

All in the Mind

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If we suffer a physical disease, a broken bone, a bereavement, we might get sympathy and attention. But if people suspect our problems are ‘all in the mind’ they usually want to get away as fast as they can! And yet suffering is ‘all in the mind’. The pain of a broken bone is physical. True we might writhe in agony, convinced our leg is where suffering is located. But the leg just gets on with the business of tissue repair. It’s only the mind that panics, thinks ‘this is unbearable’, gets us moaning and contorted in an effort to soothe ourselves. When the mind is still in meditation, we can sometimes see that physical sensations are separate from mental reactions like emotions and thoughts. In fact all of the six senses (five physical senses plus the mind, which forms the sixth sense in Buddhism) occupy distinct ‘spheres’ within experience. I first saw this during walking meditation. I noticed that the sight of the foot swinging forward was totally separate from the sensation. It was as if they occupied separate universes, different dimensions. One contained colours and shapes, the other sensations. There was no possibility of communication between the two, and it was a third dimension, the mind, that put the information together and decided they both described a foot moving forward. I was amazed that I could walk so easily even though my legs, eyes and mind were confined to separate dimensions! This isn’t just academic. The Buddha’s only purpose in teaching was to point us along the path to the end of suffering. One very practical consequence is the possibility of letting attention rest in one of the five physical sense spheres, to get a new perspective on our mental life. In meditation we notice the incessant stream of thinking that often seems to get in the way of calmer experience such as the sensations of breathing. We begin to see for ourselves that suffering ‘is all in the mind’. I learned this one time when my mind was afire with anxiety, repeating questions endlessly — What was going on? Why couldn’t I get on top of this anxiety? By chance, my attention was momentarily called by the sound of birdsong, interrupting the flow of questions. My mind relaxed as I listened. But as soon as I noticed this ‘lapse’, it hurried back to its urgent duty of fretting. As relaxation changed to anxiety I felt the voluntary nature of thought. I sensed myself choosing to fret, to indulge anxiety. It was as if I was choosing to pick up heavy suitcases. I was amazed to realise that I had a choice in the matter. But now there was no escaping that choice. Would I continue burdening myself with anxious questions? Although the answer is obvious, it felt scary beyond words to stop, to accept the reality of not knowing what was going on, or how to get on top of anxiety. It was like taking a step over a cliff. And yet, something deep within commanded that I stop fretting, accept that I did not know any answers. With my heart in my mouth, I surrendered to that truth. Next moment, anxiety disappeared without trace! Luckily, suffering is ‘all in the mind’. And we have access to five other dimensions of experience which show us the way out. At each and every moment we can rest attention in sense contact, learn to recognize the possibility of not reacting, not picking up heavy suitcases of anxiety, depression, woe, and

misery. We can choose sense contact rather than thought as our guide, step over our mental cliffs, fall into freedom.

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