

Mind Cookies and Compassion for a Non-External World

By Kokyo Henkel, 2011

I was recalling a story that I once read about a woman who goes into a cafe one morning to have a cup of coffee. She's glad that she brought her bag of cookies along with her. She gets a newspaper, sits down, and starts enjoying the morning. Reading the paper. Picking up a cookie and eating it. Having a sip of coffee. There's a guy at the counter next to her doing the same thing: having a cup of coffee, reading the paper. He reaches over and takes one of her cookies out of the bag, and she thinks, "That's kind of strange—he didn't even ask." She takes another cookie, and soon he takes another cookie too. They don't say anything to each other; they just keep reading their papers. Now she's getting kind of annoyed because she really wanted to enjoy her bag of cookies, but every time she takes one, he also takes one shortly afterwards. She's getting more and more annoyed; she can't believe he doesn't even say anything. She can't say anything at this point either, it's actually become too weird. Finally it gets down to only one cookie left, and he quite casually, while still not looking up from his newspaper, breaks the cookie in half, eats half, and gently pushes the remaining half toward her. She's totally enraged at this point and can't believe somebody could do such a thing. She eats the remaining half cookie, finishes her coffee, throws down the newspaper and leaves the cafe. She gets in her car, reaches in her purse for her glasses, and there's a bag of cookies there. The same kind she was just eating, in an unopened bag! She's stunned. Her angry mind totally dissolves and she feels completely silly that, not only was she getting upset about this guy eating her cookies, but she was eating his cookies! And he was even so kind as to split the last one with her!

This is a kind of elementary "mind-only" story. It demonstrates the basic principle that what we think is going on is not really what's going on, that what appears to be happening is only our own mind's creation. The actual situation is quite different, even though we are completely convinced it is the way we think it is. We are so convinced that we don't even bother to question it; we just assume it is so. And yet our normal, unquestioned sense of reality is seldom—we could even say never—what we think it is. So this simple story is about how believing what we think leads to suffering.

The Mind-Only School goes even further. It presents the view that not only were those not really her cookies, but also that they were not his cookies either. In fact they were not really cookies at all. Or to say it from the Mind-Only point of view, cookies (as they are experienced, which is the only way we can ever possibly know about them) do not exist external to mind. They are a mental fabrication, constructed by mind out of mind-made color, smell, taste, touch, and concepts. Everything we experience, whether conceptual thoughts or direct sensory perceptions, is a manifestation of mind. This theme runs throughout Buddha's teachings, but it's highlighted and emphasized by the Mind-Only School, which was one of the major traditions out of which Zen emerged. As Dogen Zenji says, "Mountains, rivers, and earth, the sun, moon, and stars are mind."

Our practice is about not believing our stories about what is happening, and the Mind-Only teachings get into very, very subtle stories, stories we don't even notice we are telling ourselves, stories like, "This piece of paper I'm looking at actually exists apart from my mind, external to my mind." When we hear about not believing in very subtle stories like this, we might think, "So what does this have to do with my day-to-day suffering and problems? To say that the paper is not even apart from mind – why bother with this level of investigation of experience?" If we can really start to open to the way that all our thoughts and even sense perceptions of the world are distorted by this basic duality that the mind creates, the duality of what the Mind-Only School calls the separation of "grasper and grasped," that kind of understanding can apply to all our problems. Even though it may be quite challenging to do so, if we could realize that everything we experience is only a manifestation of mind, and thereby stop believing in

an essential separation of the experiencer from what is experienced as an external world, then all of our basic, run-of-the-mill, day-to-day problems could be seen in a very different light. We would not be able to take so seriously the grasping of something that is actually not separate from the grasper, something that is merely a mental creation. Grasping or clinging to an idea, belief, or object that we think is real is the definition of suffering in Buddha's teaching.

When we hear of the Mind-Only view we might think, "Well, if there's really nothing out there apart from mind, then there really are no suffering beings." It might feel like this kind of view is undermining compassion, and undermining our helpfulness in the world, because if the world is not apart from mind, if it's really mind-only, why would we care about how it goes? In a dream, why does it matter what happens, if we know it's just a dream? I think it's important to keep looking at these questions and examine them from different angles. For one thing, if what we experience as "other" beings is really not separate from this mind, and the same is true of their experience of us, this experience is incredibly intimate. We are literally creating each other each moment, in a very dynamic and totally personal way. What could be more intimate? Opening to such intimacy of mind-only, we may feel a deep love for "others" and the strong wish for them to be free. Also, if everything we experience really is just like a dream, a mind-made creation for each of us, then when we see others appearing to suffer in this dream, we can deduce that it's because they are taking the dream too seriously; they are reifying it as something existing independent of mind; they are thinking it's not just a dream. Suffering beings, like us, are taking the dream too seriously. Therefore our motivation can become stronger to help dream beings become free from believing the dream that they're in. Our wholehearted compassion and wish for others to be free from suffering is based on the inspiration that actually situations are workable, people really can be helped, people can actually be free from suffering. Even the worst situations no longer seem completely hopeless.

Our aspiration to help can be strengthened because we can see that the suffering of the world is just a hairbreadth's deviation from freedom and joy, just the difference of this shift of vision. If everyone could see the kind of dream-like quality of our experience, and how we attribute reality to the dream, then we could be completely freed on the spot. There is such potential. It may be quite difficult to realize, but the beauty is that it's a small shift with a huge effect. One teacher said that our basic delusion is "like stepping onto the wrong airplane." It's like there are two different gates to two different airplanes next to each other in the same airport; stepping onto this one is not that far from stepping onto that one. But the result is huge, because this airplane is going to Africa and that one's going to Australia. A very small misstep creates a huge, huge difference. The more we're open to this potential shift, the more we can see that everybody has this same potential, and the more it seems that this little step has the potential to quite literally save the world from suffering. Buddha's great compassion is expressed as helping all beings, including ourselves, to shift our vision and to see the world differently. And an essential part of such a process is to first meet so-called "others" with sincere kindness and to wholeheartedly try to take care of the problems of what appears to be an external world, so that people will feel basically comfortable, at least settled enough to start looking into how this mind creates suffering.