

Doing Aggregates

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As you meditate, you have to watch what you're doing. You focus your mind on the breath, and then you have to watch it to make sure it stays there, make sure it doesn't wander off. This is a quality called alertness. You combine it with mindfulness, remembering what you're here for, and with ardency, the desire to do it right. And it's with these three qualities that you learn. In the very beginning stages, you don't have to analyze things too much. If you notice the mind has wandered off, you just bring it back. It wanders off again, bring it back again. Work with the breath to make it comfortable so that the mind likes to come back, and be on the lookout for when the mind is ready to go off. Notice how it does it.

When you can begin to anticipate that the mind is about to look for something else, that's when you begin to see the workings of the mind. In other words, you're watching the mind doing something. For most people, they're just *in* whatever they're doing. They can't step back and watch. I remember when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang. He'd say, "Watch out for when the mind is wandering off." And I'd say, "Well, when it's wandering off, I don't notice it. It's because I'm not noticing it that it wanders off, so how can I see it?" So that's a problem—and, in a way, I was the problem. Actually, you *can* see the mind about to wander off, which means that it's not doing one thing at a time. You can get it to do two things, to be with the breath and to watch over the mind as it stays with the breath, and to notice when it's wandering off.

If you give the mind enough things to do in the present moment related to the breath, it'll settle down. Otherwise, it has a few empty hands to grab on this, grab on that. So watch the breath, watch the mind watching the breath. And be on the lookout for any signs that the mind is about to slip off, or it's made a decision that it's going to slip off as soon as you're not paying it attention.

It's this ability to watch the actions of the mind that makes this the path to the end of suffering. In other words, to get beyond suffering, you have to understand it. You have to comprehend it, and that means you have to watch the mind in action as it's creating suffering. So in getting the mind to be in concentration like this, with this double focus, you're getting practice in watching the mind, seeing its movements.

As you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing here, you see that as the mind creates a distraction, it's engaged in what the Buddha calls the five aggregates. As it's creating a stage of concentration, it's also engaged in the five

aggregates. There's form, here the form of the body and the breath in particular. And there's the activity of trying to create a feeling of well-being that you can allow to spread through the body. Perception: That's the image of the breath you hold in mind. Fabrication: That's the mind's discussion of what's going on, and consciousness is your awareness of all these things.

You can see that when the mind slips off, it's engaging in perceptions and thought fabrication. There's usually a feeling. When you're here with the concentration, you're adding the form of the body as an anchor. But still, there's also feeling and perception, fabrication, and consciousness. So everything you need to understand is right here. You're getting practice in watching it in action, and that's how we begin to comprehend the problem of suffering, what suffering is.

You'll notice the Buddha doesn't say we're simply on the receiving end of suffering, or that suffering is the pain you feel when something or someone attacks you. Suffering, he says, is your clinging. It's something you're doing. You're clinging to these activities. There are lots of different ways you can cling, and one of the foremost ones is your tendency to identify with them, to feed on them and create a sense of self around them. Now, the Buddha doesn't say that what we *are* is the five aggregates. In fact, the question as to what we are or who we are is a question he said to put aside. If you try to follow it and try get an answer to it, he said, you get involved in a wilderness of views, a jungle of views, a thicket of views. Instead, he simply wants you to watch what you're doing, to watch the suffering you're creating.

When you're engaged in these activities, and one of the activities is creating a sense of self around these five aggregates, what makes it suffering? This clinging: How do you cling? You might identify with the aggregates or you might have the sense that you are whatever it is that owns the aggregates. You might feel that you're inside the aggregates, like you're in the body, like some of those philosophies that say you're a little man inside your body, a little tiny woman inside your body, who peeps out the eyes and listens out the ears and tastes with the tongue. Or you might have a more cosmic sense of yourself, expansive, assuming that the whole world and the body and all these other things are simply inside that more expansive self. We create all kinds of senses of self around these aggregates. And because we have that sense of identification, we really hold on. We feed on these things—and it's in the feeding that we suffer.

So when you hear about the aggregates, remember why the Buddha taught them. They're an analysis of what suffering is and they're activities that you can watch. Even your body is an activity. You create the sense of the form of the body

by the way you breathe. When the breathing stops, your sense of the body begins to dissolve away. So these things we're doing as we're concentrating here: When we get to know them well, we'll see that these are also the things that we cling to that make us suffer.

We cling not only in terms of identifying with them. We cling to them in terms of the sensual pleasure we can get out of them, or because of certain views we have about ourselves and the world. We cling to these activities to create those views or ideas about how things should be done—"This has to be done that way, this has to be done this way"—without any regard to what the actual results are. Those views are also perceptions and fabrications. So we cling in lots of ways.

We suffer in lots of ways around these activities of the mind. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha's not interested in answering the question of who you are or what you are. The *who* and the *what*, you put that aside. You simply look at the action. These are processes. If we hang on to these processes in the wrong way, we suffer. If we hang on in the right way, they're part of the path. There'll still be some stress involved in formulating the path, but it's stress with a purpose: It's a stress leading to the ending of stress, the ending of suffering.

So when the Buddha talks about the five aggregates and the first noble truth, it's not something far away or abstract. These are the elements with which you're doing concentration with right now. These are a lot of the activities the mind is always engaged in. We do the concentration so that we can get more sensitive to them. Then we see exactly where the suffering is, along with what we're doing that's doing the suffering. Again, notice that we're not simply on the receiving end of suffering. We're *doing* the suffering by the way we cling. So look at the breath carefully. Look at your mind carefully as you're looking at the breath because that's where this issue of why we're suffering is going to be found.

In some schools of practice, they make a sharp distinction between tranquility practice and insight practice, but the Buddha himself never made that distinction. The forest ajaans never made it. The distinction between the quality of tranquility and the quality of insight is there, but it's all part of one large practice: the concentration. As you get the mind more still, more solid, you see these activities more clearly. The stillness and the seeing go together.

So for the time being, focus on the stillness. Try to get really good at noticing when the mind is about to slip off and what you can do to keep it from slipping off, and how you can get it to stay here with a sense of well-being. If you find that too much energy arises in the course of the practice, ask yourself, "How can I disperse that energy?" You're the one in charge of deciding what feels right here.

You read in the books about rapture, and think about St. Theresa going into ecstasies. And sometimes it's tempting to try to create those feelings. But then they get overwhelming. If they feel overwhelming, think about the energy going out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. Think of doing the concentration as fixing a dish of food that you like. The recipe book may say one thing, but you've tried following what you thought the recipe said and it doesn't seem to be very good. Well, you can change. You make adjustments.

You're the one who's in charge of deciding what feels right, or feels like something you can stay with, because that's the important part about concentration: the staying so that you can watch clearly as things come and cause other things to come. You want to be here long enough to see the connection. You want to be still enough to see the connection, because everything you need to know is happening right here. You're doing it right here. And the practice of concentration is what gets you really sensitive to that doing, which is why it's one of the factors in the path to the end of suffering. You don't have to look anywhere else.