, even stops, our reflex feelings, our autopilot mind. We see things in a broader perspective. We begin to truly see the “I” for what it really is I am not the only one suffering; others are suffering, too. This terrible thought that has arisen, I do not have to own it: I can let it go.

“I” widens into “we,” embracing more situations and beings unconditionally. The true practising monastics, for example, no more restrict themselves to their biological family, but embrace all beings as their universal family. All beings are one family.

This is the beginning of ethics, of moral virtue. It is the beginning of compassion, that is, kindness to others even when they do not deserve it. This is spiritual liberation.

For a similar but more detailed reflection, see Ajahn Sucitto’s article on “Working on Perception”:

<http://dharma.org/bcbs/Pages/documents/WorkingwithPerceptionbyAjahnSucitto.pdf>

© Piya Tan, 090218