

Papañca

August 18, 2022

As you sit here focused on the breath, you get some hands-on experience in seeing how the mind relates to objects. On the one hand, you have the object that you intend to stay with: the breath. And you've got to ask yourself: Where are you in relation to the breath? And what does it mean to keep the breath in mind?

On the other hand, there are other thoughts that come up: the distractions that might pull you away from the breath. If you do your best to keep those thoughts at bay, you learn about the process of how thoughts form. In the beginning, it's very easy to be here with the breath and then find yourself someplace else, far away, and not know how you got there. You have to come back to the breath and make up your mind to watch for the signs of how you're going to wander away the next time. With practice, you begin to see how many steps there are in the process, how the mind stirs a little bit to go someplace else, and then stops, and then starts up again.

This is where you start seeing the committee of the mind in action. Some of the members have decided they're going to leave. As soon as you're not fully alert, fully aware, they're going to take off. Then they pretend that they didn't make that decision. But it has been made. It's simply waiting for the chance. Then another stirring comes into the mind, and sometimes it's hard to say whether it's a stirring in the mind or in the body. It's right at the area where the two meet. Sometimes the mind will slap a perception on it, saying, "This is a thought about that or a thought about this," and then run with it.

As you get used to trying to stop the process as quickly as you can, you begin to see the different stages it goes through. One of the stages you want to watch out for is the one where it slaps on the thought, "I am the thinker. I'm the one thinking this." That's when your thinking turns into what the Buddha called *papañca*. It's a hard word to translate. A scholar back in the seventies came up with the translation "conceptual proliferation." Then the Vipassana community seized on that interpretation to describe any time your mind is totally running amuck, attacking you with thoughts proliferating all over the place.

But when you look at how the Buddha describes the process, it has nothing to do with how much thinking there is or how overwhelming the thinking is. It has more to do with thinking that's based on certain perceptions and certain categories of thought, starting with that idea: "I am the thinker." From there it goes into things that you are, things that you're not, things that exist in the world,

things that don't exist in the world, what's yours, what's not yours. And from there, the Buddha says, you get into conflict, because once there's an "I am"—you create it out of your sense of attachment to your body, to your feelings, your perceptions, your thought-constructs, acts of consciousness—that "I am" has to feed. It needs a world in which to feed. The problem is, you run into other beings, and they're laying claim to the same parts of the world, so there's bound to be conflict.

One of the things we're trying to learn how to do as we practice is to see this process in action and to disentangle ourselves from it. Whenever there's an "I am" and a world in which that "I am" exists, you've got a state of becoming. And you can't just decide, "Okay, I've had enough of this becoming. Stop it." These things, once you've got them going, are going to last for a while, based on whatever the desire is that got them going to begin with. In the meantime, other desires come up. The mind builds a sense of self around those desires, and a sense of who you are as the thinker of those desires, and the world in which those desires can be fulfilled. That's a whole other state of becoming. The mind's really good at creating these things.

The problem is that, the Buddha said, if you try to destroy these states of becoming, you're still thinking in terms of becoming, and so it creates more becoming. The way out is to try to look at the processes that give rise to the state of becoming, that lead up to that point where you slap on the thought of "I am." This is why the Buddha taught dependent co-arising and all those lists of causes that are variations on dependent co-arising.

They give you some guidance in looking at these things simply as processes. Like right now, try to look at your meditation as a process. Just as you looked at your mental disturbances as processes, look at what you're doing as you stay focused on the breath—this is a process, too. You don't have to think about who's doing this. And you don't say there's nobody doing this, because that gets you involved in wrong view. Just try to avoid that question entirely. See: What's the action? What's the result of the action?

This is why the Buddha expresses the four noble truths as cause and effect, or path and fruit. There's a path of action that leads someplace. You don't have to ask who's walking the path. Just follow it, and you learn to see these things as processes before they turn into states of becoming. This is how you can get out of that kind of thinking.

Now, this sounds kind of abstract, very analytical. But actually, as you notice, as you're sitting here with the breath, you can get very intimate with your breath. You get very intimate with your sense of the body as you feel it from within. And

you can do this without needing to have a sense of who's doing the practice. Just get interested in the breath, interested in different ways of breathing, different ways of adjusting the breath, looking at the role that perception plays in this as you try to find a perception that's calming, that allows the comfortable breath energy to spread through the body, making you more and more sensitive to the whole body, all the way up to the skin, and then beyond the skin to the energy cocoon that surrounds you.

As you get interested in this, the question of who's doing this fades back into the background. It will come up when at times when you find yourself having trouble doing this, and part of the mind immediately turns on itself. It says, "Look, you're a bad meditator," or "You can't do this. You can't even stay with the breath for more than five breaths"—that kind of thinking. Okay, that's when you are having a *papañca* attack. It's because there's the "I" in there. This is where you have to learn good ways to talk to yourself, to pull yourself out of that kind of thinking, because the conflict that comes from *papañca* is not just conflict with other beings. It creates conflict inside as well.

But as you get more and more interested simply in the breath and awareness as it relates to the breath, you're thinking in different terms. As you get more and more skilled at this, the sense of whoever's doing this begins to fade into the background. It's just the question of which actions are good, which actions are not, which actions are helpful with getting the mind to settle down and stay settled down, or to get it to point to deeper states of concentration: Think in *those* terms. You find yourself getting very intimate with the breath without having to have a sense of "you" being there. There's just the awareness. And as I said, there's a sense of being very intimate with this. So it's not dry analysis.

At the same time, remind yourself: There's a noble reason for why you're doing this. As long as there's *papañca* going on, there will be conflict. You leave this body, and you're going to latch on to another one. You'll be the thinker in that body. And then that body's going to have to have food, and it will get into conflict again. This process just keeps going on and on and on as you have to fight other beings for food. Think of the Buddha's image of all those fish in the stream: The water's drying up, and everybody's fighting for that last little bit of water. They create a lot of karma as they fight one another. Yet then they're all going to die. It's not the case that the winners will have water forever.

You look at the world, and there's just constant conflict. So your gift to the world is that you're going to get out. Meanwhile, if you find what the Buddha said is a deathless happiness, it's not as if you're just snuffing yourself out and going

away into nothingness. You're finding something better: a type of happiness that doesn't require that you lay claim to anything.

So this practice we're doing here is not just an exercise in stress reduction. It's a gift to yourself, a gift to the world. You're trying to pull yourself out of this constant conflict. Maybe you can't stop all the conflicts in the world, but you can be one less person to be involved in those conflicts, because no matter how much you try to improve the world, it's never going to be good enough.

We sometimes think that in that puddle of fish, maybe if you gave them a bigger puddle, made sure there was water that didn't end, the fish would be happy. But as the Buddha said, look at one person's sensual desires. It would have to rain gold coins, and still that wouldn't be enough to provide for one person's desires. Once you get this, you want that. Once you get that, your ideas expand even further. It's like the case of a famous politician in Thailand who was very wealthy, and everyone assumed that once he became prime minister, there would be no corruption, because he already had all the money that anyone could imagine anyone would want. Well, it turned out that his imagination was bigger than theirs. He wanted to be wealthy not only on the national level, but also the international level. In other words, there's no bounds to sensual desire.

In addition to the image of the rain of gold coins, the Buddha once said that if you have two mountains the size of the Himalayas, totally made out of gold, that still wouldn't be enough for one person's desires. So there's no way you're going to find completion or satisfaction in the world. The world is a world of conflict, because everybody's doing their *papañca*-ing, you might say. It's only when you stop thinking in this way that you can pull yourself out.

So you have to look into your mind and see: Where are you laying claim to things? You trace it back, and it goes to this perception: "I am the thinker." As you're thinking it, it seems innocent enough. But the implications grow, and you start laying claim to more and more. So you've got to look into this habit of laying claim to things. See if you can simply be with the processes in the mind, processes in the body, without having to lay claim to them. Just try to do them well. And you'll find that that's the way out.