

Nature of Reality

The first step in any training is to become familiar with the framework for the training itself. For example, in sports one must first become familiar with the rules, the equipment, playing field, etc. In meditation practice, before one can actually give rise to insight about reality, one must first become familiar with the nature of reality itself.

It is important to be clear what is meant by the word “reality”. There are two main types of understanding: conceptual understanding and experiential understanding. It is important that one be aware of the difference between these two types of understanding at the beginning of one’s practice, as acting under the influence of a wrong understanding of reality means one will be unable to progress on the path to true understanding.

Conceptual understanding means seeing reality as made up of conceptual entities — people, places, and things. This is the paradigm on which we base our ordinary, everyday lives; it is essential for the purpose of living one’s life in the world but useless in the practice of understanding reality, since it relies on concepts that arise in the mind. In this sense, it is not really a description of reality at all.

For example, when you clench the fingers of your hand, you create what we call a fist; when you unclench your hand, the fist disappears. If we ask when and where and how the fist arose and ceased, it becomes clear that its existence is based solely on one’s own mental recognition of the concept of the fist. No fist truly arose anywhere but in one’s own mind. This is what is meant by its being a concept.

Observation of concepts cannot lead us to understand reality. Instead, it tends to encourage delusion, as concepts provide the appearance of stability, satisfaction, and controllability. A fist, for example, may be a useful tool that is constant and controllable throughout our lives. Unfortunately, the underlying reality is not, and so depending on the fist

has the potential of bringing disappointment, for example when we get old, sick, and die.

Scientists, recognizing the limitation of conceptual entities in describing reality, tried to break apart these entities and discover what actually exists behind, for example, the hand that makes the fist. This investigation led to the discovery of cells, molecules, atoms, and even subatomic particles, eventually mapping out the entire universe on to an impersonal four-dimensional (three spatial and one temporal) grid, within which every part of reality was understood to exist.

As useful as the scientific explanation is in describing the nature of the physical universe around us, it still relies on conceptualization of that which is outside of one's own experience. As such, it still cannot bring about the type of understanding about reality that is necessary to break free from one's delusions and the bad habits based on them. For example, one may calculate to a great degree of precision the nature and interactivity of all the many physical particles that form the addiction systems in the brain and yet be no closer to actually giving up one's own addictions

For one's meditation practice to succeed, it is necessary for one to undergo a shift towards an experiential paradigm that discards any preconceived notions of time, space, or identity. When one sees a fist, one must train oneself to separate the experience of seeing, from the recognition of the fist. One must discard the fist itself as conceptual, focusing only on the experience and the mental activity (recognition, perception, judgment, etc.) associated with it.

According to modern science, the physical universe exists independent of the observer. Reality, according to modern science, is impersonal; it continues to function according to causes and conditions whether we are aware of it or not. The fist (or that which makes up the fist) exists independent of our experience of it. Unfortunately, this is exactly what makes the modern scientific paradigm unsuitable for cultivating

self-realization, since it requires conceptualization of something that is outside of one's experience.

It is not that there is anything wrong with scientific theory, it is simply that theory alone is not strong enough to lead to inner change in the same way as experiential observation. For the purposes of meditation practice, it is not necessary to question the veracity of scientific theory (i.e. as to whether impersonal entities actually exist or not); it is only necessary to shift one's outlook to see reality in terms of momentary experience during the meditation practice. In this way, one can focus on the bare building blocks of experience, free from mental conceptualization; rather than simply learning about the nature of addiction, for example, one will be able to observe one's own patterns of addictive behaviour and come to understand directly how they lead to stress and suffering.

From a point of view of personal experience, the building blocks of reality are, in fact, quite limited. Beginning meditators need concern themselves with only two aspects of reality: the physical and the mental. Perceiving reality according to these two aspects should be enough to shift one's outlook away from conceptualization in favour of experiential observation.

After one or two days of intensive practice, or longer in the case of daily sessions, a beginning meditator should be able to separate experience into its physical and mental aspects. One should further be able to discern two truths about the physical and mental aspects:

1. that they arise and cease without remainder, and
2. that they differ in nature from one another.

The first truth is a defining element of the experiential way of understanding; conceptually, entities can exist for extended periods of time, unchanged and unmoving. Experientially, however, an entity can only ever exist momentarily; once an experience ends, the physical and mental aspects of the entity (i.e. the experience) cease. Because our

minds function based on experience alone, understanding must likewise be developed based on bare experience.

A great deal of our stress and suffering is arguably based on our attachment to entities that we see as persisting and stable. For example, our relationships with other people cause us suffering due to our attachment to the concepts of the other person and the relationship; when the relationship ends, we suffer due to the loss of the person and the relationship itself.

If, on the other hand, we understand reality as being made up of momentary experiences, there will be no opportunity for disappointment based on loss, since there will be no misperception of persistence or stability.

Mental illness provides a good example of how entities actually prevent us from becoming free from suffering. Identification of a condition as a specific illness can create a sense of helplessness, since entities are by definition atomic (i.e. indivisible). The “cure” thus becomes dependent on actually removing the “disease”.

As with the physical atom, however, the reality of all mental illnesses, even those with organic origins, is that they are divisible into smaller entities. A schizophrenic, for example, may be unable to avoid experiencing hallucinations, but if they are able to observe each hallucination as merely an experience, they will be able to bear with the hallucinations without having to suffer from them.

To this end, a meditator is instructed to begin by cultivating an understanding of the momentary nature of experience. For example, that the movement of the right foot arises and ceases along with the awareness of the movement; and that together they constitute a single experience. The movement of the left foot is an entirely different experience; nothing is carried from one experience to the next. No lasting entity exists within the framework of one’s experience.

This is what is called “momentary death”. In fact, it is the only death that is admitted to exist in ultimate reality. The death of a person isn’t something that we can perceive experientially; it is a concept that we apply intellectually to an entity other than ourselves, and something we conjecture as waiting for us somewhere in the future. In terms of our experience, there will only ever be momentary phenomena arising and ceasing until they finally cease entirely at the moment of death.

Actually, we can’t even really be sure what happens at death. From a point of view of our own experience, we have nothing to compare it to – for all we know, our experience might continue on indefinitely. This is, in fact, the favoured view in our tradition, with some meditators even claiming to remember past lives or having near death experiences after their brains have ceased to function. At any rate, what is important is to discard conceptualization of entities that exist continuously from moment to moment in favour of empirically observable experiences that last only for a single moment.

When watching the abdomen rising and falling, a beginner meditator should likewise be able to perceive a distinct beginning and ending of both the rising and of the falling. They should be able to distinguish between the two experiences, conceiving of them as distinct phenomena rather than a single entity (i.e. the abdomen) rising and falling. Likewise, one should experience sensations of pain and pleasure as arising and ceasing, as well as thoughts and emotions. In brief, one should come to understand that nothing lasts longer than the time it takes for an experience to occur; from the point of view of experience, there exists no lasting or stable entity whatsoever.

The second truth relates to one’s ability to distinguish the physical from the mental and understand their essential natures. For example, one should be able to observe that when the abdomen rises, there is both the rising movement and the mind that is aware of the movement.

It is readily apparent that a person’s respiratory system works continuously day and night throughout one’s life. Each in-breath causes

the diaphragm to contract, leading to a tensing of the abdomen. Each out-breath causes a complementary release of tension. This is an explanation of breathing according to the modern scientific paradigm.

From the point of view of experience, however, there is a second factor involved in breathing, and that is the awareness that allows the experience of the breathing to occur. The awareness is one thing and the physical manifestations of breathing are another; they are not the same, and yet both are required for the experience to occur.

The nature of the physical aspect is to present itself to the mental aspect; the nature of the mental aspect is to become aware of the physical aspect through one of the five senses. Both are merely aspects of a single experience; neither the body nor the mind persists longer than the time it takes for a single experience to occur.

This, incidentally, is the reason why focussing on the breath itself is not recommended as a means of understanding experiential reality, since the breath coming into the body and leaving it is conceptual. Only the changes in pressure and temperature are experientially real.

The ability to separate reality into its physical and mental components allows one to differentiate between objective reality and subjective reactions to it, for example, separating physical discomfort from mental upset or physical pleasure from desire. Given the suffering inherent in reactivity, this is a crucial step in one's progress towards freedom.

To summarize, the first steps in one's understanding of reality are:

1. Acquire an experiential view of reality;
2. Observe that each experience arises and ceases without remainder;
3. Observe that experience can be separated into distinct physical and mental components.

Once one has achieved these three goals, one is said to have begun to understand the nature of reality. Though this understanding may seem

insignificant in and of itself, it will pave the way for further realization about the nature of reality, and is therefore a crucial first step in the meditation practice.

All of the theory presented in this chapter is intended to describe and explain that which is to be understood by the meditator for themselves; it is not intended to supplant actual practice, and anyone reading this material without practicing according to the technique outlined in the first book¹ (or a similar practice) is unlikely to appreciate its true import. Therefore I encourage you once more to take the time and put out effort to realize these truths for yourselves.

¹ <http://htm.sirimangalo.org/>