

Reality — And What to Do About It

A Buddhist Look at Life, the Universe, and All That (Part 1)

by Kulananda

A tree falls in the forest. There's no one to hear it. Does it make a sound? Sound is an experience. It is not the movement of air. Nor is it the vibration of the eardrum, or the electrical impulses that the eardrum sends to the brain. Sound is the experience that these events give rise to. So the answer to our question is un-ambivalent: no, if there's no one there to hear it, the experience of sound doesn't occur. The tree falls without a sound.

Think about it. As you're sitting there, reading this, all these soundless events are taking place all over the world. Trees are falling to forest floors in complete, pin-drop silence. Now think about the image you've just conjured up in your mind: silent trees falling to the forest floor. What's wrong with that image? Answer: if there's no one there to hear the trees fall, then there's no one there to see them, taste them, feel them or smell them. What is actually happening in those forests is not what we thought it was. We had an image of trees we could see, silently falling. But there was no one to see them either. The visual image we had is therefore inappropriate, and the same goes for all the other senses. The truth is, it is totally impossible for us to grasp or even imagine what happened in that unheard, unseen forest, and the same applies to what is happening right now in the room next door to the one you're reading this in. If there's no sound or any other sense impression coming from it, what is actually happening in it, right now, is an unfathomable mystery.

'Now just hang on a moment,' you might respond. 'Perhaps I don't know exactly what's going on in the room next door, but I'm pretty sure that if I walk into it I'll find chairs, a table, a floor and a window. It's not that mysterious!'

Well, I'm not so sure about that. You may well find what you expect in the room next door, but the world we live in is very much more mysterious than we usually think, as I hope to show in the course of this article. Let's do a little more imagining. Human beings are largely optical creatures. Our eyes give us the biggest part of our information about the world we inhabit, and our world is made up very largely of sight-objects. The majority of nouns we use refer to sight-objects: chair, table, car, fridge... When we think of these things we 'see' them in our minds. If I think of the fridge in our kitchen, I call to mind a large, rectangular white object in my mind's eye. I don't think of its peculiar, intermittent, hum — which I might if I lived predominantly in a world of sound; and I don't think of its cool, hard, surface — as I would if my world were based mainly on touch.

But not all animals perceive the world in the same way we humans do. Take dogs for example. Rover relies far more on his sense of smell than we do. Imagine you're sitting around with a group of friends, having a chat, and Rover comes bounding into the room and makes a nuisance of himself. He dashes around, sniffing everyone and wagging his

tail energetically. You're a sensitive kind of person, so you notice that Suzie has stiffened and is holding herself in a tight, defensive posture. Out, Rover! Come on, out! He doesn't want to go, so you take hold of his collar, pull him towards the door and shut him out of the room. Sorry about that! He was just being friendly. He can be a nuisance. . . Suzie visibly relaxes.

Let's try and imagine what that was like for Rover. To do that, we're going to have to do some translating from his smell world to our sight world. To begin with, he dashes about the room, sniffing everyone. That gives him a lot of information about them, including where some of them have just been. All day, Rover has been running around the neighbourhood, sniffing. He's already smelt the lingering trace left by your friend John as he walked from his house around the corner. Rover also knows that Suzie got off the bus down the road and walked to your house from there.

John and Suzie left scent traces behind them. To get an optical sense of what Rover picked up, we'd have to imagine that as we move about the world we leave distinctive light traces behind us. These fade over time, but if we looked we'd see Suzie's light trace going back to the bus stop and John's going back to his house. Each of these would be different. John's light trace, for example, would contain tantalising glimpses of Janey, his pet Labrador.

Some people say that dogs know by smell whether or not people are frightened of them. So to add to the picture, you'll have to imagine that Suzie shines a cold, fearful blue when Rover comes bounding up to her, and she only returns to her usual warm orangey glow when he's safely out of the room.

It's a strange world, Rover's, but not half as strange as that of the duck-billed platypus. Scientists have only recently discovered the purpose of the large, rubbery bill on the face of this cuddly, nocturnal, semi-aquatic, insectivorous creature. It's a sensing device, and a very accurate one too. Duck-billed platypuses weigh around thirty kilos, and they eat a third of their own body-weight in aquatic insects every night (ten kilos' worth). That makes them pretty effective hunters. This is how they do it: their bill has a number of sensors in it that pick up the tiny micro-voltages emitted by the movement of insect muscles. What kind of sense world does that produce?

Imagine a world of darkness in which, when anyone near you moves, their muscles emit light, making them suddenly appear out of the darkness. But when they fall still, the light dies away and they disappear. Moving, they appear; still, they vanish. Beings emerge and vanish all over the place in this world, and they glow in intensity according to their size and the vigour of their movement.

Now let's stretch our imaginations still further. Imagine a world inhabited by beings whose primary mode of perception comes from gamma rays. Gamma rays are a form of very high frequency radiation that passes straight through objects like us. If you perceived mainly gamma rays, then the human world, in all its glory, would simply not

exist for you. You would not be able to ‘see’ it at all. To all intents and purposes, it would just not be there.

Of course I’m not saying that such beings as these exist, but I do want to say that the universe is a strange and marvellous place, an infinite network of mutually interpenetrating worlds. Bee worlds, and fly worlds, dog worlds and flea worlds, your world and my world each of us experiences the world in a unique way, according to the configuration of our senses.

We tend to think that our human world is normative. It’s ‘the world’, the way things are. Flies, with their weird, multi-faceted eyes and multiple vision may see it differently to us, but it’s this world, our world, that they’re seeing differently. For us, our world is the objective standard of reality. Chairs, tables, floors and windows: these are the real things. Flies may have a strange take on them, but that’s flies for you. Our world is the real world.

But it’s not like that. Chairs, tables, floors and windows appear because of the way our senses work. If our senses worked differently — if we only perceived gamma rays, for example — they wouldn’t appear at all. It really is all in the mind. As Vasubandhu put it, *sarvam vijñaptimatrakam* — ‘everything is mere experience.’

But we don’t like to think of things in that way. We have a deep attachment to the idea that there is matter out there, ‘stuff’ that is constant, which provides the sense of continuity we both experience and desire. When they walk into the room next door and find chairs, a table, windows and (phew!) a floor, most people think it’s because of the working of ‘matter’, the fixed and concrete underpinning of this otherwise uncertain world.

But what is matter? If different worlds appear to different beings in dependence on their sense-configurations, is there anything we can get hold of that underlies all of these worlds and keeps them together? Well, if there is, we can never experience it. If there is anything going on out there apart from our experience, we cannot get at it by any direct means whatsoever. It is a complete mystery.

Before we go any further with this, there is a point that really needs to be stressed. When I say that there is no objective world we can get hold of apart from our experience, I’m not denying the nature of that experience itself. Our experience is undeniably our experience. It is what is. What I am denying is the claim that chairs and tables have a perceptible objective reality apart from what we experience — that underlying our experience is some kind of fixed, unchanging matter.

Let’s think about matter for a little while. What is it? What purpose are we trying to get it to serve? The things we experience are experienced in different ways by different beings. Isn’t matter the stuff that holds all of these experiences together, and gives them a common coherence? When you see my shoes at the door, and I see them, and Rover and

a fly see them, we experience them in different ways, granted, but surely it's the same thing that we experience.

Well, It's true that all of us have similar experiences, although yours are more similar to mine than they are to Rover's — and who knows what the fly is experiencing? But do we need 'matter' to guarantee this? As I will show later on, the commonality of our experience can be more satisfactorily explained by other means. What, after all, is this 'matter' that we're so keen to bring in here? It has no qualities that we can point to, apart from our experience. We might say, 'You can touch matter, and you can taste it, see it, hear it and smell it'. But these are all experiences, and experiences are not matter. Where is the matter apart from experience? If you take away from our idea of matter all those elements that pertain to experience, what you're left with is ungraspable, unknowable. Weird stuff, this matter. And yet somehow it gives us a sense of security. It's like a teddy bear we hug in our beds to keep at bay the yawning sense of the insubstantiality of things. At this stage of the discussion, people often fall back upon their own minds. 'Come on,' they sometimes say, pointing to their own heads, 'are you saying that it's all just in here? That the world I know is just something that happens in the confines of my own mind?' At first sight, that's a reasonable question. But the argument we applied to the world of objects can also be applied to ourselves as perceiving subjects. As David Hume put it: 'For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.'

Apart from our experiences, where is the 'self' that 'has' those experiences? Can you ever, in your experience, locate a self? You can certainly locate further experiences — any number of them; that I won't deny. But do you ever experience anything you can call a self, underlying that experience and owning it? Upon analysis, it turns out that the self is just as weird as matter. The truth is, they're both just ideas, inferences we've drawn from experience. Self and matter, subject and object, have no perceptible independent reality at all.

What we do have is a flow of experience. but this flow does not occur in a fixed, unchanging subject and it is not produced by a world of fixed, unchanging external objects. There is only experience.

Now the significance of our attachment to 'stuff' — to matter — and to ourselves as separate, experiencing subjects is not just a question of metaphysical nicety. It goes much deeper than that. Our attachment to the idea that there is a real world out there — a world separate from ourselves, containing objects we long for and hope somehow to 'have' in order to shore up our sense of ourselves — is the basis of all our unskillful action. It is the source of all suffering, the root of all *dukkha*.

If we can only drop the idea of the intrinsic separation of subject and object, ourselves and the world, then we will lose our hopeless, painful, yearning to take hold of and cling to that which we are not. We will, in other words, eliminate *dukkha*.