

YOGIC STATES, MINDFULNESS AND BUDDHIST ETHICS

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of mindfulness, perception and well-being within Buddhist Ethics. The argument examines the Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya Stotra which translates as "The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom". This is also known as the Heart Sutra and it is the most chanted verse in Asian Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism has evolved methods of yoga and meditation to attain a state of permanent happiness. Prajñā means wisdom, Pāramitā means transcendence and Hṛdaya means the heart.

The stotra, which is essentially a dialogue between Avalokiteshwara and Sariputra the chief disciple of Buddha brings out the nature of mental well-being via an understanding of the nature of reality. Happiness is a disruptive category as it is largely based on the consumption of desire and the reflection of reality.

This stotra talks about the nature of transcendence, mental well-being and the modes of viewing reality. Perception and the inherent states of dissatisfaction within the perception of reality is addressed through the states of form and formlessness and the articulation of inner mindful states and the problems associated with the nature of reality. The paper will examine the role of perception, the nature of human desire, the perception of realities and the nature of form and emptiness and what constitutes mental well-being as articulated by the Heart Sutra. The paper also in a comparative way looks briefly at the Isa Upanishad to bring out the similarities within the two philosophical systems.

Keywords: Prajñā, Pāramitā, transcendence, form and formlessness, mindfulness

This Paper examines the idea of Mindfulness and perception to attain the state of mental well-being and happiness through the heart sutra. The heart sutra or the **Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya** sutra is one of the most cardinal sutras in Mahayana Buddhism and is widely practiced throughout East and South Asia.

One of the fundamental ideas that come out of Buddhism is the nature of reality and the modes of perceiving reality and the resultant problems of physical and mental well-being. Modern day psychoanalysis states that mental illnesses are a result of how our perception functions in terms of acceptance or the negation of realities. The negation of realities and the resultant perception is the reason for what we understand as mental illnesses, neurosis or psychosis.

THE IDEA OF PERCEPTION

Sigmund Freud in his work *Interpretation of Dreams* mentioned about two different states of how an individual handles the reality around him. An individual is bound by two different states namely *Eros* and *Tanatos*. *Eros* is the pleasure principle which motivates and drives the self in search of pleasure as a mode of well-being. It signifies the role and the nature of desire and its fundamental importance to the well-being of the individual in the sense that pleasure is a constructive concept behind a well-adjusted mind and the resultant actions. *Tanatos* on the other hand is the death wish which is a representation of the lowest ebb within ones personality. It signifies aggression, depression and the idea of suicide. Freud mentions;

It must be pointed out, however, that strictly speaking it is incorrect to talk of the dominance of the pleasure principle over the course of mental processes. If such dominance existed, the immense majority of our mental processes would have to be accompanied by pleasure or to lead to pleasure, whereas universal experience completely contradicts any such conclusion.¹ (Freud: 37)

According to Freud both need to be in a sense of an ideal balance for the individual to perform and stay with a sense of mental well-being. Perception is the key behind what is perceived to be *Eros* or *Tanatos*. We have two modes of reading perception. One can be the idea of physical objects and the interaction with the environment and the self and the other is the yogic idea of perception and the forms of *Nothingness* and the states of *No Mind* in Buddhism.

1. Freud, S. (1955). Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In J Strachey (ED. & Trans.), The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud (Vol.18, pp. 1-64) also see Freud, Sigmund. Beyond the Pleasure Principle. 1920. Mineola, New York, Dover Publication, Inc, 1920.

2. Matten, Mohan. Seeing, Doing and Knowing: A Philosophical Theory of Sense perception. London: Oxford. 2005.

The physical idea of perception that influences the nature of mindfulness and *Eros* are seen within the idea of visuality where we seem to look for the immediate and the spaces we live in. It is a direct aspect of reality that holds us. Apart from this we have ideas of sound and the awareness of the sound that gets us to understand our surroundings and we build our perception through that. The next perception is the sense of taste and how we have the preferences for specific cuisines. Hearing is an important order for the perception of the environment. The nature of the olfactory nature of perception brings in the role of choices within the environment very clearly. Touch is an important part of the manner by which we make a sense of our surroundings and it is contained within the sensory nature by which we make sense of our surroundings within the space of the mind. It is also as Mohan Matten mentions far away from the supreme idea of truth. ² (Matten: 6)

This idea of physical perception of reality is rooted within the five senses and the self can only interact through the senses. This leads to the constant state of tension within the self and the resultant problems of self-destruction and aggression.

The Yogic idea of perception on the other hand is rooted in the nature of impermanence. Spirituality and Yogic States testify to the nature of reality as being transient and impermanent. It has been described in Vedanta as *Maya* and in Buddhism as *Mara*. The Heart Sutra brings out the fundamental differences from the idea of physical perception that Freud talked about by bringing it into the nature of mindfulness and the true nature of reality.

THE BUDDHIST IDEA OF PERCEPTION AND NOTHINGNESS

The Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra is a text where the Bodhisattva of Compassion Avalokiteshwara addresses Sariputra, Buddha's chief disciple. He addresses the modes of suffering and the problems with the idea of perception. The text mentions:

The Bodhisattva of Compassion, when he meditated deeply, saw the emptiness of all five skandhas and sundered the bonds that caused him suffering. ³ (Heart Sutra)

If the Freudian idea of the self in relation with the notions of perception is based on a direct idea of the five senses leading to a state of well-being or happiness, the Buddhist idea is based on the idea of nothingness or emptiness. The world perceived in a state of mindfulness is empty as a mindful gaze fixes itself on the reality around. The mindful gaze can perceive the perishable nature of the very reality around it. This is different to *Tanatos* which signifies suppression of desires and the resultant repression within the subconscious.

The text goes on to add:

Here then, Form is no other than emptiness, Emptiness no other than form. Form is only emptiness, Emptiness only form. Feeling, thought, and choice, Consciousness itself, Are the same as this. ⁴ (Heart Sutra)

The true mindful eye can perceive beyond the duality of the physical surroundings. Beyond the scope of the five senses, the self is able to understand the cessation of desire and the idea of form as the formless. Being able to understand the perishable nature of reality, the self can no longer distinguish the form and the formless as for the discerning self both signify the same thing the perishable and the transient nature of reality and things around. This is what brings out the true nature of well-being and happiness within, according to the Bodhisattva. The text further mentions:

All things are by nature void. They are not born or destroyed Nor are they stained or pure Nor do they wax or wane So, in emptiness, no form, No feeling, thought, or choice, Nor is there consciousness. No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No colour, sound, smell, taste, touch, Or what the mind takes hold of, Nor even act of sensing. No ignorance or end of it, Nor all that comes of ignorance; No withering, no death, No end of them. Nor is there pain, or cause of pain, Or cease in pain, or noble path To lead from pain; Not even wisdom to attain! Attainment too is emptiness. ⁵

(Heart Sutra)

This is the nature of reality that comes out beyond the sense perceptions. So one understanding that can be achieved through this Buddhist sutra is to achieve a state of mindfulness within the idea of emptiness itself. This sutra goes beyond the idea of sense perception and it allows an individual to achieve a state of happy mind and well-being by participating within reality and staying away from it within the act of discrimination.

In a modern scientific sense if this can be related to Freudian ideas, then this state of mindfulness brought out through this famous mantra can take an individual beyond the act of repression itself that contributes to the problem of depressive disorders. This form of mindfulness does not lead to repression within the unconscious and at the same time allows an individual to participate within the norms and acts of society without a negative sense of involvement. The negative sense of involvement and the role of repression is the reason for the psychosomatic disorders and the more serious cases of mental illnesses like neurosis and psychosis.

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3. The Heart Sutra as Recited in the Triratna Buddhist Community.
https://thebuddhistcentre.com/system/files/groups/files/heart_sutra.pdf
 4. The Heart Sutra as Recited in the Triratna Buddhist Community.
https://thebuddhistcentre.com/system/files/groups/files/heart_sutra.pdf
 5. The Heart Sutra as Recited in the Triratna Buddhist Community.
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Isa Upanishad and the nature of reality

Looking at the Buddhist idea of Compassion and its perception of reality it will be interesting to examine if the tenants of the Heart Sutra are reflected within Indian scriptural texts. The Upanishads are a storehouse of how perception is the root cause of all sorrow. It is how one perceives reality that determines ones thought and conduct. The role of karma is also seen within Buddhism with its preoccupation with the idea of rebirth as within Hinduism. The self as a source of the destination is common to both the religious ideas. The *Isa Upanishad* states: *He in whom it is the Self-Being that has become all existences that are Becoming's, for he has the perfect knowledge, how shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere oneness?* (Isa Upanishad: 7)⁶

The Upanishad argues for a space beyond the notions of perception. The sensory perceptions can only bring about a sense of intense sorrow and suffering. This is due to the illusory nature of reality which is seen within sensory perceptions and it brings out the transient nature of reality which cannot bring about a sense of fulfilment. Hence it is the space which can move beyond the nature of reality that can bring about a sense of fulfilment.

The Isa Upanishad further states:

*He who knows That as both in one, the Knowledge and the Ignorance, by the Ignorance crosses beyond death and by the Knowledge enjoys Immortality.*⁷ (Isa Upanishad: 8)

It is very reminiscent of the Heart Sutra here which also talks about the idea of the form and the formless and the misunderstanding which is associated between them. The idea of the self and the reality merging within in the space of self-realization is the space which the Isa Upanishad talks about and is the source of immortality. Here immortality is not the idea of the physical self but essentially the space where one goes beyond the idea of duality. To conclude both the Heart Sutra and the Isa Upanishad one a Buddhist text and the other a representative text within Hinduism essentially talk and mention about perceptions and the means to rise above the idea of physical perceptions to attain a sense of well-being and happiness. They argue differing from Freud who emphasised the nature of the physical surrounding and the environment as a primary way by which the self can gain gratification. In contrast with him Indian Buddhist and Hindu philosophy emphasise the idea of well-being where the physical and the mental states merge into the notion of a well-balanced human being.

6. Aurobindo. *Isa Upanishad*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust. 2003.

7. Aurobindo. *Isa Upanishad*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust. 2003.