

Don't Objectify

October 8, 2009

We focus on watching the breath so that ultimately the mind can watch itself, because the breath is probably the closest thing that you could focus on outside of the mind. In the beginning, it's a lot easier to stay with the breath than it is just to stay with awareness, because awareness is so large and vague and has such ill-defined boundaries. But the breath is something that has ins and outs. And it's also something you can practice with, you can develop skill with.

This is important because when you're watching the mind, you're not watching a *thing*. You're watching the activities of the mind. So it's good to get used to being with an activity like the breath and with an intentional activity like staying with the breath. And even though in the beginning the focus is on the breathing in and of itself, you can't help but notice how the mind is handling it, i.e., noticing when you've slipped away, noticing when you've come back, noticing when you get angry at yourself for slipping away, noticing when you tell yourself to have a more mature attitude, telling yourself that when it slips away, you can simply say, "Okay, it slipped away. Just bring it back again." Be firm but matter-of-fact.

So even though you're watching the breath, you can't help but notice things about the mind. And the mind is most interesting when it's trying to do something skillfully. So approach the breath as a skill. What way of breathing feels best for the body? What perception can you hold in mind that helps the breath become more comfortable? Sometimes we have some hidden ideas based on who-knows-what from who-knows-when on how the body breathes, so that when we consciously breathe, we force it into a particular pattern. You've got to notice how that pattern changes things from normal. Usually, in the beginning, it makes things worse. So you've got to play with your perception of the breath for a while.

Ajaan Lee gives a lot of different perceptions to play with. When you breathe in, you can think of the energy coming in the back of the head. Once it's come into the back of the head, you can allow it to go down the spine. Other times he recommends that you think of breath energy coming up the spine. The same with the front of the body: Sometimes you want to think of the breath energy going from the nose down to the navel, and other times you can think of it coming into the navel and going up. In other words, there's a lot to play with. Notice that the perception that would work for you, the perception that would feel best for you at any particular time, will differ from time to time. You can't just hold one perception in mind all the time. You need to have a whole range of them available.

This is how you become skilled. Breathing becomes more comfortable, and it's easier to settle down in the present moment. And the way you breathe can put the mind in a really good mood so that it's easier to let go of outside distractions. Your old friends—greed, aversion, and

delusion—can come knocking on the door, and you're not as interested in them as you used to be. You've got new friends. You've got directed thought and evaluation, you've got pleasure, you've got rapture or refreshment, singleness of mind. These are much more interesting friends and they're much more reliable.

So we focus on the breath, one, to give the mind a good place to stay, and then two, so that it can get some practice in being skillful. Then it can turn around and watch itself being skillful to see what's going on, to see what qualities of mind you have to develop like mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is simply keeping something in mind, like we're keeping the breath in mind right now. And it's interesting to watch: What does the mind do when it's being mindful? The same with alertness: How long can you stay alert to something before you lose focus, and how do mindfulness and alertness help each other along? In other words, mindfulness is what stitches together moments of alertness; alertness helps you to see when you're being mindful and when you're not. This is how you learn some interesting things about the mind.

But the important point is that you see everything in terms of activities. There is a type of thinking the Buddha calls *papañca*, which is translated in lots of different ways, such as proliferation, complication, differentiation. "Proliferation" is probably the worst of the translations, because it makes *papañca* a matter of the *quantity* of thinking—lots of thoughts running rampant—rather than the categories of thinking, which is the sense the Buddha gives to the word. Perhaps the best way of translating *papañca* is "objectification": You think in terms that make objects out of things. You first start by making an object out of yourself. The Buddha says the basis of all the different categories and classifications of objectification or *papañca* is, "I am the thinker." In other words, you've made an object of yourself. You're the thinker and that's your identity now.

Once you have an identity, you have to live in a certain world. And then you try to figure out what else you are besides the thinker. What is this thinker, where does this thinker live, where does he go, where does he come from? And you've got all these other thinkers out there, thinking in the same terms. It's no wonder the Buddha says objectification or *papañca* gives rise to conflict, because everybody else is objectifying themselves and you, too.

It's interesting to note that the types of questions that come from this kind of thinking are the ones the Buddha has you put aside. For example, the question of how to define yourself: He never asks that question, he never answers it. He points out, though, that your self—your sense of yourself—is an activity. It takes as its raw material the five aggregates, which also are activities. Even "form" the Buddha defines with a verb. He says it de-forms. In other words, once there's a form, then there's going to be change in it all time. Feeling feels, perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate, consciousness cognizes: That's how he defines these things. So they are activities too. And yet we turn them into things, latch onto them, turn these things into our self, and then they turn on *us*, entangling us in conflict.

The same with the world. He says that our basic ideas about the world come from our six senses, and then from the six senses we create our sense of the world in which our self lives—and that creates all kinds of problems. “What is the world? What is myself? How does it relate to the world?” And then there is the concern, “What if I become awakened, what’s going to happen to me? Do I have to leave the world? What’s that going to be like if I can’t get back to the world?” In other words, as we give reality to this “I am” and to the world, that gets us worried.

And it doesn’t help that Buddhist thought over the centuries has tended to go in the direction of objectification, too, saying that you don’t have a self to begin with. That doesn’t get around the problem of objectification, because some of the most basic questions of objectification are “Am I?” “Am I not?” “Do I have a self?” “Do I not have a self?” In trying to answer these questions, you come to the conclusion either that you have a self or you don’t have a self. And either way, it’s all a thicket of views, a writhing, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views. In other words, these thoughts assail you and get you all tangled up.

The way out is to look at all these things as kinds of karma. “When is it skillful to create a sense of self? What kind of self is it skillful to create and what kind of self is not? When is it best not to create a self?” The same with your sense of the world. “What sense of the world do you want to create? And when is it good not to hold that sense of the world in mind?” Even the word *samsara*, which we tend to think is a place, is an activity.

When you see everything as activities, then everything changes. You’re not going to worry so much about what’s going to happen to this thing, i.e., your self, or about whether you’re going to be separated from that range of things, i.e., the world. It’s more, “Here’s an activity that you’ve been doing for who knows how long and creating all kinds of suffering for yourself and for other people, and here’s your chance to stop doing that activity.” And when you stop doing that activity, it’s not a selfish thing. It’s not like you’re running away and leaving everybody stranded. You’re giving them an example as to how to act, because they’ve been doing the same kind of activity, too, and they are suffering just as you are. You show them that it’s possible that they don’t have to suffer.

So learn to look at things as activities, as actions. And you start right here: You’ve got the activity of the breath and you’ve got the activity of the mind trying to stay with the breath. Try to get to know these activities really well. As you get more and more skillful at this, you get a greater and greater sense of other areas in which the mind is skillful and unskillful, how its thinking can be used to drop the unskillful activities and continue with the skillful ones until finally you reach something that’s not an activity at all, and is not objectified at all. It’s just there. That, the Buddha says, is the ultimate happiness.

So you’re engaged in an activity here. You’re engaged in a skill with the purpose of seeing which other activities you’ve been engaged in that you didn’t even realize were activities. You thought they were things. You thought they were objects that were just givens, without

realizing how much you've done to create them and how you don't have to. That's the lesson all along the line. When you let go, it's not that you've been holding a thing in your hand. You've been doing an activity over and over and over again. And you've been doing it, one, because you don't see the stress and, two, you think you have to do it: You think you have to "self," you think you have to "world." But the Buddha points out the skill that you can develop where you don't have to do these things.

Then, when you see that these things are stressful and that you don't have to do them and you can behave in another way, or that you don't have to behave in any way at all: That's when you can let go. This is what letting go means. You see that the activity is harmful, stressful, a disturbance, and you see that you don't have to do it. That's a crucial factor. Otherwise, we can see things are stressful and yet still hold onto them because we think we have to do things that way, that there's no alternative. Even though we see the stress, we're not going to let go. But when we see that there's an alternative free of stress then, as the Thai ajaans say, you don't have to tell the mind to let go. It lets go on its own, as soon as it really sees that.

So realize that the things you're holding onto are not things, they're activities, and they're causing stress and you don't have to do them. Keep looking at them from that angle and you find it a lot easier to let go, and find the true happiness that the Buddha says is there when you let go.