

Twigs & Branches

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There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha uses the image of a pile of twigs and branches to symbolize what we should let go of. He asks the monks, "If someone were to take the twigs and branches in this monastery and set them on fire, would you say that they're setting *you* on fire?" "No," the monks say, "because those things are not us, they're not ours." And the Buddha says, "In the same way, whatever is not really yours: Let go of it. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. And what is not yours? The five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness."

There's another passage, though, where twigs and branches are a symbol for the path. You lash together twigs and branches to make a raft and, holding onto the raft, you can cross over the flood. So in the second case, the twigs and branches are something you hold on to provisionally, for the purpose of getting across.

Of course, you know the image, that when you get to the other side, you let the raft go. You don't carry it around on your head. But still, when you look at the twigs and branches of the path, you realize that they're the same five aggregates.

You're sitting here in concentration, which is part of the path. You've got your experience of the body, which is form. There's the feeling of pleasure you're trying to create through the way you pay attention to the breath. There's the perception, the image you hold in mind of how the breath flows into and through the body. There are the fabrications of directed thought and evaluation, as you direct your thinking to the breath and then evaluate how it's going. And then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

Discernment, too, involves aggregates. As you develop discernment, you're going to be using perceptions—perceptions of things being inconstant, stressful, not-self—as a way of developing a sense of dispassion for them. And you'll be thinking about ways to get the mind to let go: That's fabrication.

So you look at every factor of the path and see that there's going to be some combination of aggregates.

The point here is that we don't just let go of the aggregates and throw them away. We try to figure out which ones are useful right now, which ones we can lash together to make a path, and which ones are just random piles of twigs and

branches that don't have any use at all. We hold on to the first; we let go of the second.

It's in this way that we create a refuge for ourselves. When the Buddha talks about making yourself your refuge, he equates it with making the Dhamma your refuge. Making the Dhamma your refuge he equates with the establishing of mindfulness.

Here, too, there's an image of a flood. You're trying to build an island, or at least a safe place on the island. But you always have to remember: The path is something makeshift—you're making use of things that eventually you have to let go. You have to feel passion for doing these things well, but ultimately, when the path has done its work, you put it aside: both the passion for the path and the path itself.

But to do its work, the path has to help you first develop dispassion for everything else. So you hold onto this. And you learn how to use these aggregates. Don't look down on them. Ajaan Lee says we have to look after our aggregates the same way that a person looks after a wound on his body. If you decide that you don't like it, that it's disgusting, it's got blood coming out, or it's got lymph coming out, and you don't take care of it, it's going to get worse. So you take care of it. In the same way, you take care of your aggregates.

Learn to get to know them. Form is the sense of the body as you feel it from within—in other words, your experience of the body that no one else can share. "Form" also refers to how the body looks. That's something you do share with other people. But the Buddha wants you to be more interested in how you feel it from within. That's the part of the body that you can use as an object of concentration.

You could also look at it in terms of how it appears when you take the different parts of the body apart, realizing that although it looks okay when it's all together, if you took it apart into its individual pieces it would not look okay at all. This body that you're so attached to, this is what it's made up of: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, all the way down the line.

Here again, you use that contemplation to get yourself away from the appearance of the body to get more interested in how you experience the body from within. Then you try to inhabit it well. You work with the breath energy. When you breathe in, how does it feel? When you breathe out, how does it feel? We're trying to create a feeling of well-being here. The Buddha says that simply by careful attention to the breath, being alert to the breath, you can make the breath comfortable.

He doesn't go into the details, but Ajaan Lee does: You experiment with different rhythms of breathing. Experiment with different ways of conceiving the breath. When you breathe in, you can think of it coming in different spots in the body. Or as it comes in, you can think of the breath energy itself originating at some spot inside the body, and as it spreads through the body you can ask yourself: Does it feel good? Are you tightening it up here, or squeezing it out there, blocking it here? If you sense any blockages, think of them dissolving away. This is when you use perception, any perception that helps dissolve the blockages. As you hold that perception in mind and as you're conscious of how the breath feels in the body, you evaluate how it's going: That's the fabrication part. If it doesn't feel comfortable, what do you need to change? Do you need to change the rhythm of the breathing? Do you need to change your mental image of the breath energy?

We've had many people come here talk about the cycle of energy that you learn in Qigong: that the breath comes in the navel, goes down between the legs, up the back, over the head, then back down to the navel again. That's one way of conceiving it, but it's not the only way—and it's not always the best way, either. Different people will have different ways of relating to the breath energy in the body, so you have to explore this area for yourself. Don't come with too rigid an idea of what a good breath energy in the body will be.

Through evaluating it this way, you develop your own discernment, because that's a lot of what discernment is: evaluation, making value judgments. We practice it first with the breath. As the issue of how to make the breath stay with the mind and how to make the mind stay with the breath gets more resolved, then you can use your powers of evaluation to look at other things. You contemplate anything that you might be holding onto that's getting in the way of the concentration—such as thoughts that ensnare the mind—and then you can ask yourself: “Are these worth going with? Where are they going to take me? What can I do to see through them?”

Notice that the questions start and end with a value judgment: Are they worth it? That's a lot of what the three perceptions are all about: judging things as to whether they're worth the effort that goes into them or not. Remember, the Buddha looked for a happiness that wouldn't age, wouldn't grow ill, wouldn't die—in other words, a happiness that wasn't born. And so how do you know if something's been born? Well, it has these qualities of aging, illness, and death. The three perceptions deal directly with that. Aging of course, is inconstancy. Illness is stress. Death is not-self: You've got to let go of everything at that point.

All the things you've identified with, all these aggregates you have here right now, you're going to have to let go of at some point.

So with anything that comes up in the meditation, if you can see that there's any way in which it's inconstant, stressful, or not-self, you can tell yourself: This is still subject to aging, illness, and death. So this is not what we're after. However, the path itself is also subject to aging, illness, and death. The difference is that when you hold onto the path, it can take you in the direction you want to go.

As in all cases, the Buddha has you be perceptive, and use your powers of judgment. It's the same with pleasures and pains on the path. There are some pleasures that, when you indulge in them, lead the mind to get lazy, heedless, proud that you have that pleasure while other people don't. In that case, that pleasure is a danger.

There are other pleasures, though, that enable you to let go of that kind of pleasure. The pleasure of seclusion. The pleasure of living in harmony with a group. The pleasure of being outside in nature, far away from all the fabricated things that other people are pushing on you. These are good pleasures and they help lead to the deeper pleasure that comes from being in concentration.

So you have to learn how to use these value judgments wisely. As you're working on concentration, you don't focus on the concentration as being inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Instead, you focus on anything else that would pull you away from the concentration. The same as when you're practicing virtue: You don't look at your precepts as being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, even though they are. For the time being, you don't focus on that. You try to make them as constant as possible. Learn how to wear your virtue with a sense of ease. Focus that analysis on things that would pull you away: your concern for your health, your concern for your wealth, your concern for your relatives, as the Buddha says. There are times when you might benefit your relatives by lying, or benefit yourself by stealing, but those benefits are not worth it.

So, you're making a value judgment and you're making distinctions. All too often we see the Buddha's message reduced to a few sound-bytes. "It's all about change. All about accepting change. All about acceptance. All about equanimity." That's not the case. If it's all about anything, it's all about nibbana. As for everything else, you use distinctions between what helps you get to nibbana and what gets in the way.

So you have to fabricate the thinking. Fabricate those value judgments that will help you make distinctions and decide: "Is this heading in the right direction, or is it heading in the wrong direction? Am I holding on to twigs and branches that are going to weigh me down and get burned, or am I holding on to twigs and

branches that are going to take me across the flood?” It’s in learning how to make distinctions like this that your own discernment grows. And it’s funny: When your discernment is really yours, that’s when it really works. As long as it’s simply something you’ve memorized from somebody else, it can work to some extent, but it’s only when you start applying it that you understand what it’s all about.

There’s a Pali term, *attha*, which means *meaning*, but it also means *purpose*. And for the Buddha’s teaching, the two meanings go together. In other words, you’re not going to know the meaning of the Dhamma until you’ve experienced its purpose arise within you: when you get to the end of the path. That’s when you really understand everything. Or at the very least, when you reach stream-entry, you see where this all leads: that it’s not just a bunch of ideas that somebody over in India cooked up.

The twigs and branches of the path really do help you cross the flood, and on the other side, on the far shore, it really is safe. Things over there are not inconstant, they’re not stressful, they’re not not-self. They’re not self either. The whole question of self and not-self doesn’t apply, but you use the Dhamma—as they say in some passages in the Canon, you use the Dhamma to get beyond dhammas of all kinds.

So, whatever is useful, realize that it’s makeshift. You hold onto it to the extent that it’s helpful, but you also learn when to let go. And don’t be surprised that you’re going to be holding onto some aggregates. You’ll even be clinging. This is the clinging that takes you beyond clinging, the craving that takes you beyond craving. These twigs and branches have their uses.

And the whole purpose of the path is so you can develop your discernment to get that use and, through your discernment, to realize the purpose, the meaning of all this, for yourself. That’s when you can let everything go.