

On the Surface of Things

April 16, 2021

Get into position. Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. And what do you sense? What are your immediate sensations right now? Try to stay with whatever seems to be “breath.” And, for the time being, whatever comes along with the breath, think of it as part of the breath as well. You’ll have some mental images, but try to keep them focused on the breath. As for any mental images focused on other things, just let them go.

The same with thoughts: Any thoughts that deal with anything else, let them go. Pay attention to the thoughts that are about the breath, and see if you can settle down on this level of awareness, where you’re aware of what’s immediately apparent. Don’t try to go behind the scenes. Don’t think about the narratives of who’s meditating or where you are. Just: What are you sensing as you sit here with your eyes closed?

There will be mental events and physical events. In the beginning, think of them all coming together. That’s what the concentration is: pulling these things together, making them concentric, all centered on the breath. There will come a point where you start analyzing things to separate them out, but even then the analysis should stay on the surface.

We like to talk in terms of deep, underlying causes, but when the Buddha uses the word “cause,” especially as it relates to what you’re experiencing here as you meditate, he uses the word *samudaya*: literally, “something that arises together.” He doesn’t use the word “underlying.” Think of his term for causality, *idappaccayatā*: We translate that as “this/that” conditionality, but actually a literal translation would be “this” conditionality—the point being that the causes and the effects are right here on the level of your immediate awareness: events you can point to right here. We’re not trying to peer behind the scenes. We’re trying to see patterns as they appear on the surface of our awareness.

Of course, the fact of delusion raises the question of what’s hidden. A lot of what’s hidden is actually on the surface, but it’s hidden because it’s so fast. A little thought will appear in the mind and immediately disappear. Things will come together in the mind and they seem to form a block. But they’re very much like the songs of the thrush, where a thrush will sing a series of notes, and it sounds to us as if it’s singing a blast of about five or six notes all at once. Actually, though, the thrush isn’t singing five or six notes all at once. It’s singing arpeggios, but

they're so fast that they're faster than our ears can pick up. Our refresh-rate is too slow. A lot of what's happening in the mind is just like that: It's all glommed together because the refresh-rate of our powers of observation is too slow.

So instead of going behind the scenes, we want to focus more precisely on: What is the seen? What is the sensed? Get your alertness more focused right here. As you get quicker, things will seem to slow down, so that what sounded like a raucous squawk actually becomes a series of notes. You can see: Oh, this follows on that, that follows on this, and it's all right here. You're learning how to watch more carefully what's right here, to look for patterns right here.

In the beginning, of course, it's more a question of what will allow you to settle down. That's when you try to bring things together. Then you get into distinctions. As you breathe in, the breath feels comfortable. After a while, you want to ask: "Which sensation is the breath sensation and which sensation is the comfort sensation?" One is a physical phenomenon: how you experience the body. You don't have to worry about what's actually going on in the body away from your awareness. When the Buddha talks about "body," especially as you're meditating, it's the body as you experience it directly.

And then, what's the feeling, the feeling tone? Body and feelings: two different aggregates that we've glommed together. Can you see them as separate things—separate notes in the bird song? The same goes for perceptions, thought constructs, acts of consciousness: They're all happening right here.

Our problem is that we tend to be conspiracy theorists. We want to know: What's happening behind the scenes? Who's operating the lasers that shot lightning over northern California last year? We have a sense of "our self" and we have a sense of the world in which "our self" operates, but those ideas are behind-the-scenes ideas. The Buddha tries to reduce them to what's on the surface. The world, he says, is simply events of the six sense spheres, and the feelings that arise from contact, all of which are happening right here. The same with your sense of self: It's just the aggregates. What are they? They're events. They're actions that are happening right here on this level. The more you try to elaborate a theory that gets behind, behind, behind the scenes, the further you're getting away from what the Buddha wants you to look at: What are the patterns right on the surface?

Pain is also happening right on the surface. Its *samudaya*, its cause, is happening right on the surface. The craving is happening right here. The contact is happening right here. We need to learn to see these things slow down as our awareness speeds up. So try to stay on this level as much as you can. As your awareness speeds up, you'll find that the different aggregates, different sense spheres, different elements or properties that the Buddha talks about will begin to

sort themselves out right here on this level.

This is what dependent co-arising is all about: learning how to watch what's happening on this level. For most of us in the beginning, it's like reading stream of consciousness literature. It all seems very random. But the Buddha says that there is a pattern if you watch carefully. So in the beginning we focus simply on these things as they're glommed together, and we create a state of concentration out of them—in other words, we stay right here. Then the more still we are, the more they'll begin to separate out.

This is what discernment is all about: seeing distinctions and seeing connections between those distinct things. They're not absolutely distinct. If they were totally distinct, there would be no causal connections. Insight is seeing where the connections are: What influences what? Where is the cause, the *samudaya*, the arising-together on this level?

When you see how ephemeral it all is, that's when you begin to develop dispassion and disenchantment. And you see how those questions that people sometimes ask —“Is there really a self behind this, or is there really a world out there?”—are all irrelevant. The Buddha's trying to get us to deconstruct those speculations, so that the energy we put into the speculations can be more usefully focused right here on observing the surface of our awareness. That's where the problem of stress and suffering happen, and that's the level on which it can be solved.