

Research on the Gap between the Perception of Impermanence and Spiritual Peace: Phenomenological Reflections based on Buddhist Emptiness Concept

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Abstract: The intellectual grasp of impermanence does not necessarily bring about a sense of peace in life and spirit, and thus a psychological and spiritual vacuum occurs. Using the idea of Emptiness (Śūnyatā) in Buddhist philosophy, Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theories were combined to examine the origin and form of this gap in this paper. Although people today are aware of the fleetingness of life through their minds, they still feel deep-seated anxiety and suffering (Dukkha). Based on a phenomenological study of the structure of internal time consciousness and intentionality, this paper finds that the gap arises from a habit of embodied 'self-grasping'-a pre-reflective inclination to reify the self despite rationally knowing that it is transient. As shown in the above analysis, true spiritual freedom cannot be achieved by reason alone; otherwise, it will still be limited by the subject-object distinction. Therefore, in order to resolve this existential contradiction, one needs to take a form of embodied non-duality and experience emptiness directly. Combine the ontology of Mahayana Buddhism with enactive cognitive phenomenology to provide a theoretical foundation for linking the awareness of impermanence with genuine existential peace, and put forward an idea to add philosophy to the practice of life in the body.

Keywords: Impermanence, Emptiness, Phenomenology, Spiritual Peace, Embodiment, Existential Gap.

1. Introduction

Transient existence, that is, impermanence, is perhaps the most widely accepted truth of life for people everywhere. From the poetic sighs in old literature to the empirical observations of modern physics, the continuous flow of time and the necessity of change have been mentioned repeatedly. A deep-seated existential paradox exists in modern people's lives: although they are highly aware of the transience of life intellectually, this awareness does not generally bring them true peace of mind. Instead of inducing a sense of peaceful acquiescence, the intellect may find itself in dissonance with alteration and experience apprehension or a fear of existence.

There is a problem in people's spiritual lives that what they know cognitively does not match what they feel existentially. Therefore, a person is not in a state of inner peace simply by intellectually agreeing that everything is impermanent. To attain true peace of mind, the consciousness of impermanence must reach a deeper, pre-reflective level of our minds. Research has been conducted on how to prevent this penetration and how to bridge the gap between intellectual awareness and existential peace; an all-encompassing theoretical system for addressing both the structure of subjective experience and the final state of reality has been put forward.

At present, Western psychology often regards this anxiety as a disorder to be corrected or treated with drugs. However, when viewed through the combined perspective of existential phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy, this profound sense of anxiety is not a defect in the body, but rather an honest and imperfect response to life as a human being. It is a psychological conflict that arises when the ego's desire for stability is in opposition to the actual condition of entropy and decay. When a modern person reads a philosophical work on the transient nature of time or notices the rapid development of technology and society in the 21st century, they are

naturally led to believe that everything changes. They can talk about the brevity of life and the futility of material desire well. But when it comes to the loss of loved ones, serious illness or the reality of old age, people lose their usual calm instantly. Visceral fear floods the void left by the fallen intellectual defence, and it is now obvious that "knowing" something has changed is merely a pretense.

Western phenomenology and Eastern Buddhist philosophy can be combined to offer some theoretical support for this study. At the bottom of both traditions is an in-depth exploration of conscious experience, a deconstruction of reified conceptual categories, and an effort to alleviate human suffering. Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed phenomenology to help people better understand how we are aware of time, space and ourselves. At the same time, Mahayana Buddhism has proposed the doctrine of Emptiness (Śūnyatā) according to Nagarjuna in the Madhyamaka school to address the origins of human suffering.

Although they have different cultures and histories, these two schools of thought are now in frequent contact and producing much. Research has begun to show that Buddhist contemplative practice and phenomenological reduction are closely related in method. Both aim to break away from the conventional division of the world and return to "things themselves" – that is, the unmediated flow of life experience.

Based on the Buddhist idea of emptiness, this paper will explore how the understanding of impermanence relates to achieving peace of mind in a phenomenological way. After the above introduction, Section 2 will present the phenomenological structure of the 'self-grasping' consciousness and the cognitive failure of rationalizing impermanence. Section 3 applies the Buddhist idea of emptiness to break down the substantial self. Section 4 presents the application of embodiment and non-dualistic mindfulness to address the problem of existence. Finally,

Section 5 is the main content of this paper, and I will conclude by briefly mentioning the necessity of combining philosophical thinking with body-oriented practice.

2. The Phenomenological Structure of Consciousness and the Failure of Reflection

In order to know why awareness of impermanence is not peace of mind, we first need to learn about the structure of human consciousness through phenomenology. Based on Husserl's investigation of internal time-consciousness, human experience is not a fixed picture of the present moment. Consciousness, on the other hand, is naturally organised by 'retention' (the preservation of the recent past) and 'protention' (the expectation of the near future) [1]. Continuous extension in time offers for the continuity of experience and, at the same time, gives rise to the psychological basis of attachment. As consciousness is always looking forward, the human mind has developed a natural expectation of stability and continuity.

The temporal structure is closely related to what Buddhist psychology refers to as the root of human suffering (Dukkha): a deep-seated, pre-reflective habit of 'self-grasping' [6]. Even when reason dictates that all things are impermanent, the consciousness of experience for the subject itself still perceives a fixed, unchanging self. As recent research in phenomenological psychology has shown, the very conflict between objective and rational reflection and lived, subjective experience is a cause of prolonged anxiety and depression [7]. The intellect thinks that "everything is in flux", but embodied, intentional consciousness strives to solidify and own its experiences in an effort to protect the illusion of a permanent ego.

The degree of this pre-reflective habit is relatively high. From the start of life, our minds have been striving to build a stable and consistent story of who we are. Connecting various independent sensory experiences and fleeting emotions to build an ongoing life story. This narrative self becomes the sole source of attraction for all conscious experience. Therefore, when the intellect puts forward the idea of impermanence, it is in fact introducing a fatal virus into the core operating system of the mind. The narrator-self knows that the universal law of change will also affect them. Therefore, it is unconsciously repressed by a defence mechanism. The more the mind is preoccupied with the fact that everything in life is impermanent, the more desperately people hold onto their sense of self, relationships and material possessions in a futile attempt to create an unshakable foundation for life. This internal conflict of the rational mind is aware that everything must come to an end, while the emotional core yearns desperately for eternity; it is at this very place that existential anxiety arises.

Therefore, the root cause of the lack of peace in experiencing impermanence is a deficiency in intellectual contemplation. Reflexes are in themselves two-way processes due to their nature. When a person intellectually considers impermanence, they view 'impermanence' as the object of their thought and at the same time establish a 'subject' who is performing the thought [4]. This division of subject and object strengthens the ego system that impermanence endangers. The individual experiences existential anxiety (Samvega) precisely because the substantial self, the 'I' that is reflecting, realises that it faces annihilation [9]. Therefore, intellectualising impermanence does not free one from the

constraints of existence; it only makes these constraints more explicit.

3. Deconstructing the Substantial Self through the Concept of Emptiness

To overcome this lack of existence, we must carry out an ontological change to break down the split between subjects and objects. Mahayana Buddhism proposes the notion of Emptiness (Śūnyatā) in this regard. Emptiness, according to the Buddhist school led by Nagarjuna, is not a void or non-being in a nihilistic sense. On the other hand, it means 'dependent origination'; that is, no thing exists autonomously and individually but arises from the relations of other things [2].

Emptiness is to say that, according to phenomenology, it is the utmost extent of bracketing or suspension of a specific view of the world. When the comparative philosopher connects Husserl's idea of intentionality with Buddhist epistemology, they come to believe that consciousness and its objects are inseparable and arise together [11]. The perceived stability of the world and the self are only cognitive constructs that are superimposed upon the continuous, interdependent flow of things [8].

If impermanence is only regarded as the disappearance of solid objects, it is frightening. Emptiness is also considered to be the underlying condition of being and change in this regard. Because they do not have a fixed essence, they can change and develop. Therefore, the existential anxiety of impermanence is a result of the false belief in a permanent self [5]. Only when one is no longer preoccupied with the loss of an eternal self does one cease to grieve, and through experience learns that there was never a fixed "self" to begin with.

Therefore, the meaning of human suffering has also changed in this way. If a person believes they have a firm and unchanging essence, then any change in their physical body, social status or mental state is seen as a violent subtraction, a traumatic loss of self. However, if one is able to perceive the self as a dynamic collection of interlinked relations in the phenomenological epoché, then change is not a loss of self but rather the continuous formation of the self itself. At the same time, by realising emptiness, there will be no distinction between the internal self and the external world. If the subject is merely in relation to its objects, then it is not a lonely, isolated being confined within a dying body, looking out at an unfriendly and decaying world. Instead, the subject and the universe are considered to be a single, continuous and harmonious process of change. Due to the change in ontology mentioned above, the psychological isolation that has traditionally motivated the fear of impermanence has been eliminated; thus, people are now able to be intimately aware of their connection with the world and spiritual freedom.

4. Embodiment and the Somatic Realization of Spiritual Peace

The transition from the intellectual understanding of emptiness to a lived and liberating realisation cannot be achieved in an abstract way; a deep connection with the body must also be made. The phenomenology of the lived body in Merleau-Ponty's work provides a method for achieving inner peace according to Buddhism. Merleau-Ponty did not believe that consciousness is an abstract, body-independent thought existing separately from the world. The body is the way

through which the world is experienced by us as subjects [12]. This view is also in line with enactive cognitive phenomenology; that is to say, cognition stems from embodied action, perception and life experience in the world [3].

The genuine kind of Buddhist mindfulness (vipassana) is not an objective and rational view of things, but rather a receiving state of consciousness in the body [10]. To relieve the anxiety that may arise from thinking too deeply about impermanence, people need to move away from intellectual contemplation and connect more closely with their bodies in the present moment. Through attention to the physical feeling of breath, recognizing the impermanence of bodily sensations, and being constantly immersed in the flow of sensory information, one directly experiences impermanence in a pre-reflective way without the mediation of an anxious ego [10].

In a state of embodied non-dualistic awareness, the boundaries of self and the external world are gone. The practitioner no longer thinks about transience; they live in it physically. When the mind's desperate, self-grasping mechanism is in accordance with the true and dynamic characteristics of life, it is thus relieved. Thus, the idea of emptiness can be translated from the mind into life, and deep peace in one's heart is achieved.

Somatic descent is not a state of ease; it is an exercise in mindful presence. When a person meditates and focuses on how their body feels during breathing, they will inevitably be bothered by noise in their mind. The mind will continue to make an effort to drag the practitioner back into the world of abstract thought, narrative planning and conceptual worries. It fears the absence of noise and the direct feeling of the body because it lives only in the present, and the past and future are out of reach. Repeatedly, gently and firmly draw attention back to the raw, pre-verbal sensations of the body, and thus gradually starve the self-grasping ego of the conceptual sustenance it requires for its illusion of solidity. With the passage of time, the sense of bodily possession is no longer a fixed and rigid concept; instead, people are beginning to feel a vibrant, fleeting world of motion that constantly emerges and vanishes. At this time of heightened, embodied consciousness, the terrifying concept of universal impermanence is directly transformed into a beautiful life of continuous being, living, and deep-seated peace in the cosmic dance.

5. Conclusion

A long-standing problem in the development of people's consciousness is that, although they are aware of impermanence intellectually, they have yet to experience peace of mind. As shown by the above phenomenological analysis, the gap cannot be addressed by further rationalisation or conceptual reflection. The intellectual mind has an intrinsic dualism and a pre-reflective habit of self-grasping; therefore, it will inevitably view the truth of impermanence as a cause of deep existential anxiety and suffering.

In light of this contradiction, a new system can be constructed by merging phenomenological inquiry with the Buddhist idea of emptiness. Recognizing that both the self and the world are fundamentally without inherent, permanent essence, one can dismantle the psychological structure that gives rise to fear in the face of change. A system cannot show its superiority by being presented in isolation; therefore, it needs to be used in practice.

In the end, spiritual peace is not the result of thought but a state of being. Cultivate non-dualistic mindfulness and return to the experience of one's own body deeply to escape the confines of thought. Through experience, the pre-reflective consciousness can be aligned with the interdependent and fleeting nature of life to resolve the problem of existence. Thus, it is not the end of all hope for life, but rather a continuous, peaceful participation in the flow of existence.

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