

Seeing things as they are

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Intermediate Meditation Course Level 1. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

Summary

Perception-as-it-is is knowing through the wordless awareness mind about how an object is at the present moment. There is no ego, no concept, no reasoning, no forecasting, no imagining, no bias, no fixed opinion, and no prejudice involved when we perceive as-it-is. It is a perception achieved through the direct awareness of the senses or the wordless awareness mind. The wordless awareness mind always sees things exactly as they are, nothing more nothing less. Since the ego is not involved, there is no sorrow, suffering, or internal conflict, and karma is not generated. Perception-as-it-is is a necessary condition for *realization* in Buddhism or *seeing one's true nature* in Zen Buddhism. It is the foundation of intuitive wisdom or paññā wisdom as well as what the Paññā School calls the ultimate reality. It is the essential condition for attaining the pure mind and the state of combined samādhi and paññā wisdom.

Definitions

The Pāli word for as-it-is is *yathābhūta* (V: như thực). *Yathā* means “similar to” or “like”. *Bhūta* means “real”. *Bhūta* is the past participle of the verb *bhavati*, which means “be” or “become” or “exist”. Thus, *bhūta* can be translated as “has been”, “has become” or “has existed”. It means “has become so”, “still is” and “has not ceased to exist”. *Yathābhūta* means “according to reality”, “conforming to the fact”, “as it is in reality”, “in its real essence”. The most important point relates to perceiving the object as it currently is, as it currently appears before the senses. The “currently is” moment only exists in the smallest fraction of time. Perception-as-it-is means using the senses to come into direct contact with the object. Whatever the object is, we perceive it as it is, no more and no less. The sense organs perceive the object very clearly through seeing, hearing and touch in the very present moment.

Characteristics

There is no imagining, reasoning, remembering the past, thinking about the future, or attachment to present objects when we perceive as-they-are. This is the first outcome when we do the As-It-Is practice. Mental chattering stops, as does the past-present-future mind. Perception-as-it-is removes subjectivity, emotions and preferences as well as mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies. It is the seeing, hearing, touching through the wordless awareness mind. This mind is the holy mind, it is tranquil, is not tainted by mental defilements and is objective and devoid of bias, fixed opinions, and prejudices. Although perception is achieved through the senses, the awareness is the product of ultimate seeing, ultimate hearing, and ultimate touch. When we practice consistently, the wordless awareness mind stays present continuously and brings forth new and intuitive findings from our potential for enlightenment. At the same time, the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, starting a chain reaction that releases beneficial biochemical substances that resolve psychosomatic illnesses. One can practice As-It-Is easily, without any constraints of time and place. Whenever we come into contact with the external world, we can practice perceiving things as-they-are while keeping our mind objective. In doing so, we do not generate speech karma, intention karma or bodily karma. Practicing persistently leads to the tathā-mind.

Looking at the “should be”, “ought to be” instead of the “currently is, here and now”

Psychosomatic illnesses happen when our mind is anxious and troubled and when we see things with a twisted perspective instead of seeing them as-they-are. Instead of seeing things as-they-are, we see them as how “they should be” or “ought to be”, i.e. we want things and people to be as we want them to be. This causes conflict, sadness, and misunderstanding when people do not bend to our will. Conversely, our mind is at peace and our relationships with others are harmonious when we see things as-they-are. The techniques “not labeling objects” and “not naming objects” that were covered in the Fundamental Meditation Course are part of the As-It-Is practice. The as-it-is moment occurs in the smallest moment of time. The moment before belongs to the past, the moment after belongs to the future, only the here-and-now is when things currently are. Even when we are in the present moment, we are not in the here-and-now if our mind is distracted towards other objects. This is the false mind in operation, and not perception by the senses. Similarly, if we are here but our mind wanders to things past and future, this is again the false mind in operation. The here-and-now moment occurs at the intersection of time and place. The aim of the As-It-Is practice is to silence the past-present-future mind, which is the name given by the Diamond Sutra to the mind that is attached to the past, present and future. When we open our eyes, the first

flash of awareness is the as-it-is awareness. Immediately following that moment, our mind typically starts differentiating, comparing, judging, reasoning, and the false mind comes into play. When the senses come into contact with the object, the awareness that arises from this very initial contact is the awareness of the wordless awareness mind.

Application of Seeing As-It-Is

If we see a glass and call it a glass, we are seeing it as-it-is. If we see a glass and call it a glass of water, we have already applied some reasoning as the glass could contain another liquid. If we see a bell and call it a bell, or a small bell, we are seeing it as-it-is. If we see a bell and call it a too-small bell, or an unattractive bell, we are being subjective and no longer see it as-it-is.

The As-It-Is practice is often mentioned in Buddhism and Zen Buddhism writings. When 9th century Chinese Zen Master Yunmen (V: Vân Môn) started his lectures by raising his stick, he wanted to remind his disciples to see the stick just as a stick and was teaching the As-It-Is practice. When the Buddha silently raised a lotus flower in his famous flower sermon, his disciples had many levels of understanding according to their innate spiritual faculty. Some understood silent awareness, others the As-It-Is teaching, while some saw suchness. If we see a fruit and call it a sweet fruit or if we salivate at its sight, we do not perceive it as-it-is. Salivation comes from the assumption that the fruit is sweet or tart. It is generated by thoughts of the false mind, through the network of association ideations of the perception aggregate. The mind is not still when reasoning occurs. If the mind was still, salivating would not occur.

When we practice As-It-Is our mind does not project and attach itself to objects in the past, present, future and is at peace and in harmony. When our mind is at peace and in harmony, we live in harmony with people around us. We should remember that we practice to change ourselves, and not force others to practice.

We should practice As-It-Is in the four postures of walking, standing, lying and sitting. The practice involves the senses, i.e. seeing, hearing and touching as-it-is. Initially, the practice may involve self-talk although this self-talk should only describe what we perceive in objective terms. In the next step, self-talk is silenced and only a silent awareness remains, a silent awareness of things as-they-are.

When we use words to describe what ultimate seeing sees, our mind is still quiet and we perceive the object just as it is. At this stage, some insights start to develop. Insight is a higher level of knowledge than ordinary knowledge. With it, mental defilements, old habits, fetters, and underlying tendencies start to lose their energy, subjectivity is lessened, and the ego starts to weaken.

In the second step, we are in wordless awareness and this immediately brings a state of samādhi while we perceive things as-they-are. As a result, samādhi and paññā wisdom act in conjunction. Samādhi is the silent awareness of the wordless awareness mind while paññā wisdom is the wisdom of seeing reality exactly how it is without the corruption created by mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies. As-It-Is is an important teaching that the Buddha taught in many suttas.

The suttas also mention Knowing-As-It-Is (P: yathābhūta ñāṇa, V: như thật tri), Seeing-As-It-Is (P: yathābhūta dāssana, V: như thật kiến) and their combination Knowing-Seeing-As-It-Is (P: yathābhūta ñāṇa dāssana, V: như thật tri kiến). The Lotus Sūtra (S: *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, V: *Kinh Diệu Pháp Liên Hoa* or *Kinh Pháp Hoa*) developed the theme into Buddha's Knowledge and Sight (V: Phật tri kiến), or Perfect Knowledge (V: toàn trí) or Omniscience (V: nhất thiết trí). At this stage, As-It-Is became associated with the omniscience of the Buddha. This reflects the importance that Developmental Buddhism places on the As-It-Is teaching, calling it a path to enlightenment, the As-It-Is Path (S: yathābhūta mārga, V: như thật đạo).

The Buddha's teaching of As-Is and As-Such

When the Buddha attained enlightenment in the fourth and fifth week after he sat down at the base of the bodhi tree, he saw the "three realizations" (V: Ba Minh) – knowledge of his own past lives, knowledge of the karma of all beings, and knowledge of the termination of mental defilements – while he dwelt in his tathā-mind. The Buddha said: "I saw the three realizations *as-is*, *as-such*". He experienced the as-is vision, together with the as-such vision, and saw the three realizations as if they were right in front of his eyes. Although the sutta mentions "seeing", we should understand that this means seeing cognitively, as the Buddha was dwelling in the wordless cognitive awareness of his tathā-mind, which is located in the precuneus. The precuneus is the reservoir of spiritual wisdom that is brought forth as realizations when the mind is in a wordless state. It is the seat of ultimate cognition, which has two levels: at the lower level is silent self-awareness while at the higher level is wordless cognitive awareness. The prime function of the precuneus is to provide wordless awareness and self-awareness, it knows itself without the need for external stimuli, and it shines forth by itself. The highest level of wordless awareness is wordless cognitive self-awareness. This is what the Buddha called "beyond the realm of reasoning" (P: atakkāvacara) or "In awareness, there is only awareness" (V: Trong cái thức tri chỉ có cái thức tri.) (Bāhiya Sutta, Khuddaka Nikāya "Minor discourses", Book 3 Udāna). When the Buddha said, "I saw the three realizations" *as-is*, *as-such*", who was doing the seeing? It is the precuneus that sees itself. When we are in as-is, we see the object exactly as it is when in

complete wordlessness, and what we see is as-is and as-such. During the whole night when the Buddha reached enlightenment, he contemplated as-is as-such without any external stimulus, using the precuneus' faculty for self-cognition or cognition of itself by itself. Similarly, when we practice the "No-Talk" technique, during the gap between two "No-Talk" utterances, we are silently aware of the wordless state of our mind; this is self-awareness being aware of itself. In this stage, the As-It-Is practice has advanced to a higher level where the senses are no longer involved.

When the Buddha realized the law of dependent origination, he dwelt in his tathā-mind to contemplate worldly phenomena, and he saw their suchness-nature or Tathātā. This is seeing as-such or cognition as-such. We can only see the suchness-nature of worldly phenomena when we dwell in our tathā-mind. This is the transition from as-is vision to as-such vision. These historical reasons led the patriarchs of Developmental Buddhism to later elevate the As-It-Is teaching into a path to enlightenment called the As-It-Is Path (S: yathābhūta mārga, V: như thật đạo), meaning that practicing As-It-Is can lead to experiencing the tathā-mind, or becoming one with suchness-nature.

From As-Is to As-Such

How do we transition from seeing as-is to seeing as-such? Let's take the example of looking at a vase of flowers. Let's look for a minute, just being silently aware of the vase, without any words arising. At that moment, our mind is in a state of samādhi. If we see two groups of flowers in the vase, if we see the leaves and the flowers, if we notice the state of our mind, we are not seeing as-such because we are already introducing concepts. The correct as-such practice is to have no thoughts whatsoever and, while being aware of the seeing, there is just seeing, there is no differentiating, there are no colors, there are no lengths of stems. When we are at the as-is stage, we see colors, but at the as-such stage, we only see things "as such". Our mind needs to be in a stable state of complete silent wordlessness. Practicing successfully leads to becoming one with suchness-nature. This practice is a paññā meditation practice. We initially use insight and words then move to wordless wisdom. The As-Is As-Such practice can be classified as part of paññā meditation, whereas the No-Talk practice can be classified as part of samādhi meditation.

