

## Clear awareness of emptiness

An excerpt from SD 60.1e Delusion and Experience © Piya Tan, 2023b (forthcoming).

**3.9.1** The cultivation of clear awareness also applies to a perception of nonself known as **dwelling in emptiness** (*suññata vihāra*), as explained in **the Mahā Suññata Sutta** (M 122). This Sutta distinguishes between dwelling in emptiness, internally, externally or both, followed by instructions for overcoming difficulties in doing so. For one who dwells in emptiness internally, for example, one is clearly aware as follows:

One understands: “Attending to emptiness internally my mind then advances, acquires confidence, becomes established in, and becomes released in emptiness internally.”

In this way, one clearly knows that. (M 122), SD 11.4<sup>1</sup>

On a simple level, the “emptiness” is perceived *internally* in our own aggregates (form, feelings, perception, formations and consciousness), seeing them as being conditioned and nonself. On a deeper level, with the arising of concentration, we attain the “fruit of attainment through emptiness” (*suññatā phala, samāpattim*, MA 4:154,15), that is, dhyana arising through the perception of emptiness. The same perception of emptiness can be made externally, that is, viewing others as the aggregates, and seeing these aggregates as “empty.”

**3.9.2** We can see that clear awareness in this perception of emptiness is similar to the way it works in the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana [3.8]. Hence, when we lack clear awareness, we lose concentration; then, we will not be able to dwell in emptiness. While in the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana, the task of mindfulness and awareness is to ensure that we do not revert to the 2<sup>nd</sup> dhyana; in the perception of emptiness, we must ensure that the mind does not fall away from the emptiness-dwelling, the emptiness-based attainment.

**3.9.3** From sitting meditation or standing meditation, dwelling concentrated in emptiness, our clear awareness, according to the Sutta [3.9.1], then proceeds to **walking**. In walking, the continuity of insight into emptiness is sustained by keeping aloof from desire and discontent. Other levels of a continuous dwelling in emptiness, accompanied by clear awareness, include keeping the mind free from unwholesome thoughts, avoiding unsuitable topics of conversation, and remaining aloof from being distracted by any of the 5 cords of sensual pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

We can see here how clear awareness extends from the perception of emptiness in a deep meditative state to cover our daily mundane activities, such as interacting with others. This essentially describes the wholesome personality of a contemplative meditator.

**3.9.4** For those of us who are unable to practise **dwelling in emptiness** to the level of attaining dhyana, especially lay followers, we can still cultivate emptiness-dwelling, as in the perception of impermanence, for each or any of the 5 aggregates. We cultivate the empti-

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<sup>1</sup> **Mahā Suññata S** (M 122): *Evam pajānāti: ajjhataṃ suññataṃ kho me manasikaroto ajjhataṃ suññatāya cittaṃ pakkhandati pasīdati santiṭṭhati vimuccatī ti. itiha tattha sampajāno hoti.* (M 122,6 f/3:111 + 9 f/3:112) + SD 11.4 (2.3).

<sup>2</sup> The 5 cords of sensual pleasure arise through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching: see SD 60.1d (7.4.2.2(1)).

ness-dwelling internally by watching the aggregates in *ourselves*; we cultivate it externally by watching the aggregates in *others*.

(1) INTERNAL DWELLING IN EMPTINESS

Dwelling in emptiness by way of **form** internally is done when we see our own body by reflecting its impermanent nature (such as how we are losing our hair a bit at a time, or how our eye-sight is worsening, or when we fall sick), as comprising the 4 elements (earth, water, fire, wind).<sup>3</sup>

When we notice a **feeling** that has arisen as *pleasant*, we simply note it as being conditioned and impermanent: it will pass away. When the feeling is *unpleasant*, it too is conditioned and impermanent. On an occasion when we are able to discern that a feeling is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we note it as “neutral.”

**Perception** can be noted when we recall that we have had a similar experience in the past, and we examine how our memory of that past has influenced the way we recognize a present object (a sight of someone or something, a smell, a taste, or a touch). Even if we have been unable to do this as it arises, we can reflect on the perception after the fact, of what has already happened.

**Formations** arise when we intentionally act, speak or think—such as about any of the above events. We should note that whether our reaction to that state was motivated by *lust* (desire) or by *hatred*; when we are focused enough we may even discern how we have been *deluded* into such an act of body, speech or mind. This should be mindfully done with awareness so as not to direct any new unwholesome thought to how we are discerning this karma-formation. Or, to be certain, we may verbalize at the end of such an exercise: “By this act of truth, may I be well and happy!”

**Consciousness** can be mindfully discerned with awareness at any of the 6 sense-doors: through any of the 5 sense-doors (which are easy enough) or upon thinking a thought (which can be more difficult). For example, we can reflect how we become aware of shapes or colours, say, on the computer screen.

Or, when we hear a sound, notice how we know it’s a sound (focus on the ear-door): we notice many sounds arising seemingly from different sources; yet, we can only make sense of any of them at our ear-door.

Similarly, when we smell a smell: we discern it at our nose-door. We may at first discern it as being pleasant or unpleasant, weak or strong, where it is coming from, and so on. When we are practising the perception of foulness (of a rotting corpse), we must then keep to the meditation advice to stay upwind so that we are not unhealthily affected by the bad odour. Otherwise, under normal circumstances, we then simply note it “smelling” without reacting to it in hedonic terms.

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<sup>3</sup> On the 4 or 6 element practice, see (Rahula) **Dhātu S 1** (S 18.9/2:248 f), SD 3.11(6.3).

To discern taste, we need to take in some food slowly enough; over time, we may even notice how the same kind of food may taste differently or simply taste bland. Or, if we are more discerning, we may notice it to be sweet, or sour, or salty, or bitter, or savoury (umami).<sup>4</sup> Or when drinking tea or coffee, we may notice (or not) the kind or blend that we are drinking (when this happens naturally). We should however not dwell on this aspect, but simply note the passing taste as a passing phenomenon. We notice how the taste actually comes and goes: we know it is tea, coffee, water, etc, by this change.

Consciousness through touch can be discerned when we touch someone, and then reflect how we feel and react to such a touch (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral).

Discerning a thought is often interesting but tricky (when we get carried away by that thought!): we must be resolute enough to simply watch how that thought arises and then ends, taken over by another thought. We can also observe how a thought emotionally affects us: how we would rather avoid an unwholesome thought (rooted in greed, hate or delusion), and nurture a wholesome one (free of the 3 roots).

## (2) EXTERNAL DWELLING IN EMPTINESS

When dwelling in emptiness **externally**, we basically adjust the exercises we have done *internally* [3.9.4] in terms of another person. For example, we discern our reaction to the sight of another: how that person has aged or changed in some physical way (grown fatter or thinner), and note this as a characteristic of impermanence. When we are attracted to a person, we will notice that there are features of the person that displease us, and so on.

When we hear the sound of another, notice how we recognize (or think we recognize) who or what it is; or when we do not know its source, we note how we react to it as a result, and so on. We may also notice how a sound may be made by someone who is sick or in pain,<sup>5</sup> or how the wind may distort a sound and make it non-intelligible. We may notice how we're able to follow what a person says (even if we do not know this person) in the midst of other people talking. We may even notice the conditioned nature of sound, or realize the context or nuance of the words; or, we may notice how we have constructed an experience of listening to another.

When we notice another person or animal discerning a smell, we simply take it as a "smell" without evaluating it (unless it is some kind of danger-sign, like the smell of smoke from a fire).

We may notice how others relish taste when taking food or a drink, even when it is not to our taste. Note how it is just a taste but our body and mind react differently to it. Or, we may notice someone taking food or drink. Even then, such a taste (experienced by anyone) is impermanent too. A hungry baby drinks milk; an elderly person tastes their soup with a

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<sup>4</sup> SD 28.15 (2).

<sup>5</sup> When such a sound comes from someone who needs help or from a dangerous situation (like a fire), we should, of course, stop our meditation and investigate—unless it is a controlled situation where there are others already doing this, or it is beyond our power to do anything.

spoon. We then reflect on the impermanence of touch or feeling, how we the pleasant feeling comes and goes just like that.

Discerning another person's experience of touch is similar to that for *internal dwelling*, only the focus is here on the other subject, and may be similar to the preceding experience.

When we are certain enough to *know* what another's thoughts are, we should reflect that they are *not* our thought: it's just the way that the other person thinks or is: whether that person is happy or sad on account of that thought, how we react should be wholesome for our own mental health and personal development.

Usually, we will not really know the mind or heart of another, but we must certainly know our own. When we feel anger or hatred against another, even towards our own self, we should first of all understand that what we dislike is *not* the person. Rather, what we dislike is the situation: we must examine what we dislike about this situation, and keep on asking this way until we reach the root of our feeling. **The Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20) calls this the "stilling of thought-formations" (*vitakka, saṅkhāra, santhāna*), or, in modern terms, *thought-reduction*.<sup>6</sup>

The same method can be used when our mind is troubled by a lustful thought towards a person, including falling in love with someone. We should mindfully examine: Are we desiring only one part of the person? Have we really looked at the person as a whole? [See the paragraph of "sight" for external dwelling.] Do we really know that person? Essentially, we must learn to love, which is to learn; to learn is to grow and see beyond appearances and expectations.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it is always wise to close our contemplation of emptiness with some lovingkindness meditation.

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<sup>6</sup> M 20,6/1:120 (SD 1.6).

<sup>7</sup> The reflection on emptiness may give spiritual humility to those high up in a religious hierarchy to prevent abuses, physical, emotional and sexual. When we are in positions of authority or power (such as monks, Order Members or clerics), it would be truly compassionate on our part to look deeply at elderly colleagues and reflect that they were young boys once—and look at elderly nuns when thinking of molesting young girls. (On the other hand, this may not work when they rape old nuns too.) When we sexually violate the defenceless young who have almost no choice but to turn to the Sangha or the Church, we have violently torn a pupa from its cocoon. The victims lose their childhood and youth, and become emotionally scarred and maimed for life. They will darkly remember us for this. The 2-part 1992 docudrama, "The Boys of St Vincent" is a vivid lesson on the dark karma of child molestation by the cloth that is supposed to clothe them with love and charity.