

## *Isolating the Aggregates*

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As the Buddha says, one of the rewards of concentration is that you get to understand the aggregates: what's form, what's feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. You get to watch how they arise; you get to watch how they pass away. When you see them clearly, you can begin to see where you're clinging to them and how the clinging involves suffering. Only when you can pinpoint these things can you begin to let go. It's like having a room full of piles of stuff. Only when you sort things out can you begin to see which things have to be thrown away and which things should be kept.

One of the reasons why concentration helps this sorting out process is that you can see things clearly only when the mind is really still. But another reason is that you actually get hands-on practice in manipulating these things in the course of getting the mind to settle down in concentration. It's in the course of that hands-on practice that you can begin sorting them out.

It's like learning a physical skill—playing a musical instrument or dancing or learning a sport: You have to isolate your sense of the muscles you're using if you want to master the skill. If the skill involves jumping and you haven't been able to isolate the different muscles in your legs and the other parts of the body that you're going to employ, the jump is going to be clumsy. But as you get your own sense from within of which muscles are needed to make the jump graceful or make it go far or high, then you perform a lot better.

It's the same way with the meditation. We start out trying to focus on the breath and we put a lot of pressure on it, for fear that if we don't, the mind's going to slip away. Of course, a lot of the pressure on the breath has an effect on the circulation of fluids and energies in the body. You can create a lot of tension, a lot of tightness, a lot of discomfort doing it that way. And even all that tension and tightness doesn't prevent you from slipping off because there's more to concentration than just pressure. You've got all these other mental activities going on that you have to learn how to master as well. Pressure on its own isn't going to bring everything to stillness. You need to understand your raw materials.

To deal effectively with the breath, you have to get a better understanding of how you're sensing the body from within. This means looking at it in terms of the properties that make up the aggregate of form—earth, water, wind, and fire—along with space and consciousness or awareness. Ordinarily, when you breathe in, there's a feeling of pressure that you spread through the body. So when we say to spread your awareness through the body or to spread the breath through the body, your immediate reaction is to spread pressure through the body, but that's not going to get good results. In fact, it can create problems. You have to learn to separate these things out: Which sensations are the breath sensations that flow through the body without disturbing anything else at all, without exerting any pressure at all? If there's pressure, it's an affair of the breath element pushing the water element against the earth element. So you have to separate those out, so that you're spreading only the breath.

As for awareness, that's not something physical, so why should your awareness create pressure in the different parts of the body? Again, you have to learn how to spread your awareness without pushing the other properties at all.

When you can start to separate these things out, it gets a lot easier to settle down and stay with the breath, realizing that the breath energy doesn't have to be penned in by anything, doesn't have to exert pressure on anything. It can flow smoothly, lightly, all through the body, instantaneously. You don't have to drag it through during the in-breath. You don't have to squeeze it back out with the out-breath.

Some people say "I try to breathe down through the body through the in-breath and I only get as far as the neck or only as far as the middle of the back before I have to start breathing out." Well, that's a misconception of

the breath. You've probably been pushing some blood down there without realizing it—because there's an aspect to the breath that, as soon as you're aware that you've begun to breathe in, has already gone throughout the whole body. When you can learn how to detect that, it gets a lot easier to follow, to stay with the breath.

The same with feelings. We talk about giving rise to a feeling of pleasure with the breath, pleasure with the concentration. Where does it come from? You can't push pleasure into the body. You have to realize that there are lots of little centers in the body, little sensation centers, and all you have to do is give them a little bit of space, and then a feeling of what seems like neutrality to begin with will actually become pleasurable—if you give it space, if you're not pushing and pulling it around too much. Then the more consistently you can maintain that sense of space, the greater the pleasure grows. And you let it spread without pressure. It becomes rapture: a sense of refreshment, fullness. Sometimes it can get so intense that you feel like you're drowning. You're not. It's simply the fact that you're allowing these sensations to move through the body and the movement of the breath is not disturbing them. It's giving them space.

This means that sensations that you used to associate with the in-and-out breath are not happening. Now, some spot inside your mind may be setting up alarm signals, but you have to reassure it that everything is all right. The breath is still moving, it's still coming in, going out, but your old forced ways of breathing are not happening. When you learn that it was forced and unnecessary, you find that you can breathe in and out with a much greater feeling of rapture, fullness, and pleasure. It becomes something you can tap into at any time.

As you learn how to dissociate the breath from the pressure, dissociate your awareness from the pressure, you begin to see that what was holding you back from settling in properly was your original perception of the breath. Now that you've changed that perception, the new perception is what's helping to hold you comfortably in place. There's a mental label that just says, "breath," and there's a picture that goes along with the label. And as you've learned, some pictures about the breath are more conducive to concentration than others. So ask yourself: how do you conceive this process of breathing in the body? Can you readjust your perception, readjust your label, readjust your little mental picture in there to make it even more useful?

This is when Ajaan Lee advises you to think of all the pores in your skin opening up. When you focus really clearly and distinctly on that perception of the pores opening up, they really do open up. This is one of the ways in which the brain communicates with itself, communicates with the body: through these images. So bit by bit you're beginning to isolate out the act of perception as you find perceptions that are more and more conducive to settling down: what the Buddha calls "calming mental fabrications."

That brings us to the aggregate of fabrication itself. These are the questions you ask yourself about the breath. Your intention to stay here is also a fabrication. Your intention to change the breath is a fabrication. The way you evaluate how things are going: That's a fabrication as well. The more clearly you can isolate these functions, the more skillfully you can do them.

And then there's consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things. Consciousness comes in different types. There's focused consciousness that spotlights specific sensations and mental activities, and then there's a background awareness that's already there throughout the body. When we talk about spreading your awareness, it's primarily a question of letting your spotlight concentration get in touch with the awareness already filling the body. This background awareness doesn't have to exert any pressure on anything at all. You learn how to separate this consciousness from, say, the earth and the water and the other things in the physical side of the body that you may have been confusing it with.

The more clearly you can isolate these things, the easier it is to figure out exactly what's going wrong when the mind is not settling down. You get more sensitive to any feelings, perceptions, or fabrications that might disturb your concentration. You get a better sense of how to handle those as well. In particular, you get more sensitive to that little process where there's a stirring somewhere in the body—which could either be physical or mental to begin with—but then you decide it's going to be a thought, so you place the label of "this is a thought about x" and then you allow it to grow in that particular direction. When the mind is really still, you can see this as it's happening. You can see it more clearly because you're intent on not allowing it to take over your

concentration.

So it's through your mastery of these different processes of the aggregates that you can actually get the mind to settle down—which is why when the mind has settled down you can see these processes even more clearly and are ready to evaluate them for what they are. You can see things in these terms because you've had direct experience in separating them out in the process of getting the mind to settle down to begin with.

It's worth noting that the five aggregates are not among the teachings the Buddha picked up from other schools of thought that were taught by his contemporaries. The terms for "form," "feeling," and so on were already current in his time, but the idea of grouping them together as a set was original with him. And it's very directly related to the mastery of right concentration.

Ajaan Lee points this out. He says that when you're dealing with the breath, you're dealing with form. As the form begins to get more and more subtle until the breath stops, the mind begins to focus on space. The ease that comes with that feeling of space part of the aggregate of feeling. Then it goes to consciousness. That's the aggregate of consciousness. Then there's nothingness, and you begin to recognize that the sense of "there's nothing" is a fabrication. Then there's the state of neither perception nor non-perception, which allows you to see how attenuated perception can be.

There's an image that Ajaan Lee uses in another context, but it applies here as well. Think of a rock containing different minerals. As you apply effort to your concentration, it's like applying heat to the rock. When you hit the melting point for, say, tin or lead or silver or gold, each of those metals in the rock will flow out and separate on its own. You don't have to go sorting through the rock with a pick, saying, "This is a little bit of gold and this is a little bit of silver." They naturally separate out as you apply the heat.

In the same way, the activities of the aggregates all separate out as you get deeper and deeper into the formless stages of concentration. Now, the teachers of the Buddha's time were able to get into these stages, but he seems to have been the first to realize how useful it was to take these terms, the ability to separate out these processes, and run with them further.

This is why, when you've been practicing concentration and you're beginning to look at the issue of suffering, you begin to see more clearly how clinging to these five aggregates is what brings suffering about. You're clinging to any one of these five activities or any combination of them—because they *are* activities. We call them aggregates, which makes them sound like a pile of gravel, but they're not. They're just different conglomerations of activities or processes. When the mind has been in concentration, you can begin to see, "This is where there's stress," say, around aging, illness, death, birth, or wherever else the mind feels stress. The stress is there because you've been clinging to these different activities. This means that you shift your focus away from the aging or whatever, and direct it toward watching these activities in action—the same activities you've been engaging in to get the mind to settle down. The more clearly you can see these activities and their direct connection to suffering and stress, then the easier it is to let them go.

So when you find yourself running up against problems in the meditation—a sense of discomfort in the body or some sloppiness in maintaining your focus—ask yourself: Which of these activities have you not been able to isolate out? Which ones are you confusing or glomming together in an unskillful way? The more easily you can isolate them out, then the more efficient your concentration is going to be, the more solid it's going to be, and the better it's going to be as a foundation for gaining even deeper insights.