

## **EMPTINESS AND SITTING MEDITATION--Gary Allen (Ratna, 2005)**

One way to understand emptiness is to say that it is freedom from concept. It's understood in Buddhist descriptions of perception that at the very first instant we perceive something--a cloud, a dog, another person, a thought--there's what we could call fresh perception. We don't yet have an idea about that person or that thought, there's just the "bare perception" of that moment. "Bare" means that there's nothing extra added on to it by our discursive thought. We just have the direct experience itself.

But very, very quickly our mind gets involved in the act of interpreting what we just perceived. We call it a name like "cloud" or "dog," and then on that basis come up with further ideas that interpret our experience according to passion, aggression, or ignorance: "pretty cloud," "mean dog," "uninteresting person." We want to possess that perception, we want to avoid it or get rid of it, or we take the attitude that it's unimportant. From there, depending on how much habitual thought and feeling we might be able to relate--"That memory really upsets me; I want it to go away!" or "There's my boss; I hope he didn't find out that I didn't finish the report"--we could get very involved in many complex thoughts and feelings. Meanwhile, the original freshness of the perception is lost. Probably, it was so overwhelmed by our thoughts and opinions, it was such a brief little flicker of experience, we didn't even notice.

But that first moment of direct perception is not different from emptiness. It was empty of any of our concepts or habitual patterns. We were not trying to make that experience into something that related to our ego and therefore made our sense of self solid by projecting our ideas on the rest of the world. "I'm afraid of the dog." "I hate that guy." "I want a car like that." Each time there's a solid "I" because there's a solid "other," a solid *this* because there's a solid *that*. If somehow we don't do our usual, habitual "patching" process, then whatever appears is free or empty of our concepts, and therefore can be experienced as it is.

So emptiness doesn't mean that everything disappears into some kind of void, but that things appear just as they are. If we look closely, we're always struggling with the assumption that those things are themselves solid and continuous. But whatever we perceive, outside or inside ourselves, is in a state of change. Moment by moment we hear a bird, we glance out a window, we sniff, we feel our stomach rumble, we look at a tree, we hear a car go by. One sensory moment after the next is passing, not to return. Even the experience of breakfast we had this morning is gone. It will never come back, even if we eat the exact same thing for breakfast tomorrow morning, it will not be the same experience, though it might seem very similar.

Therefore we can't say that things don't appear; in fact, the world, moment by moment, if we're really paying attention, is tremendously rich in appearances of all kinds, right down to a dandelion seed floating above a mud puddle or the glint in a frog's eye. At the same time, what can we really grasp and hold on to? What perception can we freeze and own permanently, keep in our attic or a museum? What we have instead of direct experiences we can hold onto are memories. We might remember a happy day we spent at Disneyland as a child, but we can't in any way have more than a memory or the stuffed Mickey Mouse we brought back. We aren't that person anymore, we can't return to the same experience, even if we still have the photographs and mementos of the event. We can have our experience now of the memory or the memento, but that's all.

Hence the world of sense perceptions is said to be like a dream. In a dream things appear, and if we're caught up in the dream we believe it to be very solid, very real, but when we wake up, we realize that it was just something that our mind made up. If we got rich in the

dream, or got drunk, or our father died, whatever it was, that was never a real thing. Other analogies could be that of movies or TV. We think what we're watching is very compelling, and we react emotionally when the hero triumphs or someone tells a joke, but essentially what we're watching is the flashing of colored light on a screen. It's not a solid thing at all, even though we may react very strongly to our experience of it.

Likewise, if we look inside ourselves, at the play of our thoughts, it's possible to see what Trungpa Rinpoche calls their "transparency." In meditation practice, as we follow our breath, for instance, it's possible for our agitation to calm down a little. Then we can look directly at thoughts. Normally we're just caught up in their contents, meaning we're very angry about such and such or wish our girlfriend would come back to us. We take the story-line of our thoughts to be the reality of our thoughts. But if we look directly at thought, what a thought is, by itself, and don't get caught up in the usual scenarios we're playing out in our minds, then we might see the empty, transparent nature of thoughts.

With thoughts, if anything, we can see even more easily how they're constantly changing and flowing by than we can with the world outside of us. If we don't solidify a thought and don't get caught up in it, we can see how it just sort of slips away. We can't really say where thoughts come from or where they go. We might see a thought pop into our minds and experience it dissolving away as another appears to replace it, but where do thoughts come from? Where do they go? They're like clouds, appearing out of the sky and disappearing back into it.

If we look closely between when a thought arises and when it dissolves, we might notice that, like a dream, it's just a mere appearance in our minds. "Mere" means it's nothing more; it's nothing other than a sound or image slipping by that we can't grasp and hold onto, like a dream or a mirage. You might on a hot day see a lake in the distance, but if you head toward it, you can never reach it because it isn't actually there, it just appears to be. In the same way, if we stop mistaking thoughts for being solid realities and just let them be, they might appear to us the way they actually are: transitory, ungraspable, and empty, the play of light in our minds.

If we can practice sitting meditation in this way, then we can learn to relax our tendency to plaster those same thoughts on the world when we get up from sitting. We can learn to let go of the habitual tendency to force everything into our conceptual framework, and instead develop a sense of openness toward our perceptions. We could be more interested in what we experience and less in our prefabricated version of it. In that way we cut the aggressive speed of our thoughts and open to the rich perceptions of the world around us. We will then have a lot more space for gentleness and compassion, and more basis for courage in relating creatively to difficult situations. We will be able, once we start to free ourselves from the dulling effect of thinking incessantly, to experience the vividness, freshness, and magic of things as they are.