

Oneness is a Water Snake

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When we talk of the oneness of concentration, it means several things.

First, you want unity in your will, that you really do want to stay here focused on one object, which means that you've got to bring all your contrary intentions under control. They have a phrase in Thailand: "like catching crabs and putting them into a basket." You've got one crab in the basket and as you catch the next crab, the first crab crawls out. So you've got to catch the first crab and the second crab and the third crab and at the same time keep them all in there. One of the reasons we try to make the object of concentration comfortable is so that the mind will be more and more inclined to stay here. It's easier to get everybody on board. So that's one level of oneness: oneness of the will.

Then, as you settle down, there's the oneness of the object, which means both that you're focused on one thing and that it's the one thing filling the entire range of your awareness. When you're focused on the breath, you want to think of all the sensations in the body as being related to the breath one way or another. In any places that you would originally interpret, say, as a sensation of a bone or some other hard part of the body: When you think of it as breath, that changes your sense of whether it's okay or not. Does that feel like a good breath? It felt like an okay bone or an okay organ of one kind, but does it feel like a good breath? If not, work with it. That gives you something to do.

As you go through the body like this, you get to the point where you can perceive all the sensations in the body as having a breath aspect, so that they're all part of your one concentration. This is where the concentration moves from simple oneness of preoccupation to unification of awareness, where the awareness and the breath seem to be one. That can take you quite far. The oneness of the mind may have to change its object as you go from breath to space and then awareness, but there's that sense that the object and the awareness are one and the same thing. That can take you all the way to the state of infinite consciousness. There's a oneness that holds you there. The perception of the body feels like a burden. The perception even of space begins to feel like a burden. You just want to be with knowing, knowing, knowing. And, as the Buddha said, that's the ultimate non-dual state.

But it's fabricated. We're not doing this to get you there and just leave you there. We're getting the mind ready to do something else, which is to let things fall apart in a natural way. Part of the falling away simply comes from the fact that, as you're working with the mind in getting it to settle down, you begin to clearly see things—events, activities of the mind clearly—that you didn't see clearly before. You can see the role that perception plays in shaping your experience. You hold in mind one perception of the breath, and the breath will be one way. You hold another perception, it'll be another way.

You begin to ferret out what the Buddha called aggregates. He actually called them *khandhas*; we call them aggregates. But these activities of the mind, you begin to see, are distinct things. Ajaan Lee's image is useful here. He talks about heating a rock. And when it gets to one temperature, one metal will flow out. It gets to another temperature, another metal will flow out, depending on the melting point of those metals. They separate out on their own.

The same with the mind here. With the breath, heavy breathing goes away. There's a more refined breathing. Then the movement of the in-and-out breath goes away after a while. And then even the perception that you've got a body sitting here that has a particular shape: that begins to blur and dissolve. You can start focusing on the perception of space surrounding the body, and going between all the atoms of the body. Then there's awareness, the awareness of the space.

When you read the translations of the ajaans, sometimes you hear them talking about the "one who knows." That's a very literal translation of a Thai phrase that basically means a "knower," or just "awareness itself." There's a sense that things begin to separate out. It's like a sauce that's separated. The knower is one thing. The breath is something else. Space is something else. When you get the knowing just on its own and then you return to other objects, you begin to see clearly that these are distinct things.

This is where insight begins. We do this, one, to get the mind still so that you can see things clearly. And, two, so that you can have some hands-on experience with what these different activities of the mind are.

This is to avoid trying to divide things up in line with preconceived notions. Sometimes you read the ajaans, you read the Dhamma in the Canon, and you think, "Well, this must be that and that must be this." But that's not necessarily the case. You might be misunderstanding the terms or misapplying the terms, which is why you've got to get really good at concentration, so that you can begin to see, "Oh, this is exactly what perception is. When the Buddha uses the word *sañña*, this is what he means. When he's using *sankhara*, this is what he means." The same with fabrication, feeling, perception, the sense of the body being the elements.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has some really good passages where he talks about how, say you're dealing with a feeling of pain, you want to be able to divide out which part is the body and which part is the pain and which part is the awareness. What's the perception that's making the connection among these things? You want to see these things as distinct events. The concentration allows you to do this. First because you've got the stillness. You're not trying to juggle all kinds of things all at once. And then because you've had some experience: "Oh, this is what a perception is. This is what it does." You've been using this to get the mind into concentration. You've been using the perception of the body as being composed of elements or properties so that it can settle down and work with the breath. That gives you some hands-on experience with the activity of perception.

Okay, what does it mean to have a feeling? And what is it to have an energy flow? And how are they different? In the beginning, they're glommed together. But as you work with them, they begin to separate out. This, as the Buddha said, is how you begin to clear the mind, by seeing these things as something separate.

So oneness has its role in the practice, but it's part of the path. And there are times you have to be really careful with this concept because it's so easy to take a perception of oneness—say, as when you settle down immersed in the breath or settle down with a sense of awareness itself—and mistake the perception for something that's there apart from the perception, prior to the perception. In other words, you start making metaphysical assumptions about what you're experiencing: "All things are one. The mind and the body are one. You and the world around you are one." When you start doing that, you make it impossible for you to see things, to see where clinging is glomming things together and how you can let go.

So we use oneness as a tool. But we have to realize it has its limitations. And its dangers. It's like having a knife. If you don't hold it properly, it can cut: cut you, cut things you don't want to cut. You have to learn how to hold it properly. Remember that image the Buddha gives of the Dhamma as being like a water snake: You're trying to catch the snake because you want something from it. Perhaps you want the venom so you can make an antidote. If you grasp it by the tail, it'll turn around and bite you. But if you take a forked stick and pin it down right at the neck, then no matter how much it coils around your arm, it's not going to harm you. We don't usually think of the Dhamma as something coiling around us with the potential of harming us, but it's there.

There're lots of mistakes we can make in interpreting the Dhamma on our own. This is why the Buddha didn't just teach the Dhamma and just leave the world scattered with Dhamma books. He created a community where people can learn through an apprenticeship to get a sense of what it means to grasp the Dhamma correctly and how to hold onto it until you've got the lessons you need. And then you can let it go.

So oneness is like a snake. It's got its dangers. But it's got its uses as well. So learn how to grasp the concept well. Do your best to get the mind into the state of concentration. Have a sense of the oneness that's nourishing; that's restful; that helps bring together a lot of things that have been scattered and torn apart. Then learn how to use it well.

This is the middleness of the middle way; or one aspect of the middleness of the middle way. We use pleasure. We use pain. We don't approach them as ends in and of themselves. They're things we develop. We develop the pleasure of concentration. Learn how to use it. We find that there are certain pains that are useful as well as we learn how to understand them. But they're tools. So use them carefully. The Dhamma's a tool. Use it carefully, too.

