

Just Events

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Psychologists say that depersonalization is an unhealthy thing—when you can't relate to your own emotions, you feel separated from your body, separated from your emotions. But from the Buddha's point of view, there's unhealthy depersonalization and healthy depersonalization. Unhealthy is when you do something and refuse to acknowledge the fact that you did it, that it was your choice. Healthy is when you see that if you identify with something, there's going to be suffering. And so you have to choose your mode of thinking—personal or impersonal—with knowledge. As with so many factors in life, if you do it in ignorance, it can lead to suffering, but if you do it with knowledge, it's actually part of the path.

Look at the Buddha's own awakening: the three knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening. They came in three different modes. The first one was a narrative mode that told the story of his many, many, many lifetimes. The second one was a cosmological mode, a view of the world. All of the cosmos, all of the beings that were all dying and being reborn, along with the pattern that lay under how they were reborn based on their actions, which in turn were based on their views.

But then the third knowledge dropped the narratives, dropped the worldview, and just focused on events, without asking the question of whether there was a person there or no person there, simply, "These are events." That kind of depersonalization can be really useful, because you find as you go through life there are a lot of things you can't control.

On the external level, there are the words of other people, and the Buddha has you depersonalize those in the sense that you get yourself out of the way. He recommends that when people say something harsh, untrue—basically what you'd regard as outrageous speech—the first thing to tell yourself is, "This is not all that outrageous. This is the nature of human speech. This is what it's like. There's going to be true speech and there's going to be false speech. There's going to be kind speech and ill-meaning speech." You just see that as a fact of the world. That gets the "you" out of the line of fire.

He also recommends that when something really nasty is being said, you tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear," and leave it at that. Don't build any narratives around it. Just see it as an event.

The same principle applies in the meditation. When the Buddha taught meditation to his son, the first thing he taught him was, “Make your mind like earth.” People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t shrink away. The purpose of this image is to remind yourself that all kinds of things can happen, but you can’t react if you want to see things clearly. As when you’re working with the breath: If you want to sense what kind of breathing is actually good for the body, what kind of breathing is good for the mind, what kind of thinking is good for the meditation, what kind of thinking is not, you have to have the mind in a non-reactive state in order to make changes and judge them skillfully.

“Non-reactive” doesn’t mean that you don’t do anything, it simply means that you do things with knowledge and not out of your knee-jerk emotional reactions. You really observe carefully what the results are. If you would like a certain technique to work in a certain way but it’s not working that way, and you let your preferences get in the way of admitting that, you’ll never get skilled. The skill requires that you be a fair observer.

But the Buddha’s image is also there to remind you that you can stand anything. The earth can hold up to anything. No matter how much you throw at it, it’s there. It’s still earth. You want to develop that same quality in your mind. After all, your mind is an expert survivor. Your awareness has survived death who knows how many times. But in the course of survival, it’s had to strip down a lot of things. This is what we have to learn as we meditate, that a lot of things we’ve got to strip down. Our narratives, our worldviews: They get stripped down when you see that they’re going to cause suffering. It’s good to get practice in that direction ahead of time before everything starts falling apart in the body.

We work with the breath, but there will come times when the breath is not cooperative. Your heartbeat gets strange, and you try to breathe in a way that’s calming, but it doesn’t seem to have that much of an effect. This is when you have to reflect back on your awareness as being something separate from all this, and it can simply watch. This is what discernment is all about. It strips things down so that we can have an observer that watches, without getting upset by anything that happens.

That means learning how to let go of a lot of things. You see your body’s not behaving, it’s starting to malfunction. Well, you do what you can, and then if the results aren’t all that good, you have to remind yourself, “This is just a body. These are just physical phenomena.” Learn to look at them in that depersonalized way. This creates a lot less suffering around it. If you start getting into the narratives about, “What does this mean about my health? How much longer am I going to

live?” you’ve switched modes in a way that’s not going to be helpful. You’ve got to switch back to the “these are just events” mode. Any other thoughts that come up, feelings, , all these things: You have to see them from that “these are just events” mode. You can say, “Oh, this is what it’s like, the body falling apart,” and just leave it at that. And try to stay with that sense of awareness.

This is best when you’ve learned how to get the breath really calm, and you start focusing on the sense of space, either around the body, or permeating the body, or both. From that sense of space, you can ask, “What is aware of the space?” That’s when the sense of the mind simply as awareness, or this quality of awareness as something separate from its objects, gets clearer and more prominent. But even if you haven’t attained that level in your concentration, you can simply hold that perception in mind: The awareness is one thing; the object is something else; the feeling is something else; the body is something else. Learn how to separate these things out, and there will be a lot less struggle when you encounter things that are beyond your control to change.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who suffered from cancer. She had to go in for radiation treatments, and she discovered that she was allergic to the anesthesia they were giving her. The doctors were wondering what to do, and she said, “Well look, I’m a meditator. I think I can take the treatments without the anesthesia.” They were a little reluctant to try it, but then she was able to convince them. So she went through the first treatment and was able to hold her mind in the state of very solid non-reactivity, the state of equanimity throughout the treatment. But then when she came out, she was exhausted.

Ajaan Fuang went to visit her the next day, to see how she was doing, and she told him what had happened. He said, “You’re just using concentration. You’ve got to use your discernment, too. Using concentration in a case like that takes a lot of energy. But if you use your discernment and say, ‘Okay, the awareness is one thing, the pain is something else, the body is something else,’ then you can hold that perception in mind. Then there’s a lot less struggle.”

She told me later that this approach made things a lot easier. She was able to endure the treatments without getting exhausted.

So when you get into this mode it’s just body, feelings, and mind, you don’t think about whose body, whose feelings, whose mind. You can see that they really are separate, and it’s a lot easier to put up with the things that the body’s going to do, with the things that the world is going to do.

We have that chant: “Aging, illness, and death are normal. We haven’t gone past them.” Well, learn how to see them as normal. It’s when you get into the narrative mode that they start getting upsetting. But if you can stay simply in this

mode of events, just phenomena coming and going, and mainly going, going, going, then your awareness is in a much better place.

This is how you strip things down. You depersonalize them, but in a way that's skillful, because you're doing it with knowledge. You know what you're doing and why. And you can pull yourself out at times when you need to personalize things, to use views about the world. It's your ability to slip back and forth through these things with knowledge: That makes them healthy, that makes them actually part of a higher level of skill for the mind.

The kind of depersonalization psychologists are talking about is when you start functioning on a lower level. But here you're functioning on a higher level. You learn how to adopt these techniques and use them with knowledge, when they're appropriate. You're expanding your range of skills so that you don't have to suffer. If you take everything personally, you die and it's miserable. You don't have to die and it's still miserable. But if you can put the mind into that mode where it's just events, then the awareness is something that's solid. It's as solid as the earth and doesn't identify with any of the things that come up.

In the Buddha's terms, with any of the aggregates: form, feelings, perceptions, or thought-fabrications, if you can see the act of consciousness as something separate from these things, and see the consciousness itself as something you can step back from—not that you go unconscious, just that the consciousness of things is something you can step back from—then as these things change, there's no suffering.

So learn to be fluid as you slip back and forth among these modes, using whichever mode is appropriate. That way you help the survival of your awareness without having to go through any suffering—and that's one of the major skills the Buddha taught.