

The Five Dimensions of Heartmind

Awakening isn't likely to be an all-at-once thing, so having a practical roadmap for consultation helps insure that nothing essential falls through the cracks. The road map we will use for discovering what's before our eyes is the five dimensions of heartmind: the physical, mental, emotional, open, and full-and-empty dimensions.

The story "What am I Leaving Out?" by Benedictine Father Theophane Boyd* concerns a young monk who arrives at a monastery late one night and tells the abbot that he is desperate for enlightenment. Refusing the abbot's suggestion to get some rest, he requests a theme to contemplate overnight in the chapel. The abbot suggests "What am I leaving out?" and retires, whereupon the agitated monk foregoes meditation and goes in search of answers. He knocks on the doors of the monks' cells, waking up each monk to ask "What am I leaving out?" Each monk responds, "Me!" Finally he falls to the floor, crying "What am I leaving out?" The floor says "Me." He runs out into the night, and cries to the moon "What am I leaving out?" "Me!"

All of those "me's" add up, and we can easily leave out or ignore just about everything that's essential to our journey of awakening, and discerning what's most important.

Meeting The Five Dimensions of Heartmind

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tation helps insure that nothing essential falls through the cracks. The road map we will use for discovering what's before our eyes is the five dimensions of heartmind: the physical, mental, emotional, open, and full-and-empty dimensions described below. These five dimensions are expressions of the one reality, and its five-in-one nature is expressed by Zen's third ancestor Seng-ts'an this way: "One is no other than all, all no other than one...misunderstanding the great mystery, people labor in vain for peace"**.

The five dimensions are discussed separately to help us appreciate their underlying unity. Brief descriptions of the first four dimensions below are followed by the fifth, in more detail. Hopefully my attempts to describe its ineffability won't make it any more incomprehensible than it is by definition.

We're grouping the dimensions here according to familiarity: the physical-mental-emotional dimensions constitute our life as we know it, while the open and full-empty dimensions are often outside awareness, even though they are omnipresent.

*Tales of a Magic Monastery, N.Y., 1981, Crossroads Publishing, Colo.

**The Roaring Stream, Nelson and Shoemaker, Ecco Press, 1996.

1. Physical: The physical dimension considers world of objects, bodily sensations, sensory phenomena, movement, chi or energy, and activity.

2. Mental: The mental dimension is the broad range of mind functions, from clear to clearly deluded thinking, from objective description to subjective opinions and beliefs.

3. Emotional: Moods, states of mind, and reactions to events.

4. Open: Like an invisible picture frame, this dimension holds whatever appears. At first open awareness is colored by a perception of dividedness, as if something is watching something else, a relic of our old habit of splitting seamless reality via a conjured-up perceptual split. A useful side-effect of this is that it makes it possible for the observer, or objective awareness, to function consciously. The observer provides a context for the experiencer, or embodied sentient perception. At first, these can seem separate, with the observer seeming somehow to be environmental or outside the skin, while the experiencer seems confined to bodily sensations. As these functions unite, we start to sample empirical evidence of our inter-being with existence.

5. Full-empty: Full refers to the vastness and inclusivity of life, without a need for names, while empty indicates the absence of any fixed quality or solidity. Full-empty isn't precisely a dimension, but the primordial nature of all of the dimensions, weaving everything into the insubstantial tapestry of existence. Zen uses terms like form-is-emptiness, and absolute-is-relative, to refer to the reality

that undergirds the seemingly tangible stuff of life.

Full-emptiness is numinous, impermanent, unknowable — and it's what we are. Because of full-emptiness, zen and other non-dual traditions can say with noetic conviction that there's no self and nothing but the self. Experiential brushes with this dimension can be incandescent, and they immediately distinguish the path of awakening from much of self help, philosophy and psychology.

The mystery of full-emptiness may open fleetingly, with or without spiritual practice: you're sitting in the park and a birdsong shimmers right through your torso, obliterating the dividing lines that make objects seem so separate. Unutterable wonder — until someone walks up and irritably asks if that's your damn dog that's running loose, whereupon you're plopped back into the me-versus-them mentality we know so well.

Misty landscapes of zen paintings attempt to depict this full-empty realm, yet they can't convey the palpable living warmth that bloom as this dimension awakens. Not surprisingly, the ego may find it more awful than awe-full when intimations of the full-empty realm start to emerge; it intuits that these intimations of some other way of seeing things might just dismantle its assumptions of primacy. After all, the small mind's self-assigned job is to reify things, either as possessions or of something to figure out, a mandate that full-emptiness declines.

Investigating the Five Dimensions

Conventional intellect won't suffice for our inquiry, since we need to discover whether these dimensions reside in our very cells. As a short experiment, take several ordinary breaths, feeling the sensations as fully as possible. Notice that within each breath, everything is constantly shifting, never the same for an instant. When we're really experiencing breathing, rather than thinking about what it feels like, the power of separating notions is undercut: are the air in the room and the air in the body really separate, or already merged?

If this sounds confounding, it's good to know that a venerable Zen koan says "Not knowing is most intimate." This unknowable-ness isn't synonymous with giving up, or just not getting it; rather, it's an amazement that emerges as we investigate what's in front of our nose, as well as what's behind it.

If our perplexed monk had had a cheatsheet like the five dimensions, he might have understood that the origin of his distress was that he was almost oblivious, even to the first dimension, physical reality, which was, all the while, sending him blatant messages from every direction.

The path to the unknowing that brings equanimity is through the first four dimensions, in the form of objects, thoughts, emotions and open spaces. As Soen Roshi, one of my first teachers, used to reiterate, "Each of us is this universal, unthinkable, untouchable world." Comments like this turns our usual view of who

we are on its ear, if we haven't been taking the open and full-empty dimensions into account.

On New Years' Day one year, Soen Roshi took some of us to the gravestone of Nyogen Senzaki, an early Zen transplant from Japan to America. According to Soen Roshi, the characters on the gravestone said "Always keep your head cool and your feet warm." Or was it feet? Soen Roshi said heart, and laughed — as if to demonstrate another of his favorite phrases, "endless dimension, universal life."

Obviously, our notions of mind and body, and everything else, can hardly be confined within our customary limiting notions. So even though we still hold our usual views, we can take the five dimensions as a hypothesis, and see if awareness of the full-empty dimension slips in gently, like morning dew trembling on a leaf. Falling, falling to earth and quenching the thirst of the seeds of heartmind nestled there. Like walking in the morning mist, we may discover at some point that we're wet through and through.

—Elizabeth Hamilton, excerpted from
*Untrain Your Parrot—and Other
No-Nonsense Instruction on the Path of Zen,*
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