

8 - concluding manas, introducing sense perception
That is the second transformation.

The third is the perception of the six senses
which are beneficial, harmful, or neither.

9 - sense perceptions are associated with all of the conditioned dharmas....

It [the third transformation] is associated with the three kind of mental factors:
universal, specific, and beneficial,
As well as the afflictions and secondary afflictions,
and the three sensations.

The "data" we use for constructing our world, we think, comes in through the 5 senses with a 6th being the mind that thinks.

But the more we pay attention by slowing down and the more we learn about the mind, the senses, and consciousness the more we see that what we perceive as coming in through the senses runs through the mind.

It's a small step for us to see that whatever we sense is interpreted by the mind, but there's still some assumption of a fixed and stable reality out there. But when we studied our visual blind spots in the first talk we saw that in some cases the mind invents visual information that actually isn't there!

These teachings go further - that everything is constructed by the mind and that when we do that we make a big, big, big distinction between something called me, and something called everything else. And that the rigid separation there is a big problem for us.

The first of tonight's verses points out that when we have experiences of perception, and this includes perceiving thinking, that can be nice, it can be terrible, and it can be neutral. Fair enough but worth taking a step back to notice.

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That is the second transformation.

The third is the perception of the six senses
which are beneficial, harmful, or neither.

And then the second verse starts us into a multi-verse analysis of the kinds of experiences we have which is to say: pay attention, analyze, see what's going on in the process of perception. Don't get so lost in the story. That verse says

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It [the third transformation] is associated with the three kind of mental factors:
universal, specific, and beneficial,
As well as the afflictions and secondary afflictions,
and the three sensations.

So the 6 senses - and remember here that the mind that thinks is a sense.

I gave a talk about this stuff to Seattle Soto Zen over the weekend and I realized a good shorthand for consciousness number 7, the second transformation, called Manas, and number 6, called Mano Vijñana or Mind Consciousness. Number 7 is the Mind that Selfs and Number 6 is the Mind that Thinks. The two get utterly intertwined in our experience as a thinking person, but these teachings are telling us we can slow down and pay attention and start to see they are different. And that being all lost in the tangle of these minds is what has us so easily twisted around, defending ourselves, trying to get what we want and on and on.

This tangle of minds is the middle in this system. On one side is the storehouse consciousness - remember that: the vast, dark, repository of all of the different kinds of experiences we can have. But held there, latent, in the dark, waiting for the right triggers to cause them to bear fruit.

And on the other side the sense.

Yogacara is advocating two different ways of practicing with all of this.

One is to learn all of this stuff we're studying and practice a deep meditative inquiry trying to peel the onion of how this mind works. To catch ourselves adding layers of conception to everything. To feel how it can, as it says in this verse, lead to beneficial states and afflictive states. That the mind-world construction business is happening all the time - universal mental factors not just when we're trying to think about something. So pay attention to the mind and it's doings with these tools. It's a powerful thing. And it takes a lot of patience and study. There is a place for analysis in the Dharma, for sure.

The second and complimentary practice path is to tune in. To tune in deeply. Meditate and quiet down. One of the great things about zazen is it helps the Mind that Selfs calm down: just sitting, nothing I'm doing and everything the "I'm doing" is so extra right? Who needs it. Just sitting. No one here who's doing the sitting. Awareness of this can come and go, but it's is a gift. But even a tiny taste is powerful. And a great relief. This Manas - the Mind that Selfs is so very busy much of the time. It's an exhausting thing being a person.

And in sitting the Mind that Thinks also quiets down - at least you develop the truth that you don't have to have it center stage all the time anymore. You tune into the something else instead. The senses. In zazen you bring awareness directly to the sense of sitting, the feelings of breathing.

And then, and most often we notice this during a retreat, you start to see that when you get up from your seat these two minds are quieter and the 5 senses are so much more vivid and powerful. We calm down these two aspects of mind and let the senses shine through. And this isn't just a great way to experience beauty. It's step towards liberation and freedom from our small self.

In an early Buddhist sutra there's a little story of a monk named Bahiya. He started out in another type of practice of the day and had gone very deep. He was honored as a holy person and wondered if he had attained full liberation. But then a spirit came to him and said, "no: sorry you aren't there." Super upsetting, so he asked the spirit who he could go see who was fully liberated and the spirit told him about the Buddha.

So off he went. He ran into the Buddha during the daily alms round - walking along with his begging bowl in the town. Bahiya recognized here was someone special: the text says when he saw the Buddha he saw someone who is "serene & inspiring serene confidence, calming, his senses at peace, his mind at peace, having attained the utmost tranquility & poise, tamed, guarded, his senses restrained, a Great One".

So Bahiya throws himself at the Buddha's feet and begs him to teach him the Dharma. The Buddha says, no, this isn't the right time we're begging for food now "This is not the time, Bāhiya. We have entered the town for alms." But Bahiya is so wound up and inspired he just keeps asking and after being asked three times the Buddha shares a practice. A practice of direct perception:

"Then, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

And so Bahiya throws himself into this practice and is making great progress until tragedy strikes: he's killed by a cow with a young calf. I guess maybe he got in between a fierce mama cow and her young? I think the bulls don't have a lot of paternal feeling. Strange enough. But happily we find out that Bahiya was successful in completing the journey to liberation because the Buddha gives a eulogy at his funeral:

"Monks, Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth was wise. He practiced the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma and did not pester me with issues related to the Dhamma. Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth, monks, is totally unbound."

There's some quirkiness to these early teachings. Kind of delightful.

A powerful description of direct experience. The "you" drops out of it. The Mind that Thinks doesn't need to be involved.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the power of this too:

When the five consciousnesses of sensation operate alone, without the intervention of mind consciousness (the mind that thinks), they are capable of touching the world of suchness, the

ultimate dimension. In fact, on their own, functioning independently of mind consciousness, the five sense consciousnesses have a better chance to experience things-in-themselves than when they are operating in tandem with mind consciousness.

And he goes on to say many times in this book and others how important that is. Touching the ultimate dimension, touching suchness, touching things-as-it-is as Suzuki Roshi said. We have to use weird sounding language to point to this because it's not a conceptual thing.

And Zen is full of stories of the power of this deep experience of direct connection. Hearing the sound of a mountain stream. The plunk of a pebble striking bamboo. Monks who have practiced long feeling a deep shift in the feeling of who and what they are in the moment. The Minds not arising. Just being. Things-as-it-is.

A great example from our sangha life was told by a member who stopped coming some time ago. She stopped because of some powerful ideas in her mind which is also relevant to this exploration but not why I'm bringing her up.

She was at her first sesshin - at Samish where many Red Cedar folks have their first experience of a week of deep practice - and she was pretty miserable. Everything hurt. Her mind was wound up. She wanted to love sesshin but really she was hating it. It was awful dragging herself through the day. And then one morning she looked up and saw about 50 Great Blue Herons soaring across the sky from the woods above the camp down to the tide flats. That sight just stopped her cold. Her minds stopped. And she just saw. And she felt the deep wonder.

This didn't make the rest of sesshin easy or anything. Or the rest of life for her. But something shifted in that moment of seeing. Of touching the ultimate. Of suchness.

I've had experiences like that, and I'm sure you have too. Sometimes they happen briefly and just slip by as the Minds that Self and Think jump back into action trying to make sense of everything inspiring all of those seeds to bear fruit.

Probably we should re-read verse 1 to start every time we study this poem:

Everything conceived of as self or other
Occurs in the transformation of consciousness

Consciousness doesn't mean "thinking" in this. Thinking is just the object that mind consciousness manipulates. These teachings encourage us to learn about all of the consciousnesses and how they interact and create this sense of who and what we are. And this section of the poem encourages us to explore the sense consciousnesses in particular.

Which is exactly what we're doing when we tune into the breath and body in our zazen. I want to close with an article by the meditation teacher Will Johnson. He's well known for his teachings on the body and posture in sitting. I'd like to encourage us to take a fresh look at zazen. Something we all need to do from time to time and perhaps this will inspire us:

In reflecting on how my practice has evolved over the years, I look back over my life and remember quite vividly the first Buddhist retreat I ever attended almost exactly fifty years ago. It was taught by a wonderful Thai monk, Koon Kum Heng, who presented a classical Theravada practice that he called rising and falling. For seven long days I did nothing but observe how my breath caused my front belly wall to rise and fall on the inhalation and exhalation. With each inhalation the belly could be observed, and eventually be felt, expanding outward. On the ensuing exhalation it would contract back in. The movement never stopped. Over and over and over again while sitting in an upright meditation posture, standing, lying down, and walking slowly from place to place, I did my best to focus my entire attention on my belly as it rose and fell on the breath.

Such simple instructions, but like everything that first appears simple, it was far easier said than done as inevitably I'd find that my mind would wander off on a parade of errant thoughts that with uncanny success would hijack my awareness and leave me oblivious to the rising and falling of my belly. The practice only became somewhat stabilized toward the end of the retreat when I realized I was no longer observing the rising and falling action from the safe distance of my mind but was actually feeling the expansion and retraction of the belly and grounding myself there.

At one point during that retreat I recall chuckling to myself over a reminiscence about a phrase that would not infrequently come up in conversations with friends of my parents. Oriented toward succeeding in life (which to them mostly meant going into medicine, law, or business), they would often remark when I told them as a teenager that I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do with my life: "Well, you're not going to just sit around and contemplate your navel, are you?"

During the retreat I realized that they really had no idea about the source from which that phrase—which they viewed pejoratively—had arisen. To them it meant not committing to anything and wasting away your life. Yet here I was, hour after hour, day after day, doing nothing but "contemplating my navel," and I loved it! By the end of the retreat I felt that my center of gravity had dropped down out of the thoughts in my head into the felt presence in my belly. Thought would appear and evaporate so effortlessly that I had my first clear awareness that I was not my thoughts. I was not the mind that thinks and the speaker of those thoughts. Instead, I was the grounded feeling of presence emanating out of my belly. It felt so relieving and wholesome. Endlessly rising and falling, rising and falling, and I loved going along for the ride.

Only many years later did I understand that this practice of observing the rising and falling of the belly in response to the breath draws on the opening instructions on breathing as recorded in the Satipatthana Sutta, one of Buddhism's earliest texts whose words have been attributed by some scholars to the Buddha himself. After telling us to sit down in a posture of meditation with the spine erect and upright, he instructs us to become aware of the breath as it enters and leaves the body, and he goes on to tell us to conduct this examination at the front of the body.

Throughout the long history of Buddhism, the two most popular places at the front of the body to explore these instructions have been the nostrils, where breath can be felt to go in and out, and the front belly wall that can be felt to rise and fall unceasingly in response to the breath.

Constant observation of the breath can be so potent and effective that many Buddhist traditions understandably focus exclusively on this opening instruction. But this is not where the instructions end. Just a few short sentences later, in a completely remarkable statement, the Buddha suggests that we no longer just focus our awareness narrowly on one small place at the front of the body but instead breathe through the whole body.

I've wrestled and danced and struggled and played with that culminating instruction for the better part of my life on the cushion. What could it possibly be pointing to? Over the long years I've come to realize that the initial instruction to become aware of breath at the front of the body refers to the classical practice of mindfulness but that the culminating instruction to breathe through the whole body takes us into the world of bodyfullness.

What might rising and falling mean to the exploration of bodyfullness?

To breathe through the whole body you have to do two things. First, you need to awaken the felt, shimmering presence of the entire body. How could you breathe through the whole body if you're unable to feel it? On every part of the body, down to the smallest cell, minute, tingling, buzzing, carbonating, pulsating sensations can be felt to exist. But, deep in our own thoughts, we have little awareness of their vibratory presence. In fact, we have to blanket them over to be able to function in the quality of consciousness that passes as normal in the world that is so often, as Thich Nhat Hanh famously observed, lost in thought. Experiencing the entire body, from toe to head and everywhere in between, as a unified field of felt vibratory presence, is the first step in the awakening of a bodyfullness that can experience breath interacting with the whole of the body.

The second requirement—and this is the most radical piece I bring to the dharma conversation—is that we need to allow subtle, continuous, amoeba-like motions to occur throughout the entire body in resilient response to the force of the breath that wants to make its transmitted way through a relaxed and awakened body—not unlike how a wave moves through a body of water. In most presentations of meditation, we're instructed to sit completely still, like a stone garden statue of the Buddha. But this frozen stillness not only doesn't allow the breath to move through the body, but it also causes so many of us so much pain and discomfort in long retreat.

Over the decades, as my awareness expanded naturally from an exclusive observational focus on my belly to an inclusive felt awareness of the whole of the body, I've come to realize that these altogether natural motions in my body start with giving my entire spine permission to rise and fall on the breath. The joints in the spine are no different from joints anywhere in the body. They're there for one purpose and one purpose only: to move. In a deeply relaxed state I can feel my entire spine lengthening as I inhale and shortening back down as I exhale. In other words, I can feel the entire spine rising and falling. What I've found over all these long years of fascination with sitting down on my cushions is that, when I enter into bodyfullness and experience how breath can be felt to interact with, stimulate, and move through the whole body, a plug gets pulled on the consciousness of "lost in thought," and the altogether natural dimensions of awakened body and mind, which "lost in thought" keeps us forever removed from, are revealed effortlessly and spontaneously.

And then like so many teachers Will Johnson offers us a teaching poem about this:

*sit down in a posture of meditation
just feel yourself sitting there
as tall as you can be
but as relaxed as you can be
focus your attention
on your belly
even in the stillest of bodies
your belly can be observed and felt
to rise and fall
expand and contract
on the inhalation and exhalation of breath
rising and falling
rising and falling
observe the motions
feel the motions
become the motions*

*now broaden your focus
to include a felt awareness
of your entire body
leaving nothing out
pass your awareness
slowly through your body
from head to foot
awakening felt shimmer
through the simple act
of focusing your attention
on a part of the body
like shining a flashlight
into a dark corner of a basement*

*relax as you inhale
and feel your entire spine lengthen
your lumbar spine moves and lengthens
your thoracic spine moves and lengthens
your cervical spine moves and lengthens
as you exhale
feel the entire body shorten back down
inhale fully and deeply
down from your diaphragm
down through your pelvis and legs
into the earth*

*simultaneously
feel how the breath can be felt
to lift the entire body upward
rising and falling
through the entire long shaft
of the upright body*

*breathing down into the earth
grounds and stabilizes clarity of mind
as it initiates the rise
stay grounded in the earth
when you feel the breath
causing the head to lift
let go and soften
the top of the head
the muscles around the eyes
and both sides of the cranium
feel the energies
in these three places in the cranium
billowing open
let vision and sound
replace thought
explore the rising and falling practice of bodyfullness
while you're sitting formally in meditation
while you're standing and walking
and making your way through your life*

DISCUSS:

HOME PRACTICE: spent time alone in a park or your garden deeply tuning in. See what happens. Stay with it a while.