

Useful Vocabulary

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When they train people to be professional tasters, a large part of the training is in learning a vocabulary for tastes and smells. The larger your vocabulary for smells and tastes, the more precise differences you're going to notice, the more distinctions you're going to be able to make, and the more useful you are as a professional taster.

The same principle applies to a lot of the Buddha's teachings. He divides things into five aggregates, six sense spheres, six properties, all the factors of dependent co-arising. Those are not superfluous teachings. They're there to throw a spotlight onto things that are happening in your mind and to give you some distinctions. How is a perception, say, distinct from a fabrication? How are they related to feelings? You can't see relationships until you actually see that there are two things to be related. Otherwise, it's just a blob.

Making these distinctions is useful because you want to know precisely where your cravings are. That's what all these words are for, so that you can spot the locations of your craving precisely. Otherwise, you can just say, "Well I'm just going to practice no craving, no attachment," and make it a blanket thing. But then everything gets smothered under the blanket. You don't see precisely what's happening. The dark corners of your mind stay hidden, and that creates problems because attachment and craving tend to hide out in dark spaces: spaces where you don't pay attention; things you don't see. And they create locations there.

This is one of the aspects of craving that you have to look for very carefully to see. The Buddha's description is that craving is located now here, now there. Craving is what creates a location that becomes a basis for your becoming. It's the little nucleus or the seed for a becoming. If you don't know where the nucleus is, you don't really know the becoming. You just think it's just something that's already there and you don't see the extent to which you're creating it yourself.

So one of the purposes of getting the mind into concentration is not just to have equanimity for everything. It's to give rise to the mindfulness and alertness. As the Buddha said, that's one of the uses of concentration: so you can see precisely when things are arising in the mind and notice the mind's reaction. The more precise your vocabulary, the more clearly you'll see things—and in particular, exactly where your craving is.

Sometimes the craving is for objects. Sometimes the craving is for the craving itself. Sometimes it's for your perception of who you are. Sometimes it's your perception of, say, "I'm a person with no craving. I'm a person who's totally free of attachments." You can be attached to that. And if you're not quick to see that, that's how the mind plays tricks on itself. The craving will still be there. The becoming will still be there. In other words, the suffering will still be there. It may be very subtle, but it's still there.

And as long as there's that potential for suffering, you can't really trust your mind, because it might stick with a particularly large perception of an awareness that's located nowhere. You're stuck on the perception. But then after a while, you're not interested in that perception anymore. You go to something else. If you can't watch your mind as it moves from one location to another in this way, if you can't catch sight of it, then you're missing precisely what you need to see. After all, if you're going to abandon your craving, you have to see exactly where it is.

There's a strange passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that there's no craving located on something you've never seen or heard or sensed. You might say, well, it's possible to have craving for the concept of that thing. But that's not where the craving is then. The craving is not with the thing you haven't seen. The craving is with the concept. This is why you have to catch the mind to see which layer of the mind, which layer of awareness, which layer of the aggregates you're focused on, where your craving looks for its satisfaction or finds it.

So meditation is not just a blanket cloning of awakening where you say, "Awakened people are unattached, so whatever comes up, I'll just be unattached." You have to know: What exactly is this "whatever that's coming up"? You need to see precisely what's coming up so that you can understand its allure and drawbacks. Are there cracks in your awareness that allow craving to take root and grow?

So these different analyses are not just extra decoration that are irrelevant to the practice. They're there so that you can see that this is what's happening. And then you can know what to do in terms of the four noble truths. Just having the vocabulary in and of itself, is not enough. It's not enough to be able to identify that this is a feeling or this is a perception or whatever. But it is a start.

The next thing to do is, what do you do with it? Is it something that you develop? Or is it something that you let go? It's because we need to perform these different duties that the Buddha has these four noble truths. It's not just one big truth that everything should be let go of or all things are unworthy of attachment. Those *are* among the teachings, but they're teachings for someone who's on the verge of becoming an arahant. We haven't gotten there yet. We've still got these duties that we've got to fulfill.

The teaching of letting go of everything, where there's no you here nor there nor in between, where there is no here or there in between, that's a teaching that makes sense and is applicable only when you've done the grunt work of developing the path; abandoning craving, all the cravings that you can see so that you're ready for the more subtle ones.

So the vocabulary's there for us to use and to figure out what needs to be done to dig out the craving, to develop the path, to get to the place where we finally can let go of everything because we've seen all the hiding places in the mind.

So think of those lists of categories—the aggregates and the sense spheres, dependent co-arising—as a checklist for where you’re going to look for the different hiding places for craving, clinging, and all the other unskillful things that tend to hide out.

As your concentration gets more still, you’re able to see a lot of the hiding places. But then there are a lot of little hiding places that get more and more subtle as your concentration gets more solid. So you’ve got to keep looking, looking, looking. This is why this is an all-around training of the mind. It’s not just in the vocabulary. It’s not just in the stillness. It’s not just in letting go. There are different processes that have to be analyzed. Sometimes the concentration has to be developed so that you get more solid and see things that are more precise. Sometimes you have to drop the analysis because the mind is getting worn out and that’s when you go for the concentration that’s there for the purpose of just giving you a pleasant abiding here and now.

Remember concentration has four uses: the pleasant abiding, mindfulness and alertness, knowledge and vision—which means psychic powers you can develop, which of the four uses of concentration, is the optional one—and then finally, the ending of the effluents: in other words, the discernment that sees not only things arising and passing away, but also understands their origination, what’s causing them, what their allure is, what their drawbacks are, and then how to escape from them.

There’s work to be done here on all these terms. The concentration is useful and helps with some of it, but the analysis helps with other parts of it. This is why you need a combination of stillness and insight, or calm and insight; concentration and discernment. These two qualities have to go together. When they’re put together in the right proportions, then it’s hard to make the distinction between concentration and discernment because they’re right there together, working together. You get the mind still. You see something. You let it go. That makes the mind even more still.

So don’t dismiss the analysis. Don’t dismiss the concentration. The one without the other can’t do its work; or it can do some of the work, but the really important work gets left undone. And when it’s left undone, then you keep coming back to more and more suffering. After a while, you get tired of meditating. You latch onto something else. Then you go back to your more gross cravings again. This is how beings go through the cycle: up and down, up and down. The only safe place is when you get out. And the only way out is if you get all the factors of the path working together.

So work on your concentration. But also, work on the kind of concentration that allows you to see things clearly in the mind as they’re coming, as they’re going, so that you can catch sight of the unexpected hiding places where you’ve tucked things away.