Aggregates as Actions

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Now I’ll chant where the Buddha has you reflect every day. I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. Whatever is dear and appealing to me, I’m going to be separated from. And then I’ve got this karma. You may wonder why the Buddha has you reflect on these things every day. They sound very depressing. But it’s not all depressing. The first four reflections are for developing a sense of sanghvega, to remind you that not all is well. You’ve got problems. Everybody has these same problems. In fact, in the discourse where the Buddha has you reflect on these things, he has you reflect even further that everybody is subject to the same problems. But the fifth reflection on karma is one that actually indicates the way out. Even though we may have done bad things in the past, we always have the opportunity to do good things now. And the good things here can be skillful and two-levels. One is simply the good actions that provide for better conditions as we keep wandering on. But there’s also a kind of karma which, as the Buddha said, leads to the end of karma, action that leads to the end of action. In other words, to awakening, to true freedom. So it is something we can act on as we meditate right here. This is a kind of action. We may be sitting very still, trying to keep the mind very still, but there’s mental activity involved in this. Each time you wander off, you have to bring the mind back. So you’re focused on the breath. There has to be the intention to stay with the breath. That’s a kind of action. And then the mindfulness that keeps reminding you to stay with the breath, and the alertness that watches the breath coming in and going out. Those are actions as well, actions of the mind. So it’s not the case that when you meditate you try to make your mind like a stone that plumps down into the water and stays very still. It requires activity to get the mind to gather its forces and to stay concentrated on one thing. And then as you get more and more proficient at it, a lot of the activity can fall away. In John Fung’s images of pouring concrete, you need the form that you pour the concrete into. If there’s no form, as you pour the concrete, it just spreads all over the place, and you don’t get what you want. But if you have the form, and you pour the concrete into it, then after a while the concrete finally solidifies, and then you can take the form away. And all these activities of keeping the mind with the breath, reminding yourself to stay with it, catching it as it goes out, bringing it back in, these are the form. And it’s not the case that you’ll always have to do this, but it’s a normal part of concentration practice. And it’s an essential part, because as we work on concentrating the mind, we get to see the activities of the mind as they’re happening. Because in addition to the mindfulness and alertness, there’s also the quality of ardency, where you really want to do it well. In other words, when the mind slips off, bring it right back. Don’t let it dawdle around. But as you bring it back, have skill in the way you bring it back. Don’t come back with a lot of self-incrimination or a lot of anger. Just remind yourself that this is a normal part of the practice. The mind that’s been used to wandering is going to keep wandering. So you’ve got to keep at it, keep at it, until it finally gets the message. But to get the message, you also have to have good reasons for it to come back. And that’s why we work on keeping the breath comfortable. As long as we’re with the breath, try to figure out what way is most comfortable to breathe in, to breathe out. Long breathing, short breathing, heavy or light, fast or slow. You can either experiment with different kinds of breathing, or simply pose that question to the mind. What kind of breathing would feel best in the stomach right now? So breathe for a while, focusing your attention on the stomach. How about the chest? Pose that question and see how your breathing responds. Think of nourishing the chest area with the way the muscles expand and contract as you breathe in and breathe out. What feels best in the chest area? You can go to the shoulders, into the head, down the back, into the hips, into the legs, or down the shoulders and out the arms. Explore the breath energy in the body. And as you do this, you find that the mind is more and more willing to stay here. So as we still the mind, it does require activity. Because this is important. If we’re going to learn to develop the skills, the action that leads to the end of action, we really have to be very alert to what we’re doing and the results of what we’re doing. Almost everything in the Buddhist teachings is about action. Even some of his terms that sound like “things” are actually activities as well. When he talks about suffering, he defines it as the five clinging aggregates. And it sounds like you’ve got this big pile of gravel in your head, and you’re trying to find some way of throwing the gravel out. Well, it’s not gravel. These are activities, activities of the mind. That’s the form. And your perception of form is an activity of the mind. Of course, there is the solid body made out of earth, water, wind, and fire. It’s the result of your past activities. As the Buddha said, your body is old karma. You’re sitting here with your old karma. Then it manifests as an activity. Things are changing. It’s not that the Buddha celebrates change. He just notices that’s what’s happening. And then as you cling to it, you’re going to suffer. You want things to be a certain way, and sometimes they are, but not always. And ultimately it’s going to change in a way that you don’t like. That’s one of the reasons why we want to get beyond this. This is why it is suffering. Instead you’re feeling pleasure, feeling pain, or feeling neutral feelings that are neither pleasure nor pain. That, too, is an activity of the mind. Perception is when you put a label on something. You see a sight. You see a bird. You see the sky. You see a cloud. You see a person. There’s going to be a label that appears in the mind. And then from there, you’re going to create thoughts, fabricate thoughts, or what the Buddha calls fabrication, sankara. This is the intentional element. It turns out the intentional element is in all of them. There’s an intention to create a sense of form. There’s an intention to have feelings. There’s an intention to have perceptions. You take the raw material that comes from your past karma and you turn it into the actual experience of these activities. And then there’s consciousness, which is actually another act, as well, the act of cognizing. The Buddha says that when you cling to these activities, i.e., keep doing them over and over and over again, there’s going to be suffering. But how do you stop doing this? You can’t just say, “Okay, stop, everybody,” because that itself is one of these activities. That, too, is a fabrication. But as the Buddha said, because these things are activities, you can see them under the framework of karma. And there is an activity that leads to the end of activity. There are aggregates that lead to the end of aggregates, which is what we’re doing right now as we’re trying to concentrate the mind. You’re focusing on the breath, which is part of the physical aggregate. The breath is an activity. It’s a kind of fabrication, bodily fabrication, because it’s the breath that keeps the body going. And it’s the breath that allows you to sense the body. When we’re talking about breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s also the energy that flows through the body. And that energy is what allows you to sense the body to begin with. If it weren’t flowing in your hands, you wouldn’t have any sense of your hands at all. If it weren’t flowing in your feet, you wouldn’t know your feet. Energy is your primary experience of the body. So we focus on that. And we focus on it in a way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. So there’s your feeling aggregate. We hold to the perception of breath. That’s the perception aggregate. Learn how to perceive your whole body as breath energy. And the fabrication is that you direct your thoughts to the breath and that you evaluate the breathing and evaluate how well you’re doing. That’s the fabrication aggregate. And the consciousness aggregate is that activity of being aware of all of this. That’s kind of the basic sensation of the body, of the various other aggregates as well. So what you’re doing is you’re taking those aggregates and you’re turning them into a path. So instead of just dropping them, you learn how to use them skillfully. Because if you want to understand any kind of action, the best way to do it is to try to get as skillful as possible. If you want to understand baseball, you try to get really skillful at the activities of baseball. If you want to understand dance, if you want to understand any activity, any skill, you’ve got to get skillful at it yourself. Because it’s only when you’re skillful at these activities that you really understand them. And then you can begin to see exactly how you let them go so that the Buddha doesn’t tell us just to drop things. We have to develop skillful aggregates as we concentrate the mind. You talk about the factors of jhana. You’ve got directed thought, i.e., you’re focusing on the breath. Then there’s evaluation. You’re evaluating how well the breath is going. And you also evaluate how well your mind is staying with the breathing. And if you notice that you’re having trouble focusing on the breathing, you may want to change the way you breathe or change the place where you’re focused. You may find that you’re focusing too hard or your focus is not hard enough. You’ve got to find a right balance here. So there’s skill involved in mastering these activities. And it’s in the skill that you really understand them. The results are one that you get more and more concentrated, because it feels good to stay here. And John Lee makes a clear distinction between the cause elements in jhana and the results, but the distinction is not quite that clear. In other words, you start by thinking about and evaluating the breath and try to stay focused on it as the one object of your attention. That begins to give rise to a sense of ease, a rapture. A rapture can be sensed in many ways. Sometimes it’s intense, and sometimes it’s just a simple feeling of refreshment, coolness. The body feels full. Maybe it’s in one part, maybe in the whole body. If you find it feeling full in one part, see if you can allow that sense of fullness to spread around. But then once the fullness is spread, then it’s easier to stay focused. The pleasure and the rapture make the direct thought and evaluation easier, make it easier to stay focused. Because it feels really good, it feels really nourishing. And as you’re doing this, you’re getting practical experience with those aggregates. The term “the aggregates” and the way they’re defined can sometimes make them seem very foreign. But as you get hands-on experience with actually doing them, as we’re working right here, you do them in mindfulness. You do them in concentration practice. You get a better and better sense of what they are. You see the intentional element in them. And it’s this way that they become a path. And this is the karma that leads to the end of karma. Sometimes you hear that the Buddhist teachings on karma are something you just kind of tacked on. That is, essential insights really have nothing to do with karma. The karma is just something that was added because it was accepted by everybody in India at the time. And the Buddha didn’t have the imagination to question it. Well, that’s not the case at all. Karma simply means action. There are lots of different theories of action. The fact that India in the Buddhist time had lots of different ideas of whether action was real or unreal, or even if it was real, were you actually responsible for it, or was somebody else or some outside impersonal force? Did it have effects? Did you have freedom of choice? These were all issues that were up for grabs. Do your actions have an impact only in this lifetime, or do they go on for future lifetimes? These were some of the hot issues in the time of the Buddha. So it wasn’t the case that he just picked up an idea of karma and tacked it on. He’s talking about the end of suffering through your own actions, and so he had to explain action. So what we’re doing right now is a kind of karma. And as you get more and more skilled at the karma, you find that there are certain types of actions that you cling to. You keep doing them over and over again without really looking at whether they’re causing suffering or not. But as you get to know them better, you begin to comprehend them. Well, this is the activity that leads to suffering. Is this activity necessary? When you can see that it’s not and it’s leading to suffering, that’s when you let it go. As you work on developing concentration, the first things you let go of are the things that get in the way of concentration, the other activities of the mind that would pull you away. This is a long, gradual process. The Buddha’s images of the continental shelf off of India have a gradual slope that goes out very gently, and then there’s a sudden drop-off. Those are getting more and more sensitive to your actions, more and more sensitive to subtle levels of stress that you didn’t see before. First you deal with the blatant ones. Then, when the blatant ones have gone, you can begin to sense the more subtle ones. It’s like having a lot of noise outside. As I said, when there’s a lot of noise outside, you can’t hear yourself think. So you try to get rid of the noise. I was up on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon just last week, and it was amazing how still things were at night. There was no breeze, there were no sounds. There were no insects, birds, anything at all. You could start hearing the processes in your own body, the flow of the blood as it went through the ears. There are subtle things that are going on just by the fact that you’re sitting here in a body. It’s the same with the meditation. At first we have a lot of really loud noises in the mind, loud thoughts, loud ideas, loud thoughts, and we can’t hear the subtle ones. But as gradually you learn how to let go of the loud ones, then you become more sensitive to the subtle sounds, the subtle activities in the mind. As you get more sensitive to the subtle activities, you learn to get more sensitive to the subtle levels of stress, and you can start seeing the connections as you look for variations in the level of stress in the mind. And you begin to see that when the level of stress goes up, this activity was happening. When the activity stopped, the level of stress went down. Can you learn how to drop that activity, not do it, not label things in that way, not fabricate thoughts in that way? Because it’s the labeling and the fabrication that are the big issues. And as you see that those ways of labeling and fabricating things are really unnecessary, that’s when you drop them. So we’re developing skill in how we act around the mind, how we focus on things. And the more skillful we become, the more subtle our sensitivity, the more we see and are able to see exactly where it is that we’re continuing to act in ways that cause suffering. Because our basic reason for acting is that we want happiness, and yet we keep acting out of ignorance. It causes suffering for ourselves, stress for ourselves. And that’s what we want to see, that it’s not necessary. The meaning of the practice is what the Buddha told his son, Rahula. Notice your actions, notice your intentions before you act, notice the results of your actions while you’re acting, and then the long-term results when you’re done. Because as you develop more sensitivity to your actions, you begin to see your freedom of choice. And it’s in that freedom of choice that you’ll find a way to ultimately attain ultimate freedom. So whatever comes up in the meditation, ask yourself, to what extent was it an unintended result of past action, or what is it that you intended just now? Because it’s by focusing on your actions that these activities, these aggregates, these intentions, come to fruition. They all become the path to freedom.

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