

Consciousness, Name, & Form

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When you're establishing mindfulness on the body, the Buddha says to do two things: One, focus on the body in and of itself and, two, put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The body in and of itself means not the body in the world; just the body as you have it right here. The body in the world would be thinking about the body in terms of whether it's good looking to other people, whether it can do the work that's required by the world. In other words, you're looking at it in the context of the world outside.

One good way of getting the right context is to focus on the breath directly as you experience it: coming in and going out, along with the energy flow in the body that allows it to come in and out. Question it on its own terms: Does it feel good? Does it not feel good? If it doesn't feel good, you can change. As the Buddha said, the breath is the factor that has the most influence on your sense of the body as you feel it from within. So take some time to look at it on its own terms and don't drag in other issues.

When you do things on these terms, it's a lot easier to see what your true duties are. When you're thinking of things in terms of the world, there are the duties you have with reference to the world, such as surviving and finding pleasure in the world. When there's a sense of you in that world, then you've got to think about: "What do I like? What do I not like?" The duties you follow tend to be the duties of your likes and your dislikes, and there's no guarantee that they'll take you anywhere good. After all, you know how fickle and arbitrary your likes and dislikes can be. Today you like something, tomorrow you don't. And then you start liking it again.

As for the duties the Buddha sets out: It's not that he's imposing them on you. He's simply saying that if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do. First, you get the mind really still, and to do that, you have to see things on their own terms: as events in the body, events in the mind—what the Buddha calls name and form on the one hand, and consciousness the other. *Consciousness* is your awareness. *Form* is your sense of the body as you feel it from within in terms of earth, water, wind, and fire; or solidity, liquidity, energy, and warmth. *Name* refers to mental events: feelings, perceptions, intentions, acts of attention, and contact among these things. Learn to be with these things on their own terms. Instead of thinking of these things as "my body" or "my mind" or "my awareness,"

it's just: "There's awareness. There are mental events. Physical phenomena." Just right here.

When you look at them on these terms, it's a lot easier to realize what you can do with them. In particular, when you focus on acts of attention and acts of intention, you see clearly that there are skillful ones and unskillful ones. Your perceptions can be skillful or unskillful, too. And whether they're skillful or not has nothing to do with whether you like them or not. It has a lot to do with where they will take you. When you look at them on those terms—how they appear, how they condition the mind and condition the body—then it's a lot easier to get your duties right.

In other words, wherever there's a sense of stress or suffering, you try to comprehend it, to see what it is that you're clinging to. When you see what you're clinging to, then you can figure out what was causing your clinging: It was craving. So you comprehend the clinging to see where your craving is focused, and that makes it easier to abandon the craving. You do this so that you can realize the end of suffering through the end of craving, and you do that by developing the path: everything from right view all the way through right concentration. When you look at things on these terms, it's a lot easier to do the right duty.

You can look at your perceptions and intentions, for instance, to see if they add to your suffering, as part of the first noble truth, or help put an end to it, as part of the fourth. If they're unskillful, you can abandon them. If they're skillful, you can develop them. It's all happening right here.

When the Buddha talks about things like name, form, or consciousness, he's not talking about abstractions far away. He's talking about your direct experience right here. Simply that you remove the sense of "I," "me," and "mine" for the time being and just look these things as events. If you look at them as "yours," then there's a different set of duties. You develop what you like and abandon what you don't like. And as I said, your likes are very fickle, so you can't take them as a reliable guide as to what you should do.

So try to stay with these things on these terms and you'll begin to see how they interact with one another. In dependent co-arising, the Buddha says that name and form depend on consciousness, consciousness depends on name and form. You can interpret this on many different levels. On the level of rebirth, if there's no physical basis for rebirth, then even if there is a consciousness, consciousness has no place to land. If there are physical requisites for name and form, but there's no consciousness coming in, name and form won't survive. It's the combination of these things that allows for a being to take birth. That's on the level of rebirth.

But these factors are also interacting right here, right now. Consciousness is the act of being aware of things going on in the body and in the mind. If it weren't for that consciousness, there would be no knowledge of these things at all. At the same time, if there were no mental or physical events, consciousness would have nothing to know. The image in the Canon is that you've got two sheaves of reeds, like two haystacks, leaning against each another. You pull this one away, and the other one falls. You pull the other one away, and this one falls. Consciousness depends on name and form. Name and form depends on consciousness. This is how we maintain our sense of the present moment.

Then, building on the present moment, we can use mental events to create thoughts of past and future. But right now we're trying to keep away from getting involved in the past and future, and just trying to see what's happening right here, right now, simply as events. If you add your sense of "you" to it all, then it becomes a state of becoming. For the time being, you don't want to go there. See these mental events simply as events, so that you can see how ephemeral they are, how quick they are to change. And you begin to wonder how you thought you could build anything solid on them at all.

But before you give up on them, try to at least build a state of concentration, so that the mind can get settled and still with a sense of well-being. When there's that sense of well-being, then the mind can look at its old attachments, its old ways of handling its thoughts, and realize, "Okay, that way of dealing with things actually causes stress and I don't have to do it." When you realize that it's stressful, and that it's unnecessary, why would you hold on?

You don't have to see things in terms of inconstancy, stress, or not-self. All you have to realize is that it's not worth the effort. That's when you let go. When you let go of events rather than of something that was part of you, it's a lot easier to let go. So learn how to see these things on these terms, simply as events: mental events, physical events. The less you get invested in them, the easier it is to let go of the unskillful ones, to develop what's skillful—and ultimately to develop a way to let go of what's skillful, too.

But you don't want to do that until things are really solid, because when the Buddha has you let go, he's not setting you adrift. He has you let go of the things that are cause of suffering and stress, and when you do, you find in a place where there is no disappointment. He's treating you much better than you would have treated yourself. So have some trust in this process.

You realize that when the Buddha talks about these things, he's not talking about far distant abstractions, he's talking about what appears in the present moment to the mind when you can make it still, and your sense of your self can

begin to fade into the background. You can just see events as events—events that should be developed, events that should be let go. That way, you can follow the right set of duties—the duties that have your true best interests at heart.