

Taking Apart Suffering

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If you think of suffering as a mountain you carry around, then the Buddhist teachings are means of taking that mountain and grinding it down into gravel so that you can carry it off, be done with it. The mind has a tendency of putting things together, called *sankhara*. You take different elements and you put them together. When they're put together, they get pretty big. They seem overwhelming. But as with any large job, it can be made easier by breaking it down into little units.

This is what the teachings on the aggregates are all about, as well as the teachings on the establishing of mindfulness. The Buddha wants you to take things apart, to see that this big mass of suffering you've got here is actually composed of little tiny things, little tiny actions, little tiny decisions in the mind or little tiny physical sensations that you've amassed together.

We're so good at putting things together that it takes a major shift to take things apart. You find this even as you just get started in the practice of concentration: Often we think that you get the mind concentrated and then you work on discernment, but it doesn't always work that way. In order to get the mind to settle down, you have to understand what the obstacles are, and learn how to take them apart. This means you have to use some discernment to develop concentration.

Sometimes the obstacle is pain in the body. In that case, use the breath to whatever extent you can to work through that pain, focusing on whichever parts of the body you can make comfortable through the rhythm of the breathing. Whether the breath is fast or slow, heavy or light, deep or shallow, you learn to adjust it so that it can help alleviate whatever pain there is in that part.

You start by focusing on a part that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe. Then you can think of that comfort just spreading from that part and seeping throughout the body. Sometimes you find that it can fill the whole body. Other times, as Ajaan Lee points out, there are certain parts that you can make comfortable, and other parts that you can't. So focus on the ones that you can make comfortable and stay there.

So even just dealing with the body, you've got to learn how to take it apart: which sensations are breath sensations, which sensations have the potential for ease, which ones have the potential for pain. You've got to learn how to analyze things if you want the mind to settle down with any skill.

Some people find it easier to just clamp down on the mind and force it to be still. That may work sometimes, but as far as mastering a skill, you find that even if you have that ability to clamp things down or to get things to just settle right down on their own, there will come times when you can't. This is why you have to learn how to analyze the problem, take it apart, to see: Which kind of breathing are you focusing on? Are you neglecting the length of the breath? Or are you neglecting which spot is most comfortable in the body? There's a certain amount of analysis that needs to be done just get the mind to settle down.

But sometimes it's not just an issue in the body. There are also issues in the mind.

Here, too, this ability to take things apart is important. When you have a certain mood in the mind—say, there's impatience or irritation—learn how to take it apart. A good way to approach it is to assume that the mind is like a committee. There's not just one person in there talking or observing, or just one mood in there simmering away. There are lots of different potential moods, lots of different observers. Even though the mind may tend to go in a certain direction to identify with a particular mood, it doesn't have to. It doesn't mean there's only the potential for that one mood there in the mind. Even though there may be impatience, there's also a part of the mind that doesn't have to be involved in that particular story, that particular identity. Remember, the Buddha talks about your sense of self as an activity: *ahamkara*, *mamankara*, I-making and mine-making. We tend to cobble these self-identities together in the same way that we cobble pains or pleasures together in the body.

So try consciously to cobble together a good observer, a patient observer. In other words, you don't have to be impatient with your impatience. You don't have to be angry at your anger. See which voices in the mind you can cobble together to just observe and watch patiently, to remind yourself of all the good lessons you've learned in the past about how you can't identify with your impatience or your irritation.

This way, by taking things apart, you find that you become a lot more manageable. Once you've cobbled together a skillful mood in one part of the mind, then you can look at the unskillful mood and see how it's created out of little bits and pieces: a little thought here, a little physical sensation there, and they get glommed together.

That might be a good translation for *sankhara*: glomming. We take things that are actually individual events and we perceive them as one, as part of a larger pattern, mass, or larger identity. Then other things get attracted to glom on some more. It's like the way they create artificial rain. They scatter little crystals into

clouds that will gather water droplets and then they become raindrops, until they're big enough to fall. In the same way, you start out with one little tiny thing in the mind, and then things get glommed on, turning into a huge sense of identity that takes over everything. But you can learn how to take that apart, look and see things as individual events.

When you do this, you find that you can get around any mood in the mind, even if the unskillful mood refuses to go right away. You have to remember that some things take a little bit of time, so develop that sense of the patient observer: "I can stand this, I can be in my other part." Like the image Ajaan Lee gives: You go into a house where some of the boards are rotten, so you don't lie down on the rotten boards. You lie down on the good boards. Or when you're eating a mango, there may be a rotten spot in the mango, so you don't eat the rotten spot. You eat just the good part. Learn to identify both in the body and in the mind the parts that are potential for a sense of ease, a potential for equanimity, wisdom, this patient observer, and then take apart the unskillful things.

In other words, you master this ability that you have to put things together which we're so good at—in the sense that we do it all the time. We're not good at it in the sense that we often do it in an unskillful way. But skills can be developed. Then from the perspective of that more skillful sense of self, you can take apart the other moods that creep into the mind and otherwise would take over.

What this means is: Don't be too quick to get rid of your sense of self. Learn how to use it skillfully first. If you try to get rid of it, what happens is that it sneaks into everything else you do. You may decide, "Well, I have no separate self, I'm just a connected self, connected with the whole world." But then you end up with an unskillful big sense of self. The issues haven't been dealt with at all, and everything goes into denial, where it's even harder to see what's going on.

The solution is to be very clear about how you're creating a sense of self, and to learn how to do it skillfully. Notice what the little building blocks are, put them together in a skillful way, and as for the unskillful things, you can take them apart. Any unskillful fabrication, any unskillful glomming that's going on in the mind, learn to take apart bit by bit by bit, until you see it's just gravel. It's not a mountain. It's just little bits and pieces. Then you can cart it off. Or actually, you don't have to cart it off. It just disperses.

The potential will be there to go back to your unskillful ways, but as long as you're insistent on trying to create a skillful sense of self, which is the part of the mind that always wants to do the most skillful thing in any situation, you can learn do that habitually. Then, over time, your old habits of glomming together this unskillful sense of who you are and or your unskillful sense of whatever mood

has taken over your mind, will grow weaker and weaker. As you learn to see the process of fabrication, both in learning how to do it skillfully and in learning how to take apart unskillful things, that gives you a certain amount of insight into fabrication.

This is how insight helps with concentration. You get the mind into a more stable mood, and it's more willing to settle down regardless of what the breath is like. Sometimes you can't get the breath really comfortable, but there are some parts of the body that are comfortable. So you say, "Okay, I'm going to hang out here for the time being." It's like the hot weather we're having. You find the coolest spot where you can stay and just stay there. You say, "The rest of the world may be all hot, but at least I'll be relatively cool here." Then learn to maximize the comfortable spots that you've found. That's called skillful fabrication. That way, you can take apart every other unskillful mood that comes by. That's where insights develop concentration.

As the Buddha once said, there is no jhana without discernment, and no discernment without jhana. The two have to go together. And if you learn how to put them together, then both will become stronger.