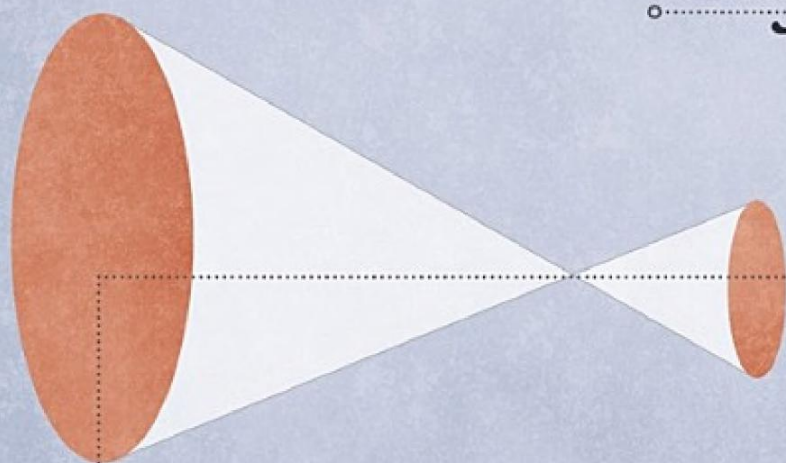


An

INTELLIGENT

Life



**BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY OF
SELF-TRANSFORMATION**

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TRANSLATED BY Varghese Puthuparampil

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I. WHAT IS THIS LIFE?

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THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

WHENEVER WE ASK about something, we make use of interrogative pronouns. *When* and *where* shall we meet? *What* is this good for? *Why* is it like that? *What* is that? *How* shall we do it? Among all these interrogative pronouns, the most fundamental is “what.” For unless the “what” is answered, it is impossible to arrive at a conclusion about the “how.” Only after first ascertaining *what* we are can we decide *how* to live. To live without knowledge of *what* we are, is to live like a phantom. It is certainly a mistake.

Little children who are learning how to speak begin asking about things using *what*. On the train it is a very common scene to witness small children pestering their mothers, asking, “Mama, what is that, what is it?” Since children are pure at heart, they never stop asking “what?” But adults, with decades of discriminatory thinking behind them, assume that they understand things obviously; they forget to keep asking, “what?” Instead we worry about *how* to live, *how* to do what is best, and so on. Usually we lead a life in accordance with our own desires and craving—a way of life that engenders suffering and worry both to ourselves and to others—but we fail to ever ask: “*What am I?*”

The very first object of the question “what?” should be our self. It will naturally expand to other objects: “What is the other?” “What is nature?” “What is the universe?” This is because oneself exists by the grace of others, oneself lives in nature, and oneself is an individual existence in the universe. It is quite natural to think about the day’s schedule in the morning; but would we not do well if, from time to time, we also asked ourselves these philosophical questions? “What is this thing called ‘self?’” “Why is this universe like this?”

To be born in this world is a wonderful thing. To be born as a human being, somewhere in the ceaseless flow of time and the unlimited expanse of space, is an expression of the impossible made possible. Don't you strongly feel, deep down, that the miracle of the self's existence—right here and now—is more marvelous than the appearance of a mysterious UFO from somewhere else?

It is a matter of great wonder that the eye has the power of vision. When the eye, a product of atoms and molecules, enters into a cognitive relationship with things, which are themselves made up of atoms and molecules, there arises a conscious vision that perceives nature—mountains, rivers, the sky studded with twinkling stars. In other words, to say “the eye has the power of sight” is nothing short of a miracle. Shall we not go even further and return to the source of the question? Shouldn't we also inquire earnestly about ourselves, about the being that contains this wonderful eye and power of sight and that cognizes this universe?

The world is like a stormy sea in which we are buffeted by the innumerable sufferings of life. It is said that life is a series of four types of suffering—namely, birth, old age, sickness, and death. There are few who are not overwhelmed by these difficulties. But if we can keep up a spirit of inquiry—a spirit that always asks, “What is this?”—then we will not falter in the face of adversity.

Before ever asking, “How should I live?” let's start by asking, with a childlike spirit, “What is this life?” Let's even cry out from the bottom of our heart: “What is this?” This cry will stir awakening by inspiring the altruistic will that lies dormant in the deepest layers of ourselves. Doing so, we will certainly find the courage to say, “Yes, I will live!”

Generally, we think that there is a world outside us, and it is in this outside world that other people, things, nature, and the entire universe exist. But is this thinking really correct? No, it is not, because each one of us creates a world of ourselves, and being enclosed in it, cannot possibly leave it.

The world is understood in two ways: as a *tangible* world of experience and as an *abstract* world. The former is the world that each person creates. We think that we live in a world common to all, but in truth this is not the case. Each one of us is in fact enclosed in a universe of his or her own experiences. For example, if I am not in a pleasant mood, the world has already become dark. If a thorn pricks my finger, the world has already become painful. No other person can directly

experience my pleasant or painful feelings.

As long as the ego remains, we cannot get out of the world of our private experiences. Since we have never slipped its confines, how then can we really talk about a world “outside” of ourselves? It could be that “outside” is nothing more than just a word. But even if there is an outside world and people come to a consensus about its existence, it still remains an abstract world for us.

Everything I experience exists in my own mind. For instance, let’s take the example of money, which is an object of great attachment for all. Whenever I see money I automatically presume two things: that money exists apart from me, and that it exists externally, exactly as I see it. Is this thinking right? No. It’s nothing more than my own strong mental image. Granted, there may indeed be something out there to which I respond; but as already indicated, I am shut up within a world of experience that I create, and it is impossible for me to get outside of it. Therefore, I cannot directly see or touch whatever is truly external to me.

Thus we can conclude that the money that I see now is only an image in my mind. If my state of mind changes, the image also changes. For instance, if I am drunk, my vision of money becomes blurred. Other people may object that this is only because I am drunk, and consequently my brain is not functioning normally. They will insist that the money really does perfectly exist, irrespective of my blurred image of it.

But we must ask in return: can we really consider the world that is created by a “normal” brain (one that is free from intoxication, for example) to be a “normal” real world? It is true that we can safely say that the world seen with unintoxicated eyes and an unintoxicated brain is a “normal” world. However, it is only “normal” insofar as we recognize it and arrive at a consensus among ourselves by collectively speaking about it as “normal.” We distinguish between “normal” and “abnormal,” but since we do not know anything other than these two categories, it is impossible for us to judge what is ultimately normal and what is ultimately abnormal.

The money that I see is certainly a phantom of my mind. This is just one possible example; it is not a question of just money alone. What about the self that I recognize as myself, and you, “the other” to my self, and nature, which envelops both self and other, and the universe, which comprises everything—do all these really exist outside of me? Or

are the universe, nature, self, and other—all of which I tangibly experience—only shadows in my mind as was the case with money? In fact, we might say of ourselves that we are “a single person, a single world,” for we are entirely unable to get beyond the confinement of ourselves.

FIGURE 1: A SINGLE PERSON, A SINGLE WORLD



Imagined Nature: the abstract world spoken in language; object of attachment.

Dependent Nature: Mind; things that arise due to causes and conditions.

Why can we not escape from the captivity of ourselves? The answer is very simple: it is because our experiences are characterized by what we may call an “ego consciousness.” As long as we are possessed by this “ego consciousness”—which we ordinarily refer to as “I,” “myself,” or “me”—we will be incapable of evading our own mind. So all of our activities end up always centered on the self, on “egoism.” A charitable act done for another, in the final analysis, remains an act done for oneself.

Consider the concept of loving others. Can we really love others in a

selfless and disinterested way? In fact, when we love others, our ego consciousness expects them to return our love. The other is expected to give way, lest I run into him on the road. As the train comes to the platform, and the door opens, I run to get a seat first. Everywhere, the ego consciousness is subtly performing its work. Is it really good to live life through such actions?

Does this “self,” “I,” or “me” actually exist? We conceive that we ourselves do exist, and our thoughts and actions are concentrated on that existing “me.” Still, does such a self in fact exist? No! The self is only an echo of the word *self*. In my career as a professor, I often used the following script to help students grasp this truth.

“Consider your hand.” Students look at their hands.

“Whose hand is it?” I ask.

“It’s my hand,” everyone answers.

“You can see your hand with your own eyes and confirm its objective existence. Can you also turn your thought inward and confirm something within you that corresponds to the word *my*?”

Now the students begin to think deeply. Answers are typically slow to come and hesitantly stated. Many are perplexed. Although we expect words to reveal the existence of what they denote, in the case of *my* or *self* we find nothing that precisely corresponds to these words.

I pose still more questions.

“Please close your eyes.” I allow a few moments to pass. “Now open them to see. You certainly see me, because I am standing in front of you. But who is it that sees me?”

Students are typically quick to answer, “*I* am the one who sees you!”

But again, as was the case with the owner of the hand, I ask them to pursue this *I*: “What is it that corresponds precisely to this word *I*?”

Again, they have trouble identifying anything.

In the simple process of questioning our assumed experience, we quickly become aware of the fact that what we take to be ourselves is merely an echo of the word *me*. We are made up of hands, legs, a body, eyeballs, functioning eyesight, and so on and so forth, but this is all. When we attach the word *me* (which has no prior existence of its own) to all these realities, we allow ourselves to fall into thinking that this is *my* hand, *my* foot, that *I* see things, and so on. When we look into this “*I*,” so central to our experiences, we can’t figure out where or what it is. Isn’t this a high-handed maneuver that contradicts reality?

Let's consider further examples. For instance, seeing a pyramid, I am quick to say, "There is a pyramid." But in truth there are only the stones that have gone into the construction of the pyramid. If we analyze and pick apart these stones themselves, we get only stone powder, molecules, atoms, and finally atomic particles. By taking into account the data of our perception, and concretizing them with words, we create a thing called "pyramid," and subsequently we perceive it to be a real, objective thing.

In the same vein, on reflection we find only mind and body as elements for the constitution of a self. Ultimately the body, like the stones of a pyramid, is an assembly of an infinite number of minute elements. Mind is also comprised of many different moments of mind. A single second of mind is just one part of a complex phenomenon. When the concept of *me* emerges within our experience, we presume that there exists a substance called "me." This is similar to contemporary quantum physics where the smallest units of things are particles like electrons, which do not exist as substances with spatial extension. At the macro level, in the everyday world, we can see that there is a difference between self and other, but that difference is only an illusion—the result of a pervasive prejudice. If we look more closely at things, digging into what they really are at the micro level, all substantial differences disappear.

So when it comes to the mind, is there really a mind that I can say is "my mind"? Mind has no color or form. Mind is instantaneous, passing from moment to moment like the flame of a candle or the flowing water of a river. The constituent elements of both things and the mind are only the continuous flux and flow of all things. Can we really assert that they are our minds and bodies? Can we really intercept the flux of mind and matter as if they were static? There is only a body and mind where I see "me." The "me" indicated by the thought "This is *my* body and *my* mind" doesn't really exist. When we come to understand this truth, our experience of the world and vision of life is greatly transformed.

Are you outside? Or near a window with a view? Take in the landscape—lush green mountains, the vast, dark-blue expanse of the sky above, whatever you may see—all the beauty of nature unfolds before your eyes. Really, that the eyes can even see at all is such a wonder! We must be grateful for the gift of sight. The Japanese term for "wonderful," *fushigi*, is originally a Buddhist term, derived from the

Sanskrit word *acintya* (“unthinkable”), which was then translated in Chinese as “a matter beyond our thinking and speaking.”

Why do color and form appear whenever we open our eyes? When the eyes, which are just atoms and particles, make contact with the beauty of nature, which is also constituted of atoms and particles, why is it that in our eye and our mind there arises a consciousness of seeing lush greenery? Mind arises when the world and our organs of sense meet each other. Even though the details may be beyond our understanding, it is a fact that the mind is active here, specifically in what we refer to as vision. We may not understand the *why* or *how* of the reality of the senses, but we can certainly admit that they are wonderful. It isn't just our senses that are wonderful either. Living beings endowed with bodies and minds—even that we are alive as human beings—are a wonder.

Once, as I was leading a seminar at the university where I teach, the students and I discussed why life is important. “Why is life important?” I asked. There came the answer, “Because life is very rare.” The birth of life on the face of the earth, in this vast and boundless universe, is indeed a very rare event. Over time, satellites in space have lifted the veil from the heavens, showing us the true faces of the planets and the vast expanse of the night sky. As a result we are now almost certain that there is no life in the solar system other than what is here on Earth. Hence the old Buddhist aphorism that “life is rare and is therefore precious” still has great persuasive power. None of the students opposed this idea. That a thing of rarity is precious is not just a personal feeling, but is a commonly shared value among all people.

It is, of course, also possible to think that there is no need to treat a thing carefully simply because it is rare. One student had the opinion that “life came into being when a favorable condition for the birth of life on earth came about accidentally. Therefore, it is not necessary to consider it as precious.” There is some reason in this line of thinking, which brings together the concept of “accident” and the concept of “rare.” But another student argued: “This is an insufficient reason. It might have originated accidentally, but life remains precious all the same because of its rarity.” At this point, however, I had the impression that we were merely arguing about concepts—not about life itself.

Before making a *value judgment* about whether life is precious or not precious, it is necessary to make a *factual judgment*, which requires a determined awareness of the facts of the matter. We can say that there

that allow us to comprehend the various data as this or that “thing.” Afflicted consciousness underlies conceptual consciousness and adds further coloration to experience by dividing the perceiver from the perceived and placing the various “things” perceived in relation to the self. By its activation even more “color” is added to the mental illustration of that “thing.” All of these layers of mind emerge from the store consciousness, which is the fundamental or source mind.

We can think of the mind as being like a painter. If we settle the mind and restrain our attention, keeping it focused within, we can silently observe the process whereby the activity of the mind draws and colors in the various “things” of perception. By engaging in this type of inward observation we come to clearly see the principles of Representation Only.

Throughout our lives there are two types or worlds of experience: we experience the waking world and we experience the world of dreams. Suppose that you have just awakened from a dream into the “real” world. Having awakened from the dream and having reflected on it, we say, “Oh, it was a dream. It wasn’t real.” But are we correct to think this way? What exactly is the difference between the world experienced in dreams and the world experienced in waking life? Isn’t this world that I now see with my eyes, hear with my ears, and ponder with my mind the same as the world of dreams in terms of how it is experienced?

We know only these two worlds of waking and dream experience. Given that there are only these two, it seems impossible to determine that one is ultimately more true than the other. This world that we take to be reality certainly also has a sort of dreamlike quality because it is also produced by the mind.

Without giving it much thought, I tend to consider my mind as being like a transparent mirror, upon which the outside world is reflected in just the way it exists. But this is absolutely wrong. Everything we experience—whether shapes, colors, or concepts—are shadows, molded and constructed by my mind. The world I cognize is nothing more than the painting I have made with the various drawing materials available to me in the brush box of my mind. The world does not exist exactly as I cognize it; instead it exists only for me, like an illusion, a dream.

When the great samurai general Oda Nobunaga received the news of the defeat of the vanguard of his army at the battle of Okehazama,

distraught, he danced about and sang, “When I think of the fifty years we are given to live here on Earth, it seems like a passing dream. Is there anyone who doesn’t soon die after coming into life?” Similarly, Kanpaku Toyotomi Hideyoshi uttered the following lines on his deathbed:

Is not my body like vanishing dew?
The things of Osaka, too, are like a dream of dreams.

We should not think this way only when facing imminent death, but should see this truth here and now, in the very midst of our daily lives. It is very important that we realize this fact that everything we experience as utterly real is actually fantasy—here and now—in the middle of our daily lives. When we realize that everything is a dream, an illusion, without any substance, that there is no fixed and unchanging matter, we become able to finally bring our attachment to things to an end. There are some who, despite realizing that what they cling to is dreamlike, want to make it a wonderful dream nonetheless.

When I say in a lecture, “Everything is like a dream,” inevitably some student will meet me after class to complain about how awful it is to think that this life is like a dream. But I ask them in return, “When you consider that we don’t remember how we got here, or when this life began, don’t you feel like this resembles our experience in dreams?” If they stop to consider this, eventually they acknowledge its truth. The great thing about us human beings is that we are naturally endowed with a sense of awareness that is innately capable of understanding the truth about reality.

Everything we experience is just a conceptual construction in the mind—nothing more. To truly realize that everything is as a dream, essentially we must become a buddha like Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha. The Sanskrit term *buddha* is the past participial form of the verb *budh*, which means “to wake.” The epithet *buddha* thus refers to one who has awakened as an enlightened being. When we finally awaken from a long night’s wandering in dreams, we realize that they were dreams by comprehending the entirety of the world about whose status we were confused. Our waking consciousness completely swallows the entire world of the dream. The term *buddha* calls us to awaken, as soon as possible, from the suffering of this long night’s

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