

A Multilingual Mind

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One of the things you notice in meditation as you start looking at your thoughts, looking at your feelings, looking at sensory input, is that the solidity of your world starts dissolving away – both your sense of the world outside and your sense of yourself inside. And in some cases, just that much feels liberating – free from the heavy burdens you normally carry around. You begin to see that the heaviness is something you yourself have invested these things with. But that lack of solidity is not total liberation. The reason we want to let things seem less solid in this way, is so that we can see patterns we'd otherwise miss.

You notice that when the Buddha summarizes the essence of his Awakening – at least the part that's worth teaching, worth passing on – he focuses on the principle of causality, the connection between things. In particular, he focuses on the connections between what he calls name and form on one hand and consciousness on the other. Starting with this connection, he points out how suffering is built on top of it. The important elements of name and form are contact and intention. The way you regard the contact is another element of name and form, called attention. But here contact means not only contact at the senses, but also contact among different things going on in the mind. From that kind of contact you make choices, you make up your mind, you want to do this, you want to do that. You have an intention that leads to actions.

The Buddha wants you to see this. This is the process of fabrication. This is how we create our worlds, how we create our sense of self. And he wants you to look at it directly as it's happening. The reason we don't see it is because we divide things up into things that exist, things that don't exist, our self, and what lies outside of our self. This set of distinctions tends to point our attention away from what we're directly experiencing. The things we experience: Do they really exist? Do they not exist? In other words, is there something lying behind them? Is there nothing lying behind them? This kind of questioning pulls our attention away from what we're experiencing to focus on what we assume is either out there behind it or not out there behind it. We find ourselves placing our trust in things we don't even see, can't even experience.

The same with the distinction between self and things outside ourselves: When something is inside of our self, we don't observe it very well. We identify with it. It's like putting your foot into a shoe: Your foot starts getting shaped by the shoe without your really noticing it. As for things outside of yourself, you're not really responsible for them. They don't matter so much. That's your attitude.

So both of these ways of looking at things pull your attention away from what the Buddha said is the real issue: how your intentions give rise to suffering,

how the process of fabrication gives rise to suffering. He wants you to look at these things as a process so that you can understand the patterns. The first step is to see what kinds of fabrication are blatantly unskillful, so that you can learn how to drop them. And then as your sensitivity to the idea of skillful and unskillful gets more and more refined, you find yourself dropping more and more refined things. Ultimately you can drop the whole process of fabrication altogether.

But first we have to start with blatant things. This is why we start with the breath. What kind of breathing is skillful breathing? What kind of breathing is unskillful breathing? What kinds of perceptions are skillful, what kinds are unskillful? The breath and the questions about the breath are all elements in the process of fabrication. When you're talking to yourself as you meditate, what kind of talking is skillful, what kind of talking is not? The meditation points you right to this level, and asks you to drop your other levels of analyzing, other levels of looking at experience, because looking at the process of fabrication *as it's happening* is where you're going to see what you really need to see. What is the cause, what is the effect? Which causes are better than other causes? Which effects are better than other effects?

This is why the Buddha's most important teachings are the four noble truths, because they point to cause and effect: skillful cause and unskillful cause, desirable effect and undesirable effect. Simple, very basic, basic terms: pleasure, pain, ease and stress, happiness and suffering. These are things we've known since even before we could verbalize anything, but we haven't understood them. So the Buddha is trying to get you to pull the mind down to that pre-verbal level as much as you can. That becomes your basis for looking at things, for mastering the processes of breathing, thinking, and perceiving, so that you can put these processes to the ideal purpose, which is finally to go beyond all of them.

So try to get to this basic level where you're just looking at the building blocks: the very basic, basic actions that then get constructed into larger and larger patterns as you're looking at your breath, as you're going out and functioning in the world. When you don't have any other duties, you can simply watch the process of how the eye and forms meet, and then the way you comment on them, the way you direct your eyes to look at certain things in certain ways. That's a process too. You want to be able to shift in and out of that mode, because if you work in this mode all day long you wouldn't be able to function at work, wouldn't be able to get along with people.

But if you're good at shifting in and out of these modes, dealing on the level of people when you need to, dealing on the level of the building blocks when you have the opportunity, you learn a lot of interesting lessons about how the mind works: where the elements that lead to unskillfulness – lack of mindfulness, lack of discernment, lack of concentration – come in. You begin to catch them. It's like learning another language. You don't forget your original language, it's just that you learn how to function on another level, in a new context. And people

who become bilingual begin to notice that they have a separate personality in the other language, a separate sense of how the world works in the other language. The process of becoming skilled in the other language is very good lesson in learning how to take things apart in a new way, seeing processes as they happen. Then you turn around and you have a new perspective on your original language as well.

So we're training the mind here to be multilingual, able to function in many different contexts, and in particular getting good at this context of simply looking at the processes without worrying about what entities do or don't lie behind them, or about which part of the process is you and which part is not. The question here is which activities are skillful and which ones are unskillful. Learn to look at things as activities, as events in a causal chain.

And this is not just a game of perception, because it has a really good purpose: release, total freedom. That's what you can gain as you learn to look at things simply from the perspective of what leads to what, which actions lead to which results. That way you learn to see things that you never before really thought of as actions, simply as actions, as part of a causal chain.

That's one of the things that the Buddha means by the word, "emptiness." You don't load this causal chain down with your preconceived notions or the constructs you tend to build around it. Instead, you learn how to see events simply as that: as events, empty of any other questions that would pull you off in other directions.