

Distinctions That Make a Difference

July 10, 2021

One of the hardest parts of learning a second language is training your ear to hear distinctions in sounds that don't make a difference in your native language but do make a difference in the language you're trying to learn. As when you learn Thai: There's a difference between ๑ and ๑ , a difference between ๑ and ๑ , which we don't hear in English—in fact, we're trained *not* to hear the distinctions—but, if you're going to speak Thai, you have to hear the distinctions.

The same principle applies in learning the Dhamma. The Buddha makes distinctions between things that we don't ordinarily see as distinct; we tend to glom them all together. A thought, a perception, a feeling, our awareness of these things all tend to be one glob, and we hang onto all of them. But if we want to understand them—understand *why* we're hanging on—we have to make distinctions.

We hang on because of clinging. And we cling because we crave. And craving is very precise; it has its location. In fact, craving creates locations at times.

There's that passage where the Buddha asks, "Something you've never seen: Do you have any craving there?" And you might say, Yes, there are places in the world you haven't seen—Torres del Paine, Mount Fitz Roy—and you'd very much like to go there. But that's not craving *at* the object; the craving is at your image of the object in the mind, or pictures you've seen of it. That's where the craving is located. You need to make these distinctions if you're going to understand the allure of the things you hold on to.

It's because we glom things together that, say, when we fall in love with someone, often we're falling in love with the perception of the person and not with the person him- or herself. As you get together, you find that the person is not the perception; you're having to live with the actual person, and it's something very different from what you anticipated. We fool ourselves all the time like this.

This is precisely where we have to learn the Buddha's vocabulary. He talks about the different places where craving can be located: He goes through the aggregates; the act of directed thought can be an object of craving; the act of evaluation; craving itself can be an object of craving; perceptions; feelings. And, in order to get some dispassion for the craving, you have to see precisely where it is. So it's good to learn the Buddha's vocabulary.

When he talks about the five aggregates, you start out by learning them as concepts. But you really get to know them as you practice concentration. This is one of the reasons why concentration is necessary for discernment, because when you're concentrated, you've got all the aggregates right here. You're doing them as part of the concentration.

Say you're focused on the breath: The breath is body, or form. It's part of the wind element in the body.

Together with the breath there will either be pleasant feelings or unpleasant feelings. You're trying to focus on the pleasant feelings and nurture them—give rise to them and keep them there.

Then the perceptions—the images you hold in mind of the breath: When the breath comes into the body, where does it come in? How far does it go? You'll find that different ways of imaging the breath to yourself will have an impact on how well you can settle down, and also will have an impact on the feelings that you create.

Then there's the directed thought and evaluation: When you're talking to yourself about the breath, analyzing it, and evaluating how well it's flowing, and asking yourself, "How could you do it better?" that's fabrication.

Then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

In order to do concentration properly, you have to have a hands-on mastery of these aggregates. That's how you get to know them. When you get to know them in a hands-on way like this, then you can be more precise in noticing: "Where are you focused?"

Are you focused on the breath? Or are you focused on the feeling you associate with the breath? This will have an impact on how your concentration goes. If, when the breath gets comfortable, you focus on the sense of comfort and forget the breath, you begin to zone out. So, just to master concentration, you need to see these things distinctly and be very clear about where you are.

As you get better and better at focusing on the breath, you begin to realize: Your perception of the breath is one thing; the breath itself is something else. There are times in the concentration where everything gets melded together, but, as the Buddha said, if you want to understand things, you have to see them as separate.

So once there's a sense of well-being that comes from the Oneness, then you allow things to settle out. Ajaan Lee has a nice image for this. He says it's like subjecting rock to different temperatures. You raise the temperature to the point where the tin melts, and the tin flows out. Raise it a little further: The lead melts,

the lead flows out. A little further: The silver melts and flows out. Higher still: Finally the gold melts and flows out.

In the same way, when you go from the first to the second jhana, verbal fabrication falls away. You go from the third to the fourth: Bodily fabrication—the in-and-out breath—falls away. You go from the fourth jhana to the infinitude of space: The sense of form dissolves away. You go to the state of neither perception nor non-perception: Perceptions fall away.

So, as the mind settles in, these things separate out, and you begin to see clearly exactly where you were focused—where your craving was focused.

Because that's when you can do the analysis that comes with seeing things arise, seeing them pass away, seeing their allure. If you can't precisely locate your craving, it's going to be hard to see the allure that's pulled you in. But when your perceptions are more precise, you can see precisely, "Oh, this is it. This is why I go for that." Then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks. That's when you can develop dispassion and find your escape.

So, to get out, you need to see the territory clearly—see the processes clearly. It's like being presented with a wall that's filled with different doors, and knowing precisely which door to go through. That leads to another wall with many doors; you know which door to go through. You learn this through trial and error, but after a while you can make your way through the maze, because you see that there actually are choices, and the choices make a difference.

So try to learn the Buddha's vocabulary, both by reading what he has to say and by trying it out in your practice, so that you get an intuitive sense of what the five aggregates are, what the six sense spheres are, what the six properties are. Because you can have craving for any of these things, it's good to know precisely where your craving is located.

We like to think of the Forest Ajaans as being kind of rough and ready, coming straight to the practice with a minimum of education. But even though they may not have been able to speak or read Pali, they did know the vocabulary, and knowing the vocabulary enabled them to sort things out in their minds.

So even though to know the Dhamma it's not necessary to be able to read the old languages, still it's really useful to get the Buddha's vocabulary in your head, and get an intuitive sense for it—to see the distinctions that it points to, so that you can be very clear about where your craving is. When you're clear about that, then you know precisely what to abandon. You can be clear about where your clinging is, and you know what to comprehend. You get a clear sense of the elements of the path, so you can develop them properly.

So, when the Buddha's making distinctions, regard them as distinctions that really make a difference—because, when you use them properly, you can make a difference in your own mind.