

In & of Themselves

May 23, 2020

The basic frames of reference for getting the mind into concentration are three: body, feelings, mind. And the Buddha has you look at these things in and of themselves: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, because otherwise, we go and create them into becomings, acts of taking on identities in worlds of experience. These are the raw materials from which we create thoughts about what we want to do, where we want to go, what we want out of the world, who we are in the world. These becomings are driven by our desires. We don't see them clearly because we're in them.

So it's to get us out of them that the Buddha says to at the raw materials in and of themselves. You're actually going to create another state of becoming out of them, a state of concentration. But you'll be doing that with knowledge, with awareness: You see what you're doing, understand what you're doing. And that'll give you some insights into the other processes of becoming. But you have to be quick, because the mind is very quick to look at the body in the world, your feelings as they relate to the world, your thoughts, your desires, your aspirations as they relate to the world, because that's how it ordinarily functions.

There was a French psychologist, Jean Piaget, who studied the intellectual development of children. We're not talking about kids in school, we're talking about kids starting around age two or so when they start getting a sense of the world, and they very quickly create a worldview. It's not the case they just have little pieces of information, then add them together and then finally get a sense of the world. They start out with a sense of what reality is, and they try to fit everything in there. Then they find things that don't fit into their original structure, so they destroy the original structure and create something new. That's how we grow.

We've been doing this ever since we've been two or so, turning our sense of the body, our feelings, our thoughts, into worlds. And, as the Buddha said, the way we do this is what creates suffering. It goes against the grain when we hear that, because this is how we negotiate through the world. That's because we want to find our happiness in the world. The Buddha said happiness is not to be found in the world. It's going to be found by getting out.

It's only when you've had a sense of enough in the world, and have seen the drawbacks of trying to maneuver your way in the world to get whatever little bits and pieces of happiness and well-being it has to offer: It's only when you've had

enough that you're really beginning, really getting ready to start doing the concentration practice.

In Ajaan Lee's early books, when he talks about concentration, he starts out with contemplations that are supposed to give rise to a sense of *samvega*. That's the emotion the bodhisattva felt that motivated his quest for awakening. He saw that the world was all laid claim to. There was nowhere in the world he could go for happiness that somebody hadn't already laid claim to. That meant that if he was going to try to get happiness out of the world, he would have to fight somebody off. The end result, of course, was that everybody was going to die anyhow. But they would have had the karma of having fought one another. He felt a sense of dismay. In fact, he felt a sense of terror: This is all there is to life? Isn't there anything better? He tried all kinds of ways of getting out, and finally found it by getting into the mind, watching the mind as it creates its worlds, learning to steer it off in another direction—that's the way out.

So you have to back up every time you find yourself in a world and say, "Okay, I've created this. I've got to drop it." Try to go back to the raw materials, in this case the breath, your feelings around the breath, and your mind states related to the breath: the mindfulness, alertness, and whatever elements of concentration you can develop. That's a world that forms part of the path. You turn these things into concentration: the breath, the object of the concentration; the feelings, the results are going to come when you direct your mind to the breath. You've got body, feelings, and mind all right here. This is where you can watch them. Then you look at what kind of perceptions help you settle down: perceptions about the breath, perceptions about where you are in your body right now as you try to get everything to fit together.

You're going to be trying things out. This is where the patience comes in—your willingness to keep trying things out. You try something, you sit with it for a while. Don't be in too big a hurry, because you want to see the long-term results of a particular perception or a particular way of breathing. You don't want to jump to any quick conclusions. Try to think of the quality of circumspection that Ajaan Lee talks about. You look at things all around. If you find something you don't like, okay, then you can try something else.

When I was studying with Ajaan Fuang, I didn't realize how unusual his approach was to meditation. He didn't teach a technique that you had to follow without thinking. You had to think a lot, but the thinking was centered on what you were doing right now. It wasn't abstract thinking. It wasn't thinking far away. It was thinking about, "What am I doing right now? What are the results? What can I change?" It was a practical ingenuity that he was looking for, that he was

trying to develop in me. This was how he had found his way, and this was how all his students were going to have to find their way, too. You can give them encouragement. You can give them pointers as to what areas might be blind alleys, dead ends. But a lot of it has to do with their own ingenuity: looking at what they're doing, and being circumspect about passing judgment.

When you find a way that you can get the mind and the breath together with a feeling of well-being, a feeling of pleasure, or a feeling of equanimity, then you can put some of the thinking aside, and just be with the sensation of the body in and of itself.

You're getting closer and closer to the "in and of itself," until finally the breath grows still, and you can pursue the breath only that far. You still have the sense of the body, and you begin to realize that what's holding that sense of the body together is a perception, clearly the perception in and of itself, simply as an activity. You say, "What if I drop this?" And with that, you can go into a sense of space.

In this way, you begin to see the raw materials in the mind a lot more clearly as you get the mind into concentration, and as you begin to realize that there are stages in the concentration, different levels of concentration you can pursue. This is where concentration practice has its element of insight, because insight is a matter of looking at those raw materials prior to their being any kind of a state of becoming, even a state of becoming that's the concentration itself. But first you learn to get sensitive to them as you manipulate them to get the mind into concentration.

So we're trying to get down to the raw materials here, because an important part of mindfulness practice is getting out of any reference to the world.

While you're sitting right here, thoughts of your children, thoughts of your family, thoughts of work, thoughts of home, thoughts of your parents: That's all "world." And you want to develop a sense of samvega about the mind state that goes out looking for fulfillment in the world, realizing it's like that mouse pad I saw one time. It had a drawing of a mouse, and under it was a caption that said Teenage Mouse. The mouse is sticking its paw in the trap and it's saying, "I can so get away with this." That's the way we live in the world, where we're semi-conscious of the dangers. There's always part of us that says, "Well, I can get that little bit of cheese. Other people have failed, but I can do it." But the trap is always set to go off. So you have to have a very live sense of samvega around the world, because otherwise the mind very quickly goes to the world, creating the worlds of becoming. It's an old habit. It's a habit that's been going on so long that the Buddha says you can't find the beginning point.

So when you've decided that you've seen the danger, you have to go back and convince the whole rest of your mind that that's not where you want to go. This is where patience comes into the practice, because simply the fact that you have one desire to get out doesn't take care of all your other desires. They'll always have their "yes, but..." arguments. It's going to take time to fend them off. But the Buddha and all the noble disciples assure us that there's an end to that process. It's not that we have an infinite number of voices inside or an infinite number of desires, or an infinite number of rationalizations. The mind has its repertoire, and you're going to have to learn how to undo its repertoire for creating states of becoming. But these are the tools with which you do that.

You realize that every state of becoming comes down to this: body, feelings, mind. These are the raw materials. So get to see them in and of themselves, as they still are raw materials. Steer them off in the direction of concentration, and you'll be able to steer them further, to the point where they are just raw materials. That's when the path opens up.

So try to keep things as basic as you can. The further away you get from the basics, the less you see—the more you think, but the less you see. The closer you stay to the basics, the closer you'll get to the way out.