

A Good Dish of Concentration

July 15, 2017

That phrase in the chant just now, “those who don’t discern suffering,” sounds strange. We all know that we have suffering. The problem is that we don’t really discern it. To discern it, in the Buddha’s terms, would be to see it in terms of the five clinging-aggregates, and that’s usually not the first thought that occurs to us when we’re suffering. We need to meditate to get the mind calm, so that we can actually see what’s going on, so that we can see what these aggregates are and why they’re suffering.

There’s one analysis you hear sometimes, that the aggregates are the Buddha’s analysis of what we are: i.e., we don’t really have a self, but we are the five aggregates. But we most definitely are not them. As he keeps telling us to say with regard to each aggregate: “This is not me. This is not my self. This is not who I am.” That’s the attitude we should have to each of the aggregates.

But the problem is, we do cling to them. And one way of clinging is by identifying with them, either as being ours or as belonging to us. But as the Buddha said, and the ajaans say again and again, if you’re going to see something clearly, you have to step back from it and see it as something separate.

To do that, we try to get the mind into concentration. That’ll enable us to see some of the aggregates that we’ve been identifying with that are unskillful. It puts us in a position where we can get more sensitive to what is actually unskillful about them, and our standards as to what qualifies as skillful and unskillful will go higher.

So try to get your mind still. Where do you get your mind still? Well, you get them still within the aggregates or using aggregates. But you’re trying to use them in a skillful way, rather than carrying them around. I like to think of them as bricks that we ordinarily carry around, but now we’re not going to carry them around. We’re going to put them down and use them as pavement on a path.

You’ve got form, i.e., the breath. Then you’ve got feeling, which are feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, that are here in the body. And as the Buddha said, by focusing continually on the breath, you can actually give rise to a feeling of well-being. That’s what we’re trying to create.

Now, to focus on the breath what do you use? You use *sañña*, or perception, which is a mental label that you apply. This can either be simply the word “breath” or your mental picture of what exactly happens when you breathe in. You have a mental picture: maybe the breath coming in and out through the nose or in through the pores of the skin or, in Ajaan Lee’s analysis, it can come in anywhere—the back of the neck, the top of the head, come up from the soles of the feet, out the soles of the feet. You want to choose a perception that makes it easy to

stay with the breath. Without this perception, you wouldn't have a marker. The perception acts like a label for marking what you're going to be doing and where you want to stay. Without this marker you wouldn't be able to stay here. In fact, of the various concentration attainments, all of them up through the perception of nothingness, the Buddha says, count as perception attainments. Without the perception, you couldn't hang on.

Then there's fabrication. In the beginning this deals with what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication, i.e., directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and you evaluate it. Does it feel good? Does it not feel good? If it doesn't feel good, what can you do to change it to make it feel better? Here it's useful to remember that you can change either the form, i.e., the breath, or you can change the perception. Once it does feel good, what can you do to maximize that feeling, spread it around? Because the state that we're trying to attain here is an all-body awareness, where your awareness fills the body, the breath fills the body, and the feeling of ease and rapture fill the body.

How do you do that? That's the duty of evaluation, to figure that out. Then when these things actually do start filling the body and everything comes together, you can drop directed thought and evaluation, and the only fabrication left is the fabrication of the breath itself, along with the feelings and the perception. Those are the things that hold you together.

And then you've got consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

So here you're taking the aggregates and you're making good use out of them. From this vantage point, you can look at other aggregates. And here it's good to think of aggregates not as things—and that's one of the problems with the word "aggregate" in English, it sounds like little bits of gravel—but as activities. There's a passage where the Buddha actually defines them in terms of verbs, the activities they do. And it's good to think of them as activities, because activities are things you can change. Maybe you see you're engaging in some bad perceptions: You can say, "Oh, well, I can change perceptions, use different perceptions, create different feelings, fabricate thoughts in different ways."

You want to take the sense of well-being that comes when you're actually able to fabricate the aggregates into something really good like concentration, so that when you start fabricating other things, you can see that they're pretty shoddy. Thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of pride, thoughts of *whatever* that the mind gets involved in, you can see that they're a pretty shoddy way of fabricating an experience, because you've been able to fabricate something better. And you begin to ask yourself, "Why do you want to feed off these things?" Because that's what the aggregates are related to: the way you feed.

The question sometimes arises: Why did the Buddha choose these five particular aspects to define who you think you are? Remember, their focus is his analysis of suffering. And that's because they're all related to feeding. Remember that question from the other night: "What is one? All beings subsist on food." That's the activity that defines us. When the Buddha was recollecting his previous lives, that was one of the major factors he would recollect, not only

what he looked like and his experience of pleasure and pain, but also what he fed off of.

Our feeding defines us. And it's not just physical feeding here, but also mental feeding, emotional feeding. So you can ask yourself: These other things that you feed on, are they really worth it? Is it really good food? What do you have to do in order to find that food? And what happens to you as a result? What kind of person do you become? It's like eating a lot of junk food: You find that after a while you become fat; your heart gets clogged. The kinds of things you feed on will have an effect on who you are. And we identify with the ways that we feed.

Take physical, food for example: There are certain physical things that we will eat and others that we won't. That's part of how we define ourselves, and that's defining ourselves around form. Then, of course, there's the form of our own body. Then there are feelings: We have feelings of hunger. We try to change them into feelings of fullness. We have perceptions: perceiving what kind of hunger we have and what's going to satisfy the hunger, and just learning to identify what out there in the world is edible. That's perception in action. You see this with little kids: They crawl across the floor. They see something: The first thing they do is they put it in their mouths to see if it's food. So that perception of food and not-food is a very early one.

Then there's fabrication: what you do in order to find food, what you do with the food once you found it, how you fix it. And then there's your awareness of all these things. These are the activities that surround feeding.

And we feed off the activities themselves. There's a double layer here. So you want to ask yourself, "As I feed on these things and as I feed in these ways, what's the result?" There's a lot of food out there that looks good and tastes good, but it's going to be bad for you. There are other kinds of food that don't look so good and don't taste so good, but they actually turns out to be good for you. Some are hard to fix. Some are easy to fix.

With concentration, it sometimes takes a while to get good at fixing your concentration, but it's worth the effort because your concentration is a kind of food for the mind. When the Buddha gives analogies for the functions of the different aspects of the path, concentration usually comes in under food. So for the time being, learn how to feed on this food.

Ultimately, you're going to have to let it go. And as the Buddha says, when you get the mind really good at concentration and you've been able to use it to peel away your attachment to other kinds of feeding, then you turn around, look at it, and say: "Oh my gosh, this, too, is also form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. I've been feeding off of this." And when, as a result, you can incline your mind to something that doesn't involve any feeding at all, that's when you're free.

But before you get to that point, you've got to learn how to feed here. So this is a culinary skill that you're going to have to develop: how to fix a good state of concentration out of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.

If those five things are too much to think of, just think about form and awareness, i.e.,

breath and your awareness. The perception will do its work, and the feelings of pleasure will arise, without you having to think too much about them. But if you find that you have trouble settling down, you're going to ask yourself, "Which of these factors am I not doing quite right?"

This way, you can learn how to fix a good dish of concentration here and then feed on it with manners. In other words, you don't just gobble it down—you don't just wallow in the pleasure and forget about the breath. You keep focusing on the breath. The pleasure will be there. It'll do its work. So have good manners in how you feed on your concentration. As they say, when you have good manners in your feeding, you get to eat for a long time.

In the meantime, you're learning about these five aggregates; you're beginning to be able to discern the differences among them, to sort them out. And that'll put you in a position where you can actually use this type of analysis to get beyond the aggregates. Without this hands-on experience, it's really hard to see them clearly. But with this experience, you can get to know them really well. And it's only when you know them really well that you can let them go.

So use some care. Use whatever time is required. And use all your powers of observation to fix yourself a good dish of concentration. The food will be good, and you'll be learning some skills that will hold you in good stead for a long time to come.