

**- Empty Movies -
Seeing Through Appearances**

From *The Debate between Wisdom and Ignorance*:
The reflection of illusory appearance arises
Within the mirror of the empty mind.

By Fedor Stracke



Happy Monks Publication

All rights reserved

No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system or technologies now known or later developed, without permission in writing from Fedor Stracke.

© Fedor Stracke

Other Happy Monks Publications:

Collected Topics

A Drop from the Ocean of Consciousness

A Drop from the Ocean of Mind and Mental Factors

A Drop from the Ocean of Aggregates

Emptiness

A Debate Between Wisdom and Ignorance

The Sun Illuminating the Profound Meaning of Emptiness

Biography

Chandrakirti - The One Clarifying Nagarjuna's Superior
Point of View

Meditation

Om Ah Hum Meditation by Lama Yeshe

A Commentary on the Praise to the Twenty-one Taras

A Commentary on the Praise to Manjushri

A Commentary on the Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer

How to Be a Happy Meditator

Available for download from:

www.happymonkpublication.org

Table of Contents

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
| The Example | 3 |
| The Meaning | 6 |
| The Conclusion | 9 |

Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltzen,

Consider the subject 'I' - it lacks true existence - because it is a dependent arising, like the reflection of form in the mirror.

Introduction

Two thousand years ago the Buddha taught that there are the two truths: illusory conventional truth and ultimate truth. He referred to conventional truth as illusory because conventional phenomena appear differently from the way they actually exist. There is an almost subliminal but very profound belief that both the 'I' and the world it lives in exist from their own side.

Believing in this misperception is said to be the root of anger or attachment, while understanding this distortion in our perception and being able to see through it are said to be the best antidotes against all disturbing thoughts. While practising compassion bodhisattvas meditate on the yoga of viewing everything like an illusion so as not to fall under the influence of mistaken appearances.

To understand this distortion one needs to understand emptiness, which is the lack, i.e., non-existence, of the apprehended object of the grasping at intrinsic existence.

In order to convey the subtle discrepancy between appearance and existence the Buddha used examples that are illusory even according to ordinary worldly perception, such as dreams, reflections, mirages, magical illusions, and so forth.

By definition an example is easier to understand than the main premise, acting as a bridge between not understanding at all and perfect understanding, which makes today's world of fiction and movies a perfect example for the illusory as well.

The Example

Even without realising emptiness one can see that for as long as one believes in the intrinsic nature of what one sees on the screen, one will get involved and generate sympathy for the protagonist and aversion for the antagonist. However, as soon as one, for example, remembers that all one sees is actually only the reflection of light on the screen, the movie can get a little boring. In fact, as in real life, there is a huge discrepancy between what is perceived and what is actually happening, and the more we meditate on the dependent arising of what we see, the less we will fall under the spell of true-grasping.

Take one of the more famous films in recent history, the Lord of the Rings, and its famous character, Frodo. There is an appearance of Frodo, his companions and his antagonists, of the world they live in and their actions to the mind, and everyone is aware that these are only appearances.

But at the same time a (con)fusion between fiction and reality exists in the minds of the audience, because attachment is generated for the protagonist and anger at the antagonist. As in real life, on a certain level the mind strongly believes that what appears to it is true, and then different harmful emotions are generated as a result.

But what is a character in a story, or the story itself, if not a mere mental creation? We can ask the famous question, 'How does Frodo exist'? He is certainly not on the screen, and he is also not hiding in the film reel, or somewhere else in the cinema. He also was not present at the time of filming, and he is not in the Shire or some other place in Middle Earth.

If it comes down to it, we have to say Frodo is just an artificial conceptual creation, first in the mind of Tolkien, and then in the mind of his readers.

In Buddhist psychological terms he is the mere apprehended object of the conceptual thought thinking 'Frodo'. Not more and not less. He is a mere object of a conceptual thought, because apart from the name or label Frodo there is no Frodo to be found. And in Frodo's case this means that he is totally non-existent, since he is not labelled in dependence on a valid base, which would have to be a combination of body and mind to make Frodo a person. Frodo exists only in our minds, and this fictional Frodo that exists in our minds is not really Frodo. Actually Frodo does not exist at all, or in other words, the object apprehended while watching the movie is non-existent.

Although obvious, this is quite significant. While it would probably never be asserted that there is an actual Frodo existing somewhere, when watching the movie that mental creation of Frodo is treated instinctively as a real person with real feelings of suffering and happiness. The mental creation has been brought to life, i.e., infused with some measure of real, intrinsic existence.

The Meaning

Why this is significant is because we do the same in real life. According to the Middle Way philosophy everything, we ourselves, our environment, and the people in it, are merely labelled by conceptual thought; all of it is the mere apprehended object of conceptual thought.

If we are aware that something is a mere conceptual creation of thought, without any reality of its own, then it does not worry us one way or the other. Father Christmas is only important to those who believe in him.

But our *reality* does worry us a great deal. We mentally create a life-story in a certain environment with different protagonists and antagonists in it, and then infuse it with intrinsic existence.

Friends are oh so wonderful, and enemies are oh so bad, all from their own side, out of their own nature. And when we switch our view and start to hold those who were enemies as friends, and those who were friends as enemies, we again believe this new *reality* of ours to be naturally true, even though it is the exact opposite to what we perceived before.

There is a continuous struggle to attain happiness for the self, and different kinds of emotions such as

attachment or anger are generated almost on a momentary basis for different objects because of the belief in their real existence.

Our mental creations have become real for us because self-grasping and the mental imprints of self-grasping have infused our mental creations with intrinsic and real existence. Just questioning appearances a little, taking them with a grain of salt, can help to avoid chasing the phantoms of intrinsic attractiveness and intrinsic faults with attachment and anger.

In the midst of all this is the good old self that is the centre point of everybody's life. An artificially created self (-image) that is pervading and dominating every aspect of a person's life, while at the same time being somewhat elusive and unfindable when looked for.

The Buddha gave as the definition of the self the mere 'I' that is labelled in dependence on any of the five aggregates that are its basis of imputation.

But while both the 'I' in one's own continuum as well as the 'I' in others' continuum are merely labelled, i.e., just the mere apprehended object of a conceptual thought, just as the characters in a movie or a story, they are not perceived as such.

Rather it is believed that the 'I' has intrinsic existence, in the same way that the characters in a movie or a story seem to have intrinsic existence. But when that intrinsic 'I' is looked for then it is unfindable, just like Frodo.

Of course there is one difference between Frodo and us, which is that while Frodo does not exist at all, we do exist. Although both Frodo and we are *se/ves* merely labelled by thought, at least we are labelled relative to a basis of a body and consciousness. Our 'I' is labelled on a valid basis, which makes it existent, while Frodo, also a labelled 'I', is not labelled on a valid base, which makes him non-existent.

That is why we become the basis for cause and effect, experiencing happiness and suffering, while Frodo does not.

The Conclusion

Movies are a good example for the way the world is supposed to be according to the Middle Way philosophy, according to which everything is merely labelled by conception but then made real to us through our grasping at intrinsic existence.

Because we think that we ourselves, others and our world have intrinsic existence, we generate attachment for those we like and get angry at those we don't like.

But were we to realise that we and the world around us lack intrinsic existence, our anger and attachment would cease naturally, because who gets attached to or angry at a mere idea?

We are able to disengage emotionally from the movie when we contemplate the artificial nature of what we are watching. In fact, we might feel it to be completely pointless to be watching it, since there is nothing *real* there, apart from the light on the screen, and even that lacks intrinsic existence.

Similarly, the realisation of emptiness stops attachment and anger from arising because it takes away the point. Realising the non-existence of the inherent existence of the object, and its artificial

nature, takes away the focus of anger and attachment.

But at the same time bodhisattvas generate love and compassion for sentient beings and do not fall into the extreme of nihilism. They understand that sentient beings exist conventionally because of being labelled on a valid base, and that sentient beings conventionally circle in samsara and experience suffering because of their misperception of reality.

The realisation of emptiness takes away only the basis for the mental afflictions, and through the realisation of emptiness everything disturbing in the mind ceases. But the good things stay and increase.

Impermanent phenomena appear as permanent,
Misery appears as happiness,
The unattractive appears as attractive
That projected by ones mind appears to exist from
its own side.

Written by the Semiconscious Fedor Stracke in 2004.
Published in Mandala Magazine and Budhismus Akutell.

SARVA MANGALAM