

Layers of Selves

June 6, 2017

Your sense of self is especially acute when it comes up against something it doesn't want or when its desires are thwarted. That's when you become particularly aware of the fact, "Yup, that's me. I want this. And I'm not happy about whatever." When things are going pretty smoothly, the sense of self is there, but it's more diffuse. If you're not paying careful attention, you might miss it. This is why it's a mistake to say, "All you have to do is just be the knowing. You'll be apart from any self, and that's the purpose of the practice"—because there'll still be desires in that knowing. The knowing may be aware of the desires. The problem is that the desires get excused: "Well, that's just the natural functioning of the body. It doesn't have an impact on the knowing." But there's still that seed of an identity in there—and so there's still the seed for more suffering.

One of the reasons why the Buddha has you focus on pain as a large issue is because your sense of self, or whatever identification you may have, is going to become very clear around the pain. All your clings are going to become very clear. The problem in dealing with pain is that, in the very beginning, it's hard to take. In fact, one of the *ajanas* defines pain as what puts a squeeze on the heart; what makes things hard. So you need another place to identify with it. Instead of identifying yourself as the person who has the pain, find some spot in the body that's not pained. There'll be part of the mind that wants to keep going back to the pain, but you have to say, "Nope, nope, nope. We're going to stay right here." You can use a little bit of not-self thinking here. If there's a pain in the leg, a pain in your hip, you can say, "That's not me right now."

This is where it's good to see that you have many different potential senses of self from which you can choose. Because that's the way it is. It's simply that we're not all that aware. We think there's just the one "me" that keeps showing its face. And it seems to be pretty clearly delineated. But if you look at it carefully, you begin to see the identification varies with the desire.

So, right now, we're going to be sitting for an hour. The desire is, "How can I get through the hour without suffering from the pain?" And for that purpose, as a first step, identify with some other part of the body. Breathe into that part of the body in a way that feels comfortable. If you can't find any spot in the body that's not connected with tension around the pain, start with the space around the body. And then think of the space permeating into the body, between the atoms, inside the atoms. Where there's a sense of well-being, think of it spreading. Think of the breath energy spreading through the pain. You stay in your home base that's not the pain itself. But think of the comfort coming from your home base radiating out through the pain. If it feels like the pain is a wall, change that perception.

Remind yourself that the atoms of the body are mainly made out of space, so the breath energy can flow right through them. And besides, the pain itself is not something physical. It's there in relationship to the body, but it's not the same thing as the body. When you can hold that thought in mind, you're already beginning to work with your perceptions, because perceptions are the big problem, the perceptions we cling to over and over and over again. They seem to be confirmed by our experience of reality, so we hold onto them tight, even though the perception is actually causing us a lot of unnecessary mental suffering.

When you finally do get around to being ready to look at the pain directly, you ask yourself, "What in here am I identifying with?" Sometimes that question about identification is a little bit too direct. So you do it in an indirect way. Say, "What are the perceptions here?" When a perception changes, does it have an impact on the sense of suffering in the mind related to the pain? If you feel that the pain is out to get you, that immediately creates a sense of "you" in there, as though the pain has invaded your space. Can you change those perceptions?

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about trying to see the distinction between body, feeling, and awareness, which are the three components of our concentration. We try to take them apart to see that even though they're in the same place, they're different things. You can think of the analogy of the radio waves going through the room here. There are radio waves from Tijuana, from San Diego, from Los Angeles. They're on different frequencies but they're all in the same space. A radio here could pick up any of them, depending on how you dial the frequency to ferret out one frequency instead of others. In the same way, think of the pain and the awareness and the body as being there in the same space but on different frequencies, and you have the right to choose which frequency to tune-in to.

When you begin to see that the pain and the body really are two separate things, you begin to realize that the pain moves around a lot more than you originally thought. You thought it was kind of a dull ache right there and it had a particular location with clear boundaries. But now the boundaries begin to get a little bit more fluid. And you can start chasing it around and perceive it as running away from you rather than coming at you.

What you're doing here is that you're going through the steps of breath meditation steps related to the feeling: the tetrad that starts out with breathing in a way that gives rise to rapture; breathing in a way that gives rise to pleasure. In other words, finding the spot in the body that feels good. And then breathing in and out sensitive to mental fabrication, i.e., your perceptions and your feelings. How are the perceptions having an effect on you? How are the feelings having an effect on you? How do they get mixed together to have an effect on the mind? Then you find a way to calm that.

When you're dealing with the pleasure of concentration, that means going from pleasure to equanimity. But if you're dealing with pain, calming it doesn't necessarily mean making the pain go away. Some pains *will* go away when you work with the breath, but others are going to

stay right there. What you want to calm is the effect of the pain on the mind. And that's going to be through the perception.

What our repeated perceptions keep telling us, we take for reality—like the big lie that gets repeated often enough that people take it for the truth. We think that the picture presented by our perceptions has worked for us all along, so we keep holding onto it. But you have to ask yourself, if these maps of reality are causing suffering and stress, are they really working? And where do these maps come from? Many of them came from times when we were pre-verbal. Before we even knew about anything about language at all, we were experiencing pain and dealing with it in our own crude way. We may have learned some better techniques in the meantime, but often a lot of the childish perceptions we started out with are still there. Like the one that the pain is after you, or the pain has invaded your space. And so you've got to work with those perceptions, to untangle them and deconstruct them, because they are the things you're clinging to.

When we say "clinging," it's not as if your mind has a hand that's grasping onto something. We've just got certain perceptions and thought fabrications that we churn up over and over and over again: the ones that we slap onto reality or slap onto experience and say, "This is the way things are." We rarely learn to question them. The reason we hold onto them is that, in some cases, they're very useful. But in others, they're not. Identifying with the body helps you to move it around. But then when the pain comes, the perception that you control things in here becomes a problem. To be free of suffering, you have to be willing to let it go. Here is where you run up against a particular sense of self that may have gotten lodged in there. You can tell yourself, "I don't need that sense of self right now. I'm willing to be a self, or a person, who's just aware here. There can be pain anywhere in the body, but I'm not going to be affected by it. I'm going to use the perceptions that help change the relationship to the pain." This is a case of digging out your sense of self when it's pretty obvious.

Dig a little deeper. Your sense of self at the moment comes from a certain desire: You want the pain to go away. Well, can you change that? Can you learn how to say, "I want to be able to sit with the pain and not care whether it goes away or not." That new desire becomes a new you. And so you learn how to identify with the equanimity. You learn how to identify with the knowing. At that point, you are the awareness. And that's a useful identification to have for that particular purpose.

But then as you've dealt with that, then the next question is, "Okay, is there a potential for suffering there in that identification?" Of course, there is. Wherever there's identification, there's going to be suffering. We sometimes hear that the reason that clinging is bad is because everything you try to cling to is going to be impermanent. And when the Buddha has you reflect on the drawbacks of clinging, that's one of the main reflections he has you engage in.

But even if you try to cling to something that you think is permanent, and it seems to be pretty permanent, there's suffering in the act of clinging. So you want to look for that. Even

when things are going your way—there's no pain in the body; the mind is still; there's just a sense of awareness, very clear, very distinct— you have to look for, "Where's the stress in here too?" And it's going to be very subtle. But you have to realize that the fact that you're able to maintain a sense of awareness as being something separate: that, too, is a perception you're holding onto. There's clinging there. And the easiest way to see that is to detect any slight inconstancy in what seems to be otherwise pretty permanent. You've got to look for it.

This is why if you simply stop at being the knowing and don't ask these further questions, you're going to miss something really important, i.e., the possibility of finding something totally unfabricated. It may take a while, but always hold that question in mind. Wherever anything is held together—even if it's by a really calm perception, a perception of just knowing, knowing, knowing, that doesn't run up against many obstacles—there's still desire, there's still clinging, there's still stress. The desire is in the perception that holds you there: "All I want to do is just know: be aware, aware, aware." To see this, you have to look for two things. One is the times when you're not just aware, when something leaps out and wants something, which is why one of the ways of dealing with this particular thing is to sit for longer periods of time so that pain will inevitably come up. And the other time is when you're there in that sense of awareness, but there's a slight wobbling or variation. Check it out to see: "Oh, this too is fabricated. It's being held together by this perception. There's an element of clinging there."

So it's not that you're going to be attacking your one and only sense of self. You're going to be attacking lots of different ones, depending on what the problem is. They're going to have more or fewer teeth, more fangs or fewer fangs, depending on the extent to which they're running up against an obstacle. Often the ones with lots of fangs are the ones you have to deal with first. But then realize, there are perfectly innocuous ones, or seemingly innocuous ones. They're still in there, too. So just remember that fact, because that's what helps to keep you from getting stuck on some of the really nice things that happen along the path, but would deflect you from reaching something better: the goal where you don't need to fabricate a sense of self in any way, shape, or form in order to maintain it. Because it's deathless.