

Focus on Your Intention

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There's an interesting passage where the Buddha defines the different aggregates in terms of verbs. Form deforms, feelings feel, perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate, and consciousness cognizes—the point being that these are activities. The word “aggregate” has an unfortunate connotation. It sounds like gravel, little bits and pieces of rock. The aggregates probably got that name in English from a convention in early modern European philosophy which said that groups of things were either systems or aggregates. Systems were collections of things that actually work together for a purpose. Aggregates were just random collections of things.

It was during that time that the early translators came to translate the word *khandha*, which means heap in Pali. They chose “aggregate” to give the sense that these are discrete things that don't necessarily work together. Our problem is that we try to make them work together. This is why that definition of the aggregates as verbs begins to get interesting, because fabrication is also translated, or defined, as intention, and its role with regard to the other aggregates is to take the potential for each of those aggregates and make it into an actual experience of that activity. In other words, there is a potential for form coming from your past actions, there's a potential for feeling and so on, and through our intentions, we take that potential, and turn it into an actual aggregate for the sake of having that aggregate. Of course, that aggregate then is for the sake of what? Well, it depends on the intention.

As the Buddha points out, our main tendency is simply to cling to these aggregates. We carry them around, They're a burden. You can think of a pile of bricks that you've picked up and you're carrying around in a sack over your back. Or the image they have in Thailand is of the old grandmother who has a huge load of straw that she carries around on her back all the time, hoping that someday it'll come in handy. You never know when you're going to need straw, so she's going to have a lot of it on hand all the time. Of course, she weighs herself down needlessly in the meantime. In the same way, when we claim these aggregates and turn them into our sense of ourselves, or things belonging to us, we're going to weigh ourselves down, to suffer.

The way out of this dilemma is to change our intentions. We take those same potentials and we can turn them into a path, a path to the end of suffering. This is what we're doing as we practice the practice of virtue. We're going to be involved

in perceptions and feelings, and fabrications around our actions: telling our body to do this, telling the body to do that, telling it not to do this, not to do that, as a way of gaining some sense of our power here. By changing our intentions, these potentials turn into something else. Like the oil they found coming out of rocks in Pennsylvania back in the nineteenth century. At first, it was just a nuisance. Then they decided to make medicine out of it. They put it in bottles and sold it as medicine for you, even though it wasn't very good for you. Finally, someone realized you could use it to power things by burning it. That may not be a very good analogy because we've since found out that you create trouble when you burn oil that way, especially when you burn a lot of it. But it's an illustration of how something that was a nuisance can actually be put to use, or something that's put to a bad use can be turned around and put to a better use.

So it is with the aggregates, especially when we come to concentration. You've got the form of the body: the breath that you're focusing on; the feeling of pleasure you're trying to create by the way you focus; the perception of the breath as a whole-body process that helps you stay with the breath and helps that feeling of pleasure to spread through the body; the fabrication, the directed thought and evaluation by which you adjust the breath, adjust the mind, so they fit together just right. Even when you get past the first jhana, there will still be the intention to stay with the breath. That's also fabrication. Then there's consciousness, aware of all these things.

So you put all this together and try to make it as solid as you can because you want to use the state of concentration for a lot of purposes. One of them, to begin with, is learning how to pry yourself away from the hindrances.

It's a lot easier to let go of sensual desire, ill will, and the rest when you've got something good to hold on to. Then you can use those aggregates to analyze: What is that particular sensual desire made out of? What is that ill will made out of? Mainly, perceptions and feelings. Even the way you breathe will have an impact on some of those hindrances. It's part of the appeal, or part of the sense of urgency. When anger comes in, and you breathe in a way that's very uncomfortable, ordinarily you think, "I've just got to get it out of my system." Why? Because the breath has changed. But as you get into the state of concentration, you can step back and say, "I can change the way I breathe so that I'm not faced with the simple choice either of exploding or bottling up this uncomfortable energy in the body." There's a more skillful alternative. Just dissolve the tightness and tension in that way of breathing. So it's important that you get your concentration solid, and that you maintain your intention to be

concentrated, to be mindful as you go through the day, to make this your center of gravity.

There *will* come a time when you start changing your intention toward the concentration. You start taking it apart, too. But don't be in too great a hurry to do that, because there's other work that needs to be done first: peeling away your attachments to distractions. The Buddha wants to get you attached here at the concentration, so that when you finally do turn your attention on the fabricated nature of the concentration and start trying to develop dispassion for it and use the perceptions that would lead to dispassion, this will be your last attachment. You'll clearly see it as being inconstant: Even though there's a solid state of well-being, it has its ups and downs. It has to be maintained, which means there's stress involved in it. Thinking of it in those ways, you see it as not worthy of identifying with as you or yours. You simply watch the potentials for concentration as they have come to be, without turning them into concentration. You develop some dispassion for them, and because that's your last attachment, that's when you're freed.

Now, a lot of people want to go straight to that: seeing potentials as they have come to be, before you make something out of them. Sometimes this is translated as "seeing things as they are." But when the Buddha lists the stages in the practice, this knowledge and vision always comes after getting the mind in concentration. That's because you want to pry away your attachments to other things first, leaving only the concentration as your big attachment. Then, when you finally peel away your attachment here, and can let go of the discernment that did the peeling, you really are freed. There's nothing left to hold on to. Otherwise, if you simply note at the very beginning, "Well, yes, my concentration is inconstant because it hasn't been mastered," and think that it's wise or discerning to see its inconstancy, and that it's stressful and not-self, you just fall back to your old attachments.

The Buddha wants you to put yourself in a new place, with your concentration as the center of your sense of well-being. Then you work from there.

So the practice is largely a practice in training your intentions. And what are intentions? Your kamma. This is why the Buddha called himself a *kammavadin*: someone who teaches kamma, teaches action with a focus particularly on intentions in the mind. So be very careful about your intentions, how you engage with these various potentials that you find in your awareness.

One of the reasons why our lives are so scattered is because our intentions tend to be scattered. Now we're trying to bring some order to them, recognizing the intentions that will lead to attachment and clinging, i.e., more suffering; the

intentions that can turn the aggregates into the path; followed by the intentions to let go of the path when it's done its work. Those are the three main stages.

Mastery, perfecting your skills, is what makes all the difference and leads you to where you want to go when you do these trainings in their proper order—and particularly, when you give a lot of importance to concentration. This is why the Buddha singled it out in his verses on respect. He talks about respect for the triple training, and then he adds respect for concentration. Now, concentration is part of the triple training. But apparently, he wants to emphasize the point that you really do want to work on your concentration because that's how the dynamic of the practice works. The other stages, the higher stages, work because your concentration is solid.

So content yourself to be right here. Try to find a real sense of pleasure right here. Learn how to be with the pleasure and yet not lose your focus. In the Buddha's terms, be with pleasure but don't let it invade your mind and remain. It can remain. It's there. You're working on it, but don't wallow in it. Appreciate it. Learn how to be with it so that it can do its work, and you find that that particular aggregate, the aggregate of feeling, together with the perception that maintains it, the fabrication, the intention that maintains it, is a path that really does take you someplace. In the Buddha's terms, it helps you to reach what you've not yet reached, to attain what you've not yet attained, to realize what you've not yet realized. You're able to do that because you've gained some mastery that you hadn't yet gained over your intentions. So that's where the work is. Try to keep focused on it.

If you don't maintain that focus, life simply gets scattered. Your intentions pull you here, pull you there, weigh you down. But as you master the steps of the path, you take that pile of bricks on your back, you put it down, and you make it into pavement. Ultimately, you turn it into a runway and you take off. As the Buddha said, those who have gained full awakening are like birds flying through space: They leave no path that can be traced. But they get up there because they've done a good job of making that runway. That's what you're working on now.