

Dharma Alphabet

The Great Way is not difficult
for those who have no preferences.
When love and hate are both absent
everything becomes clear and undisguised.
Make the smallest distinction, however,
and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.
If you wish to see the truth
then hold no opinions for or against anything.
To set up what you like against what you dislike
is the disease of the mind.
When the deep meaning of things is not understood
the mind's essential peace is disturbed to no avail.¹

For this talk I would like to focus on two lines from the 3rd Patriarch's: "If you wish to see the truth then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind." This practice instruction is directing us to investigate how our minds' work. So, how do we begin?

In Samdhinirmocana Sutra Visalamiti asks the Bhagavan how Bodhisattvas are wise with respect to the secrets of mind. And, the Tathagata responds that Bodhisattvas understand the three secrets of mind. What are they? They are mind, thought and consciousness.

Mind in this context is the "storehouse consciousness", the "basis consciousness", also known as "appropriating consciousness". Thought refers to "manas", mentation, or mental constructs. It is the aspect of mind that includes the identity builder and fantasy maker. Consciousness refers to the 6 sense consciousness: eye, ear, smell, taste, touch and mind, and their corresponding sense organs and sense objects.

Mind, thought and consciousness are three aspects of mind, not separate from each other.

How do the three aspects of mind work?

[A bluejay call]

Each of us sitting here has a seed in the storehouse consciousness that brought us to this moment of the bluejay call. We also have a predisposition to language and I am talking about the bird call while all of you are listening. Now the sequence of events happen very quickly with mind and body working together. The bluejay calls, the appropriating consciousness grasps at the sound brought into our human body by the ear sense organ into the ear consciousness coupled with mind consciousness to interpret the sound using "thought" to locate the mind's image of 'bluejay. What is produced is an "image" of bluejay. At the moment we project our image of bluejay we have separated ourselves from the experience of the bluejay. We have labeled it, bluejay.

We actually do this moment after moment.

Another example is a recent experience shared by someone who was on their way to a restaurant in a mall and due to that condition entered a shoe store along with 3 other family members with the intention of browsing.

¹Verses on the Faith Mind by Sosan Zenji, 3rd Patriarch, Verse 1, Hsin Hsin Ming

What happened was the husband saw a pair of purple shoes and told his wife that these shoes were really “cool”. At that point the wife came over to take a better look and sure enough, the shoes were “cool”. However, the wife said she had no need for purple shoes as her wardrobe was around orange...and black. Besides, the right size was not available. Immediately thereafter, she observed the same shoe was in black and available in her size. Without delay she tried on the shoe. Feedback from other family members indicated that the wife had too many black shoes and therefore that selection should not be considered. The subject was dropped and the shoe replaced on the display shelf. Browsing further, a brown version of the shoe showed up on another shelf. The wife was fighting back desire with logical thinking about the many shoes already owned. All left the store with no purchase but there had been talk about checking out shoe availability using the Internet. At the restaurant continued thoughts about the shoes popped into the wife's brain. Oh they really were “cool” shoes.

At 4:30am the next morning the wife awoke and worked out an entire plan that would result in the purchase of all 3 shoes, purple, black and brown. Here awareness was brought to the mind's capacity for expanding on ideas, building stories. Applied mental effort continued to see through the delusion around the shoes.

Days later thoughts of the “cool” shoes appeared and were dismissed. Even a search on the Internet was done, but no purchases were made.

What can be learned from this experience? Words, our propensity for language, the seeds of becoming, impact us and we are mostly unaware of this process. From the example we can see that words can be “triggers” for us and take us down a mindstream we had no intention of going down.

After hearing this story I reflected on trigger words in my own life and started to record my “dharma alphabet”. Try this for yourself. Just go through the alphabet and whatever word comes to mind for each letter, write it down. Some trigger words for me are: angry, aggressive, beautiful, bitch, bold, comfortable, capable, different, interesting, intelligent. Once you have a list, then watch for any of the words you wrote down to show up in either your vocabulary or someone you are listening to in a conversation. At that point try to follow your mental reaction, your bodily response (any tenseness, gestures, body signals). Note what is happening. Each trigger word that can take one down a mindstream is also liberative and can be the dharma door, the entrance to non-duality. It is how one applies mindfulness in the process, bringing awareness each time the word arises until one no longer is attached to the word. The grip it has on you is lessened each time until, finally, the chain is broken and the gate to transformation entered.

This kind of exercise is helpful to become familiar with your mind habits so that transformation of the seeds can occur. If you can observe it you may be able to see the response arise as it arises, rather than seeing the result. Equally important is this study of the self leads to knowing the self. The closing verse of Hsin Hsin Ming reminds us:

Words!
The Way is beyond language
for in it there is
no yesterday
no tomorrow
no today.²

Please treasure yourself.

²Hsin Hsin Ming's closing verse

