

NOTES ON HOW TO SEE YOURSELF AS YOU REALLY ARE

CHAPTER 1: LAYING THE GROUND FOR INSIGHT TO GROW

This first chapter is about the importance of identifying ignorance. By “ignorance,” the Dalai Lama (DL) means the conception of inherent existence, which can include cognitive, emotional and sensory components. Another way to think about ignorance is as the misapprehension of how things exist. We think and feel as though things exist in a self-supporting, mind-independent way, whereas when we look for such things, we can never find them. We project a kind of existence upon things that things simply don’t have. There are local, individual ways of treating certain emotions, and Buddhism has practices for them. The DL gives the examples of counteracting sexual lust by meditating on the parts of the body lying beneath the skin that don’t seem so desirable, and counteracting hatred by cultivating love. But these are targeted, specific antidotes. They work, and Buddhism uses them; it does not discard them. But they don’t work for *every* counterproductive emotion. For a *general* antidote, we need *wisdom*, the opposite of ignorance.

The DL is making two very closely related points here:

A. Ignorance is responsible for unproductive emotions.

“Ignorance binds us to suffering; therefore ignorance has to be clearly identified.”

The DL says that, seeing things in this exaggerated, extreme way is the source of all “counterproductive emotions,” a.k.a., “afflictive emotions.” Notice that he does not provide a detailed list of these emotions. In passing, he mentions lust and hatred. “Lust” in this sense is often treated as broader than the normal sexual sense. In the broader sense it refers to wanting something you don’t have in a way that entails a sense of attachment that diminishes your happiness.

There are many detailed Buddhist lists of the afflictive emotions. But in Buddhism the common factor is that these states of mind all depend on an exaggerated sense of the existence of the self and the existence of the object. We attribute objectivity and independence to the object and the qualities we see in it. The antidote is explained as the deep insight that these things are not objective, self-powered, or mind-independent.

Notice also that the DL is not explaining the process whereby ignorance causes these counterproductive emotions. Accounts of this process are easy to find in Buddhist texts and commentaries. But this book does not go into those details. This itself is an interesting point.

It indicates that perhaps such explanations are not necessary. Instead, we are invited to try out this system; perhaps through experience we will experience relief from things that bother us, and we won't need detailed mechanical or psychological explanations.

B. The first step in applying the antidote is to recognize what this ignorance is.

“Identifying this false appearance of things and acknowledging our tacit assent to this illusion are the first steps toward realizing that you and other beings, as well as all other objects, do not exist the way they appear to...”

The DL is recommending that we become able to identify the discrepancy between how things exist and how they appear to exist. Identifying ignorance calls for us to look into our experience. We use the “introspective” method of meditation, and try to identify those appearances that imply that their objects exist inherently, in a way that doesn't depend on thought. This is one of the hardest and most important parts of emptiness meditation.

The reason it is hard is this: until we have a pretty good understanding of emptiness, we don't quite know how to tell if something seems inherently existent. It almost seems like identifying the sense of exaggerated existence depends on realizing emptiness, and realizing emptiness depends on recognizing the sense of inherent existence.

Identifying the Sense of Inherent Existence

This is a known issue with the DL's system of emptiness teachings. For the beginning student it can really seem like a muddle. But if we stick with it, things become clearer with time. A few clues can be used. When some phenomenon appears in a very concrete, insistent way, when it appears as though it's like this for everyone everywhere, and as though it **must** be so regardless of anyone's opinion or cognition, then that is often a good sign that there is a sense of inherent existence involved in our experience. The appearing phenomenon can be an object, self, event, process, thought, feeling, truth, view, etc. The strong and exaggerated views and feelings that can appear around these things are often evidence that something in the mix seems inherent and object to us.

In this teaching, we don't try to refute the feelings themselves. Instead, we use them as clues. We look for the objects that the feelings seem to point to. It is those objects that we have exaggerated. We must realize the opposite of that exaggeration. The feelings are simply by-products. When we no longer exaggerate the objects, the feelings will become pacified.

The DL begins this book with the importance of identifying this ignorance, this discrepancy between how things appear and how they really are. When we identify it, then we are able to isolate the target of refutation that our meditations will focus on.

Meditative Reflections

“Consider:

1. All counterproductive emotions are based on and depend upon ignorance of the true nature of persons and things.
2. There are specific ways to suppress lust and hatred temporarily, but if we undermine the ignorance that misconceives the nature of ourselves, others, and all things, all destructive emotions are undermined.
3. Ignorance sees phenomena— which actually do not exist in and of themselves— as existing independent of thought.”