Emptiness And Fullness

Recently, we have been talking about sunnata (soon-yah-tah), emptiness, or hollowness, that is, the absence of an autonomous, enduring self. The traditional Buddhist understanding is that every natural thing is conditioned, that is, everything in the known universe is inextricably linked to everything else and is, therefore, empty of singular, autonomous existence. In the human experience, this interdependence is experienced in awareness, that is, as the mind is operating, there is a link between external conditional circumstance and internal meaning-making processes.

The normal mode of this experience is misperceived as a duality, that is, a witness (the self) and whatever is witnessed (sensory stimuli, including thoughts and emotions; in Buddhist psychology, these phenomena are called the Six Sense Bases). This dualistic approach fundamentally misrepresents the interdependent nature of reality—there is no “internal witness” that is separate and autonomous from an “external object”. The natural non-dual reality is sunnata. In awareness, an awakening experience could also be understood as “fullness”, that is, an opening to the farthest extent of moment-by-moment awareness available without a fabricated separate, witnessing “self”.

The title of this document is “Emptiness And Fullness”. The ability to notice all the phenomena of subjective awareness inclusively, without creating a subject/object duality can be understood as fullness, that is, the fullness of this moment of reality opens the process of the mind, diminishing the felt need to believe there is a self involved. This awareness is very subtle and hard to open to, but every effort to function at that level of ongoing awareness liberates the mind from “the tyranny of I, Me and Mine”.

I want to focus on the practice of opening the mind to a more clear awareness of sunnata. In this practice I believe it is valuable to conceptually consider that, because of the interdependent complexity of reality, the experience of sunnata could be approached not only as *emptiness,* but also as *fullness*. This condition is frequently termed *choiceless awareness*.

Let me describe the meditative approach procedurally:

***First, there is the experience identified as mindfulness of breathing*.** Subjectively, there is an internal witnessing, that is, the subjective “self” aims and sustains attention on the sensation of breathing as an object, a dualistic process. This process stabilizes and disciplines attention as practice becomes more proficient. Typically, there are fewer intrusive thoughts and the flow of internal subjective experience is more persistently focused, “quieter” and “calmer”. We call this samadhi/passadhi.

***Next, we can broaden this stable, calm process of awareness to include other sensory experience*.** This might involve scanning through the body systematically with the intention to include all the physical phenomena of body awareness within the scope of moment-by-moment investigation. This process then can broaden further to include whatever auditory sensations might arise with the same inclusive moment-by-moment scrutiny. Any emerging thought process is noted as just another category of sensory phenomena, rejecting special importance (It is just another sense base, not a “self”). During the development of proficiency at this stage of practice, it is useful to *alternate* between broad, open attention (simply aware of the whole array of phenomenal experience *inclusively)* and directed attention (to *exclusive*, specific segments or portions of awareness). For example, alternating breath awareness with sound awareness, then whole-body awareness.

***The next level of practice is to notice the “openness” of awareness without preference for or identification with any particular contents in the flow of experience*.** Proficiency at this level of practice is shown when the whole array of experiential phenomena are stabilized in present-moment awareness without “wobbling”, and without becoming preoccupied with any traces of internal narrative processes.

One of the ways I conceptualize this practice is related to a printed page. Normally, the mind primarily pays attention to the printed material, identifying with the generation of meaning prompted by the words. This also would likely involve the mind diverging attention away from the printed material as the meaning-making function wandered off into tangential thoughts, then veered back to the written content. This is analogous to the undisciplined mind. Initial samadhi/passadhi is represented by the ability to read the script without attention deviating from the content—this represents the first stage above. The second stage would involve being able to notice the paper as well as the printed material, to include both in ongoing investigative awareness. The third stage of proficiency would be to notice that there is more paper than there is ink, then progressively drop any distinction between paper and ink. This is choiceless awareness, and enables the development of even more profoundly liberating non-dual awareness. This stage provides the opportunity to release any tendency to experience craving and clinging to any perception of a self observing an object, that is, liberation from duality, opening to non-dual awareness.