Aggregates as a Path, The

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Our task as we meditate is to take these aggregates, this pile of stuff we have here, our sense of the form of the body, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness, and make them into something, make them into a path. Otherwise it’s just lots of little heaps of things, and for the most part the heaps of things weigh us down. We have to change the relationship from being on the underside of these heaps. We have to put ourselves on top and learn how to use them as tools, learn how to construct them into something that really is worthwhile. When the Buddha talks about the path, that’s what we’re doing. We’re taking the aggregates and we’re making them into a path. It’s like a pile of bricks that load us down. We’d learn how to take the bricks off of our chest, off of our hearts, and put them on the road and turn them into a path that we can walk on, like when we’re practicing concentration. We have form and feeling and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness, just like everybody else. But we turn them into a state of good concentration. The form is the form of the body, which we sense when we’re sitting here with our eyes closed. We sense it as energy, which is the breath; warmth, which is the fire element or the fire property; coolness, which is the water property; and then solidity, which is the earth property. We take these properties and we make them the object of our concentration. We focus on the breath, because that’s the most important of the elements, the most important of the properties. It’s our most immediate sensation of the body. We tend to think of the body as something solid that we’re immediately in touch with, and then the breath comes in and goes out. But actually, if it weren’t for the breath, we wouldn’t be aware of the body at all. It’s through the movement of the energy that we have a sense of the body to begin with. So it’s our primary contact. It’s the point where the mind and the body meet. So I take this sense of form and we make it an object of meditation. Then we focus on it in such a way that we perceive, we label it as breath, rather than labeling it as “my body,” or “a nice body,” or “a bad body,” or whatever else we may feel about the body. We just say, “There’s breath.” We relate every sensation we have in the body to the breathing. That’s perception. We make the breathing comfortable to create a feeling of comfort and ease. So there is the aggregate of feeling. In the process of doing that, that’s fabrication. Then we’re aware of it all. So all the aggregates are here. But instead of being a pile of bricks weighing on the heart, they become a path that we can walk on. This is the genius of the Buddha, taking these things that make us suffer and making them a path to the end of suffering. He realized that we can be more skillful in the way we approach our experience. That’s the first question he has you ask when you approach a teacher. “What’s skillful? What’s unskillful? What, when I do it, will be for my long-term happiness and benefit? What, when I do it, will be for my long-term suffering?” There are a lot of assumptions in those questions. One is that your actions really do make a difference. Secondly, that you can train them to be more skillful. Thirdly, that you can get skillful to the point where you really do get to long-term happiness. If you can’t make those assumptions, then there’s no use in meditating. You just sit there and kind of wait for grace to come, or wait for some outer being or some outer force or things just to happen. As a result, you miss out on all the important things that the Buddha talked about. What was his awakening? He awakened to this principle of causality, that some of our experience is shaped by the past, but it’s also shaped by our present actions. We can pay attention to those present actions and the results and make adjustments. We can make adjustments all the way to a point where the mind opens up to the deathless. That’s what the Buddha awakened to, and that’s the basic principle of his teachings. Everything else grows out of those very simple facts. He wasn’t there getting a sense of oneness with everything or just kind of tripping out. He was really paying careful attention to what he was doing. He learned some important things about the principle of causality. He learned how it can be used to create true happiness. We use those principles in our practice. You take the raw materials that you’ve got and you learn how to use the principle of causality to your advantage. You’ll be observant, watching three things. One is what you’re given here in the meditation. When you sit down to meditate, what do you have that you’re focusing on? Sometimes the body’s in a good shape, sometimes it’s not in good shape. Sometimes the mind feels in a good mood to meditate, otherwise not. That’s the given. As well as all the unintentional thoughts that come popping into your mind, that’s a given as well. The difference you can make is the intentions you have right now. What are you going to do with that raw material? Pay attention to your intentions and then notice the results that come about. If you’re alert to all three of these things, you’ll start making a difference in your practice. You’ll begin to notice, this way of breathing is not helpful, that way of breathing is helpful. When I focus here, these are the things that happen. When I focus there, these are the things that happen. You’re working on developing a skill. To master this skill requires respect. One is respect for the teachings, the people who’ve gone before you on this path. Secondly is respect for the principle of cause and effect. You can’t just sit here and wish for things to go well. You have to actually settle down and notice how to cause and effect operate in the mind. Which mental movement is an intention? Which mental movements are unintentional? Which things are the results? Which things are the causes? What you do is you take your respect for the principles of cause and effect, for others, and you also have to have respect for yourself, respect for your ability to observe. So you take your respect for the people who’ve gone before you on the path, the Buddha, the Noble Sangha, your respect for yourself, and then you test it against the principle of what actually happens in practice. If you treat all these things with respect, you find that the practice develops the right balance. If you’re missing one of them, it’s going to go out of balance. In other words, if you just respect what you read in the books and you’re understanding what you read in the books, but don’t really test it in the practice, you’re missing something. You’re not going to develop the skill. If you go simply by what you think must be the right way to do things and don’t listen to anybody, don’t really look at the principle of cause and effect, that’s going to be very unbalanced. Or if you just go by what you observe without checking it against what other people have observed, you can go off the track that way as well. So there’s a need to balance all three of these things and to treat all three of them with respect. You’re really there to learn. This is what the meditation is all about. It’s learning. It’s not just barging in, “Well, this must be that way. That must be this way.” It’s also not just letting things happen on their own. You’ve got to make a difference. When they talk about learning theory, they point out that if we didn’t have any input into things, there would be no way that we could learn anything. The world would just be a passing show, flashes of red, yellow, blue, green, pain, pleasure. If we were totally passive, there would be nothing we would learn. We would just be observing, like somebody watching a TV. Totally passive. And there would be nothing that we would learn from it. You have to make a difference here, make a difference there, and see what happens. And have respect for the fact that sometimes you anticipate, “Well, if I do this, I’ll get good results.” But the results don’t come out what you thought they might be. Learn from that. Be open to that. There’s openness, there’s willingness to experiment, there’s willingness to make mistakes that you can learn from. That’s how a skill is developed. There are lots of elements that come into play here. There’s right understanding, understanding the principle of causality, what you’re doing, what its potential is, what the raw material you have to work with is. In other words, we’re taking these khandhas that otherwise would be a huge weight on us, and we turn them into something good. You know the path isn’t perfection. After all, it’s a path to the end of suffering. It’s not the end of suffering itself. And there are going to be ups and downs, times when it’s easy, times when it’s hard. But as long as you’re determined to make whatever comes your way into part of the path, you’ve got the right attitude, the right understanding. And the attitude requires respect as well, the realization that we’ve all got a lot to learn. If we haven’t reached the end of suffering yet, there’s still a lot for us to learn. There’s that famous story about when the Buddha went through six years of austerities, convinced this had to be the way. And it took six years of getting nowhere for him to finally realize, “Wait a minute, I can open up his mind to the possibility that maybe there’s another way.” And there are different versions of the story. Some say that he overheard a woman walking by singing a song about a lute that was tuned too tight, a lute that was tuned too loose. And he took it to heart. Other versions say that he simply remembered he had a childhood memory. He was trying to learn from things that had happened in his childhood. In other words, he was open to different possibilities and the willingness to try them out. That’s what got him on the right path. But the openness wasn’t enough. He also had to test things. When the Buddha is talking to the galamas, everyone picks up on the fact that he says, “Okay, don’t go by the scriptures. Don’t go by what your teacher says. Don’t go by what your teacher says.” Now, he doesn’t say to throw the scriptures out or to throw the teacher’s advice out. He says simply that you can’t take that alone. You look at two things. One, in your own practice. What leads to harm? What leads to benefits? Put things into practice. Secondly, notice what wise people have to say. Weigh those two together. And when you’re sensitive, you’re sensitive to that balance. Then you’ll find the middle way. It’s where everything turns into a path.

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