The Aggregates as Tools

July, 2001

There was one time when someone came to John Lee with a problem. His friends had been making fun of him, saying, “Hey, if your body is not self and your feelings are not self, why won’t you let us hit you?” He didn’t know how to answer. And then John Lee’s answer was, “Well, because it’s not mine, this body, I have to take very good care of it before I give it back.” It may sound a little flippant, but it’s a very good answer. Before we let go of these aggregates that we’re holding on to, we have to learn how to use them well. This is a step in the practice that a lot of people forget about, but it’s very important. We’re told that form, which is the form of the body, feelings, perceptions, thought, constructs, and consciousness are not self. We tend to cling to them and identify them as our self in one way or another, either as us or as ours. And we know at some point we’re going to have to let go of them. But we don’t understand how. And we miss the important part in between. If you’re going to let go of them, you have to understand them. And before you can understand them, you have to learn to use them. The definition for clinging is delight and passion for each of these things. In other words, we tend to treat them as ends in and of themselves. We want a particular feeling. We want to have particular ideas. We want our body to be a particular way, as an end in and of itself. That’s where we suffer, because they can’t be ends. When the Buddha defines the aggregates, he defines them as verbs. The body deforms, feeling feels, perception perceives, thought constructs, constructs, consciousness cognizes. They’re activities, they’re verbs. You can’t take a verb as an end in and of itself. But because we don’t understand these things, we have to explore them. That’s a lot of what the meditation is about, is exploring them, learning how to treat them not as ends in and of themselves, but as tools. Take feeling and perception, for instance. We perceive the breath in the present moment. We give it a label. We say, “This sensation is a breath sensation.” Then we learn how to adjust those perceptions so as to give rise to a sense of pleasure. Now, the pleasure is not an end in and of itself, but it becomes a tool. It becomes part of the path. When there’s pleasure, the mind can settle down. When the mind can settle down, it can see things more clearly. So we learn how to treat these perceptions and these feelings as tools on the path. A lot of our skill comes in learning how to play with them, how to experiment with them, like we’re talking about today. Sometimes when you’re dealing with parts of the body, that feel tense or blocked, try to conceive them in a different way from the way you happen. There are parts of the body that we tend to identify as breathing sensations, and there are parts of the body we tend to identify as the part of the body we have to contract in order to get the breath in. Try changing your conception. Maybe that part of the body you’re contracting, maybe that sensation is actually part of the breath, but it’s a warped breath sensation now. So learn to think of it as a place where the breath flows. It’s part of the breathing in itself. Sometimes just that change in perception will change the way that part of the body feels. And in seeing that connection, you’ve learned something important about the relationship between what they call name and form, in other words, mental events and physical events. Sometimes the physical events impact the mental events. Sometimes the mental events impact the physical ones. The way to see that, though, is to experiment. The same with that other issue we were discussing today about when you go from form to formlessness. When the breath gets very, very still, you begin to realize that a lot of your sense of the body was through that movement of energy throughout the body. And as the breath energy begins to go more and more still, the sense of the body begins to grow vague. The lines defining the body get less and less defined. It’s almost as if the body were a fog. Then you learn to focus, instead of on the form of the body, on the space between the little droplets in the fog that permeates the body and spreads out in all directions. Again, this is a mental label. There’s a passage in the text where the Buddha talks about the various levels of concentration, through the sphere of nothingness, as perception attainments. In other words, you give a label to your sensations. It’s just a matter of learning how to label them in a skillful way. So you take these labels, which as the aggregate or clinging aggregate of perception, are suffering and stress, and you change your attitude. You change the way you approach them. Instead of ends in a chain of themselves, things for which you feel delight and passion, you try to treat them as tools, as part of a causal chain. They become your path. From the first noble truth, they turn into the fourth noble truth. And you begin to gain more and more discernment into what’s going on in this complex siddhipat sitting right here. There’s a sutta where there’s a sick monk. His name is Girimananda. Ananda finds out about him, so he comes into the Buddha and asks the Buddha to go see the monk. Maybe by teaching him the Dharma, the monk might get better. And the Buddha instead sends Ananda to go. He teaches him ten perceptions, and each of these are perceptions that are part of the path. The perception of impermanence, the perception of not-self, the perception of the unattractiveness of the body, the perception that no world at all, whatever world you might conceive of, is really worth delighting in. And it finally ends up with breath, mindfulness of breathing, as the tenth perception, the tenth sannyāsa. So as we’re working on the breath here, it’s a kind of sannyāsa, it’s a kind of perception. You’re labeling the breath. You’re recognizing which sensations are comfortable ones, which ones are uncomfortable ones. You recognize which approaches work, which approaches don’t work. This is all a matter of perception. It’s taking that kind of perception and learning how to use it effectively, use it skillfully as a tool. In other words, it’s no longer an end in and of itself. It becomes a tool. So any techniques that are helpful in getting the mind to settle down, any techniques, any ways of using your thought processes that are helpful in getting the mind to loosen up its attachments to gain understanding of things, these are all legitimate parts of the path. And you use them when they’re helpful, and you let them go when they’re not. Ultimately, even the most helpful tools you have to let go of. But you don’t let go of them until they’ve done their work. This is why there’s a teaching you see over and over in the forest teachings, that you don’t just drop the five khandhas. You take good care of them. You look after them. But you look after them the same way that a carpenter would look after his tools, because they’re useful, they’re helpful. Because without these tools, how could you gain concentration? How could you gain discernment? Where would the path be? It’s got to be right here. So if visualization helps, you use visualization. If it doesn’t help, you drop it. This is one of those things you just have to learn from trial and error. Ultimately, you get to the point where the work is done, then you put your tools aside. But until then, take good care of them and have a very open mind about what might be useful and what might not be useful. We hear so many lessons about meditation, “Don’t allow the mind to think. Don’t get into concepts.” Okay, well, sometimes you have to think. Sometimes there have to be concepts in order to help you over an obstacle. It’s all a matter of your learning how to sharpen your powers of perception so you can see what’s useful, what’s not useful, what’s helpful, what’s not helpful, what gives good results, and what gives bad results. Again, that can only be learned through trial and error. That’s why meditation takes time. That’s why it can’t be just sort of a packaged experience. You have a weekend of meditation or a week of meditation. It’s as if that were just an experience that you can get over a weekend. It’s a living practice, something you do day in, day out. You come for a retreat like this to sharpen the tools that you can then develop in your daily life. Until someday when you find you can just let the tools go. So there are these three steps. One is recognizing what you’re holding on to as an end in and of itself. Two, learning how to use it as a tool. And then finally, learning how to let the tools just fall away after they’ve been mastered.

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