

## *See Yourself as Active Verbs*

*November 15, 2018*

There was a famous scientist who wrote an autobiography entitled, *I Seem to Be an Active Verb*. And that sums up a lot of the ways in which the Buddha treats you: that you're active. The mind he says, is not just sitting there receiving input from outside.

Even before we see things, or hear them, smell, taste, touch, think about them, there's already a lot of activity in the mind going out. The Thai ajans call these the currents flowing out of the mind. Your intentions, your perceptions, your plans for things: All of these have an impact on how you're going to receive that outside contact. And these activities prior to contact are the ones that determine whether you're going to suffer from the contact or not.

Even the suffering itself, he says, is an activity. He equates suffering with clinging. Clinging is the act of feeding on things. We're not simply on the receiving end. We tend to think of ourselves as receiving suffering from outside, that we're the ones who feel the pain that comes from something that's come to hit us. But then we hear the Buddha saying something else entirely, that it's because of the way we act that we suffer. Now, he's not saying that you shouldn't act at all. After all, there's the path, and the path, too, is a path of action. It's what we're trying to do right now.

We're acting on the present moment. We're shaping it, and we're trying to learn how to shape it well, as part of that path. Bring the mind to the breath, keep thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath. How does it feel right now as you're breathing in? Question the breath: What's going on right here? What are you doing? How are you relating to the breath?

You're trying to bring the breath and the mind together. Both of these are activities. The way you breathe is an activity, as is the activity of the mind: the perceptions, the thoughts. How do you get these things to stay together, so that breath and mind are acting in concert? That's the skill we're trying to develop right now, because when they act together you become more sensitive to them. It's as if the mind had lots of little minds, and they're all headed out in different directions. They don't know one another very well. But when you bring them all to the breath, you begin to see, oh, this is how minds work. They can watch one another.

As you focus on the breath, you notice that a perception helps you stay there—an image = you hold in mind. What kind of image do you have? Is it a useful one?

One that's really useful, as the mind begins to settle down, is not so much that the breath is coming in from the outside but that there's a breath energy that originates in the body at any of the resting spots that Ajaan Lee describes. Above the navel, the tip of the breast bone, base of the throat, the palate of the mouth: Those are just a few. Notice when you breathe in, where does the energy seem to emanate from? When you hold that perception in mind, your sensation of breathing will change. You'll find it easier to live with the idea that as the mind begins to settle down, the breath gets very, very subtle. Sometimes it gets so subtle that it seems to stop. And if you feel that you have to suck the air in from outside, the mind is going to panic, and that'll destroy the concentration. But if you remind yourself that the breath energy is something that originates from inside, and when the mind is really still the brain uses very little oxygen, and so the body will breathe only as much as it needs to. The quieter the breath, the greater the sense of stillness inside. The breath is already there, filling the body, so you don't need to pull anything in from outside. That's a good perception to hold in mind.

All of these are things we do: the perceiving, the breathing, the thinking. We're trying to bring them together here in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being that's solid and also allows us to watch the mind and see in which ways we're creating our suffering.

The Buddha equates suffering with clinging to the five aggregates. The aggregates are form, feeling, perception, mental fabrications, and consciousness—and all of these the Buddha defines with verbs. Form, he says, deforms. In other words, in the form of your body, there's nothing static. Then feelings feel: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions perceive. Thought fabrications fabricate, and consciousness cognizes. These are all verbs, and we cling to them. The act of clinging is also a verb. We've got verbs holding onto verbs. What that means is that they're activities we like to do repeatedly.

The problem is that all too often we get some measure of pleasure out of them, but there's also a lot of suffering, a lot of stress that we create, and we tend to turn a blind eye to the stress. The Buddha, here, is asking us to turn around and look at it directly. There's stress in the clinging, in this repeatedly having to hold on to particular activities, and he points out four ways in which we cling. One is clinging to sensuality. That's our fascination with, not so much sensual things themselves, but with our sensual fantasies, plans, resolves: "I'd like to have this pleasure, I'd like to have that pleasure—well no, how about this one." We can design them for hours, our pleasures, as we like and in the realm of our imagination, we have pretty much free rein.

This is what the Buddha says we're attached to, much more than to the actual objects, which is one of the reasons we suffer so much. Say you get into a relationship with someone else. You have these plans and those about how good it's going to be, but the person is actually something very different from what your plans are. That's one of the ways in which we suffer.

Then there's suffering over what the Buddha calls habits and practices, the ways we do things, the way we stick to them. We have certain habits that we're pretty committed to, regardless of whether they really work or not. We're not going to change, and sometimes we even believe that with certain habits, certain rituals, or certain ways of behaving if we just behave ourselves, that'll guarantee that we'll be happy. But all too often, those habits have little to do with happiness at all. It's simply that we're familiar with them. It's like an old shoe that's not very good for your foot but because you've worn it for so long, that's what you're used to.

Then there's clinging to views, particularly views about the world: It has to be this way, should be that way. This includes views about politics—you can get all fired up about those. People create a lot of suffering for themselves over these issues.

And then the fourth kind of clinging is to views about yourself, the way you define yourself. You're this kind of person, you're that kind of person. You exist, you don't exist. As the Buddha said, when you define yourself, you limit yourself.

I've known people who say, well, human-beings are simply conditioned biological organisms. Or yesterday I read about someone saying that we're all algorithms. What can an algorithm know about the deathless? What can a biological organism, which is caused and conditioned, know about the unconditioned? Once you define yourself like that, you place huge limitations on yourself.

So these are some of the ways in which we cling and which we suffer. The Buddha said that if you learn how not to do these things, though, then you don't suffer. That's his basic solution.

Now, the solution is strategic. After all, if you look at his path, there are views there are habits and practices that he recommends, and then even ways he recommends that you see yourself that are all provisional parts of the path. The path does involve some clinging. It, too, is an activity. The only thing the Buddha doesn't recommend clinging to at all is sensuality. This fascination you have with what kind of sensual pleasures you want, he says, you put that aside. Go with the other three: To learn good habits and practices, you learn the practices and the precepts, you learn the habit of practicing meditation, practicing concentration.

You have views about action, that you do have some freedom of choice here in the present moment.

When describing the Buddha's awakening, the compilers of the Canon talk about how he saw the universe on the night of his awakening, beings dying and being reborn from all different levels of the heavens all the way down to the hells. But there are very few descriptions of the heavens and the hells in the Canon. The Buddha didn't go into describing those things. What he did do, when he summarized his awakening, was to boil it down to a principle of causality: the principle that lies behind our actions. And one of the main features of that principle is that even though your past actions play some role in shaping the present moment, they don't play a total role. You do have some choice here and now, which is why we're able to follow the path to begin with.

If everything were predetermined by past actions, you'd just have to roll along with the results, whatever they were, and you wouldn't be responsible for what was happening or what you're doing right now. The fact that you *do* have some role in shaping right now is what provides the opportunity for us to practice. So that's a view the Buddha has us develop

And also the view that it is possible through our actions to arrive at something where there is no action, where there is no conditioning, where there is no fabrication at all. That's a view the Buddha has you take on as a working hypothesis.

As for your sense of self, he doesn't define what you are. Sometimes you hear it said that the Buddha defines you as those five aggregates, but he says, no, the aggregates aren't you. They're what you're *doing*. You're defining yourself in terms of those five aggregates, whichever activities you hold on to. Sometimes you identify yourself with your feelings, sometimes with the images you have in your mind, sometimes with your thinking, sometimes with your body or a combination of any of these, or just simply your awareness. But that's not how the Buddha defines you. He doesn't have to. You're already defining yourself.

Still, he does tell you to develop a sense of yourself as competent. This is a path you can do. He also recommends having a sense of love for yourself, in the sense that you don't want to act in any way that would cause you harm down the line. And if you really care about yourself, you're also aren't going to cause harm to any other people at all, because if you can harm them, then there's going to be trouble coming back. If your happiness depends on their misery, they're not going to stand for it. And even if they can't get you, your kamma will, at least to some extent.

So identify yourself with the thoughts in the mind that say, “I want to find a happiness that’s harmless, I want to find a happiness that’s reliable,” and have a sense that you can do this, that you can depend on yourself. You can develop the qualities. You have these potentials within you and you can develop them so that you can find that happiness.

These are assumptions that the Buddha has you take on about yourself.

So the path does involve some clinging but it’s provisional. When you’ve completed the path, then you can put it aside. And your sense of who you are, you can put that aside at that point, too. In fact, everything gets put aside; everything gets dropped.

In total awakening, there is no clinging at all. In fact, that’s how awakening happens: It’s from lack of clinging that people find release. But you have to cling to the path to get to that point. What this means is that you keep doing again and again the things that the Buddha recommends, the activities that he advises you to do: The habits and practices, your views about the world, those are activities made out of thoughts and perceptions. Your sense of yourself, is an activity too. You try to do these things in line with the Buddha’s recommendations and they’ll take you to a spot where you can finally put them aside.

The image in the Canon is a person taking a raft across a river. While on the river, you have to hold on to the raft so that the river doesn’t wash you away, but once you get to the other side you don’t have to pick up the raft and carry it on your head. You just put the raft there at the side of the river and you can go your way. Because once you’ve solved this problem of the way you make suffering, then you’re free. There may be other issues you want to take up in life, but the big issue has been solved. And it is the big issue because if you don’t create suffering out of anything, there will be no suffering in your mind at all. Nothing from outside can come in and make you suffer.

So when the Buddha says we suffer in the clinging, it does throw some responsibility on us, but also gives us the freedom not to suffer. After all, if the suffering were coming from outside, there are so many things outside that we can’t control, and the suffering would never end. But because it is an activity we do and it is an activity we don’t have to do, that’s why it is possible to have a path of practice that leads to suffering’s end.