Wisdom Academy

Emptiness: A Practical Course for Meditators

Lesson 3 Reading: Chapter 5

5. CREATING A SELF

If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it.
—Anagarika Munindra[1]

WE'VE NOW SEEN that the logic of self is not trustworthy, that the sense bases and aggregates are the real elements of human experience, and that the self is not to be found within them. In this chapter we explore how the sense of *being* a self or *having* a self is so pervasive. How have we come to believe so strongly in something that is, in fact, illusory? Even after we start to question the solidity of the sense of self, why do we keep falling into it? To answer these questions we'll look at two different mechanisms. One has to do with our thoughts, the other with the activity of attachment.

CREATING SELF BY THINKING

As I've noted, full understanding of not-self or emptiness needs to be developed through hearing (or reading), reflection, and meditative insight. This chapter will be more meaningful if you approach it in a meditative frame of mind. Without some degree of steadiness, you won't be able to see thoughts clearly and can be swept away by their flood.

Beginning instructions in insight meditation tell us to direct our attention in a continuous, sustained way to a simple sense experience in the present moment, like a breath, sensation, or sound. Although the instruction is simple, it is not always easy to carry out. We might feel one breath or sensation and then not notice another for several minutes, because our attention has been captured by a succession of passing thoughts. In such cases, we'll eventually come back to the present moment and reconnect to the breath or sound—but the time spent drifting can be rather long.

While the wandering of attention can be frustrating, we learn important lessons from it. The first is that it is not possible, at least in the beginning, to control one's mind. This can be humbling, but it is an important lesson because it reveals the limits of our will.

PAYING ATTENTION TO THOUGHTS

When our attention is not in the present moment, where does it go? We observe that it gets diverted into all kinds of thoughts that apparently are more interesting than a breath or a sensation—thoughts of past or future, work or family, self-image or fantasy. These thoughts do not occur in a clear, linear, or logical pattern; they are chaotic and jumbled, leaping wildly from one topic to the next, sometimes accompanied by great swings of emotion. We might enjoy an image of lazing on a tropical beach in one moment and in the next be gripped by anxiety about a presentation at work. There are strong forces at work in the mind that are not controlled by our conscious intention.

We may wonder if we are failing at the meditation when we spend so much time thinking—and I'd like to say clearly that this is not the case. As long as we are willing to reconnect with the present moment each time we wake up from one of the thought excursions, the meditation will continue to develop. The instructions suggest that the attention should be continuous, but this is seldom possible—and that's fine too. If we are willing to come back to the simple experience of breath or body, to start again, then we will progress.

Once we've found a little stability in being in the present, we begin to notice subtler aspects of our experience, like our state of mind. What is the mood in this moment? Is it sad or excited? Nervous or peaceful? Resentful or grateful? It's important to understand the effect that moods have on us, because they so

strongly influence our happiness and unhappiness as well as our interactions with others. Instructions for this kind of meditation, called mindfulness of emotions, were offered at the end of chapter 2.

As we start to pay attention to our moods and their shifting range of power, beauty, and pain, we notice that they are often linked to our thoughts. A long train of thoughts about our partner can perhaps leave us feeling a mix of affection, regret, desire, and annoyance. Thinking about work can lead to pride and satisfaction or embarrassment and anxiety. A fantasy can be quite enjoyable but then leave us deflated and enervated when we emerge.

To understand our emotions, we have to keep looking closely at our thoughts, because the two work together to bring us into states of happiness or misery. Understanding this is helpful and can motivate us to bring more care to the process of thinking.

THOUGHTS ARE NOT THE ENEMY

When we first begin the practice of meditation, we may imagine that thoughts are the enemy. They seem to take us out of the present moment, stealing our attention away from the chosen subject and derailing our practice. When we have a moment of calm, it may be so satisfying that we think this peaceful state is the whole point of practice. We might imagine that the way to meditate successfully is to stop thinking. A teacher's praise of tranquility may even contribute to this belief. So it is quite natural to think that thoughts are merely an obstruction to be overcome and discarded—but this attitude itself becomes a problem. It isn't possible to stop thinking through willpower, and the effort to do so only ties us up in knots.

The deeper purpose of meditation is not simply to enjoy moments of calm, as rewarding and meaningful as they are, but to understand deeply how our minds lead us into unhappiness so that we can stop the activities that lead to those states. To reach this understanding, we have to learn to observe thoughts with as much presence and discernment as we bring to the seeing of breath and emotions. Instructions on practicing mindfulness of thoughts are at the end of this chapter. This is a fascinating exploration, because all our big choices in life, as well as many small ones, begin with a thought. When I was a senior in college, I had a strong thought of wanting to see Asia. This thought became a seed that

continued to grow. The next year I found myself in Malaysia on a two-year teaching assignment with the Peace Corps.

THE PROLIFERATION OF THOUGHTS

When we look closely, a thought is not very much: just a fleeting string of words or images generated in the mind. It's far from solid. Yet thoughts exert such power in our life! They lead to important choices, influence our relationships with others, and lift us to heaven or toss us down to hell emotionally. How have such insubstantial phenomena managed to gain so much power over us? The Buddha gave a penetrating analysis of the mechanism of thinking in a pithy discourse called *The Honeyball*.[2]

A man approached the Buddha and asked in an aggressive tone what he taught. The Buddha said that he taught that one does not argue with anyone in the world and that "perceptions no longer underlie" such a wise being. The visitor harrumphed and departed, seemingly frustrated that he couldn't get an argument going. But the reference to perceptions in the Buddha's reply was intriguing even to his disciples, who later asked him what he meant. He said that it could be explained by the following sequence.

> Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferations beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.[3]

This passage packs in a lot of Buddhist psychology. Let's look at it line by line.

> *Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact.*

Form (*rūpa*) is the first aggregate, meaning physical matter. Here it means a visible object. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is the fifth aggregate and means the faculty

of mind that knows or registers the bare data revealed by the senses. There are six types of consciousness for the six types of sense experience: the five physical senses plus the mind, with its objects primarily of thoughts and emotions. When three things come together—eye, object, and eye-consciousness—that is called a moment of contact (Pali: *phassa*). Contact can occur at any of the six sense doors.

With contact as condition, there is feeling.

When there is sense contact, we feel something impacting us. The impact may be light and subtle, like a distant birdcall or the touch of a feather, or it can be intense and overwhelming, like scalding bathwater or a nearby gunshot. With each impact there is a quality of feeling, or feeling tone (*vedanā*), the second aggregate. Hearing a birdcall might be felt as pleasant while a gunshot is usually sensed as unpleasant. The touch of a feather may be so subtle that it is felt as neutral. The point is that with every contact there is an associated feeling tone, which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. This feeling tone conditions our likes and dislikes, hopes and fears.

What one feels, that one perceives.

When we feel the impact of a sense contact, our attention is drawn to that experience. That object is singled out from the field of experience and becomes the focus of attention, at least for a moment. When we focus on an object, the mind will try to recognize it. We place the sense experience into a category we've created and used before: birdcall, feather, water, gunshot. This act of recognition or naming is perception (*saññā*), the third aggregate. This usually happens automatically, without any effort on our part. Occasionally we have a sense contact and don't recognize the object. When that occurs, we are usually drawn to investigate the object further so that we can place it in a familiar category.

What one perceives, that one thinks about.

Once we have noticed the object and put it into a familiar category, we roll out the rest of our conceptual apparatus and incorporate this object. We think about

times we've heard the bird before or remember a hawk's feather we once found on a trail or imagine a favorite hot tub or speculate about who fired the gun, or a million other permutations and scenarios. We don't do this with every object we perceive, but in most waking moments, we are thinking about some object we have perceived. What the Buddha is pointing to here is our habitual tendency to move from direct sense experience into thinking about that experience.

> *What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates.*

As thought kicks in around a fresh perception, it generally diverges further and further from the original object and the reality of the moment. Once in meditation I came out of a vacation fantasy and wondered how I had gotten there. I retraced a train of thoughts that had gone from a door slamming down the hall (accurate perception), to imagining who had done it (initial thought), to judgments about that person, to a teacher they reminded me of, to a friend in that teacher's class, to a trip we'd taken together, to a breakfast buffet at a hotel in the tropics. From a nearby door to halfway round the world in six steps! Our thoughts engage in this type of free association all the time. This kind of endlessly diverging stream of thoughts is called in Pali *papañca* and can be translated as "conceptual (or mental) proliferation."

> *With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferations beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.*

Here is the kicker. We may have thought that our habit of turning perceptions into thoughts was a kind of innocent pastime—but now the bill comes due. Other perceptions and thoughts now *beset* us, quite apart from our wishes or intentions. Who has not experienced this? We start out thinking about a small incident with our partner, and before long a blizzard of thoughts has come storming in about past and future: arguments, regrets, plans, hurts, disappointments, therapy sessions, divorce, child custody, and so on. We find to our horror that we can't stop the thoughts, and the accompanying flood of emotions does not dry up quickly. We are spinning in a stew of our own making. To a greater

or lesser extent, this is our condition much of the time when our attention is not clearly focused.

If we retrace the chain of events as the Buddha describes them in this discourse, we see three distinct stages. The first is rather automatic: a sense contact arises, we feel the impact, and the mind recognizes the object. This all occurs naturally and inevitably: just steps in the ongoing links of cause and effect that is life. The second stage is volitional: we think about the object we've recognized. This comes out of our own will and to some extent our own choice. We like to think. We not only acquiesce to thoughts but encourage them. At this stage we are still the active agent. But in the third stage we become more of a passive victim as the *papañca* we've activated takes on a life of its own, swirling out of control like the broom in the Disney cartoon of the Sorcerer's Apprentice in the movie *Fantasia.* Thoughts and perceptions beset us and bring with them a raft of disturbing emotions.

HOW PROLIFERATIONS CREATE SELF

As we see all this thought activity and its disturbing nature more and more clearly, we begin to wonder, How did this come to be? What's behind this pattern? Is there a thread that strings all the beads together? Is there a theme common to them all?

As we look, we find that all the beguiling narratives are basically about "me": what I like, what I don't like, what I want, what I fear, what I hate, what I believe, what I'm like. These I-thoughts are frequent and compelling—just try giving them up for two minutes. We sense that they are being thrown up by some strong motive force like a turbocharged engine. What is behind all this power? It is the belief in a self, in the story of "I, me, mine" that we tell ourselves over and over. We do this to convince ourselves that we are real in the way we imagine ourselves to be. But this self is a fiction. There isn't actually an entity that corresponds to this fabrication.

To convince ourselves that the imagined self is real, we tell the I-story continuously, using past and future, likes and dislikes, hates and loves, views and beliefs, engaging our deepest emotions to keep us turning on this hamster wheel. It's not a pleasurable or satisfying habit. In a recent study, participants were asked to stop all activities and simply be with their thoughts for six to

fifteen minutes. Most subjects either rated this as difficult or didn't find the experience enjoyable. A number of the subjects, including two-thirds of the men, were offered an opportunity for distraction by giving themselves an electric shock, and chose to do so.[4]

This habit of thinking doesn't make any sense, one might say. Why would we engage in thought activity that is so often restless, upsetting, disturbing, and painful? Because the alternative is feared to be even worse. And what is the alternative? It is seeing an aspect of the truth of emptiness. If we didn't keep up the drama of the I-story, there would be a space in the mind. Eventually this is greatly liberating, but in the beginning it can seem, well, too empty. Thoughts are the first of the two main ways we create a self and fill the space.

CREATING SELF BY HOLDING ON

The other major strategy we employ to construct a sense of self is holding on to things. In Buddhism, an attachment is a relationship we form by taking hold of something we've experienced and not being willing to let it go. We form attachments to people, places, things, and experiences. The length of time we're attached to a thing can range from seconds for a handsome face we pass on the street to a lifetime in the case of our body. The reason this is so important in Buddhism is that when we are attached to something, we become dependent and lean on it, and when it changes, part of our foundation is shaken. When change comes to a major attachment, we can suffer a lot. The Buddha considered attachment to be the source of suffering.

Māra is a malevolent figure in Buddhist lore who tries to lead practitioners away from the noble path into negligence and unhappiness. Shortly before the Buddha's awakening, Māra attacked him with several armies to persuade him to abandon his quest. In modern terms, Māra is sometimes understood as a force within one's own psyche that leads to suffering. About attachment, the Buddha said, "By whatsoever a person clings to in this world, by that Māra will track them down."[5] That is, when we cling to anything, at some point in time, the clinging will become either a test of our commitment to awaken or else a source of suffering.

The list of attachments for most of us is long. To get a sense of its scale,

ask yourself, What in my life would I be upset about if it changed? We might include our health, the health of those we love, our marriage or friendships, home, job, savings, car, possessions, status, reputation, weight, appearance, eyesight, mental acuity, and more. Take a few minutes to reflect on this and see what comes to mind.

At age twenty-nine, before he left home on a quest for liberation, the Buddha saw a few of his own deeply rooted attachments and let them go.

> I too am subject to aging, not safe from aging . . . When I considered thus, the vanity of youth entirely left me. . . . I too am subject to sickness, not safe from sickness . . . When I considered thus, the vanity of health entirely left me. . . . I too am subject to death, not safe from death . . . When I considered thus, the vanity of life entirely left me.[6]

In a powerful statement of nonattachment, Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's two chief disciples, once emerged from meditation and shared with the other monks an understanding he had reached:

> Friends, when I was alone in seclusion, a reflection arose in my mind thus: "Is there anything in the world through the change and alteration of which sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and grief might arise in me?" Then it occurred to me: "There is nothing in the world through the change and alteration of which sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and grief might arise in me."[7]

This is a powerful testament to the unshakability of Sāriputta's liberation.

In Western psychology, attachment refers to the wholesome bond a child forms to its parent or caregiver, which is necessary for the development of trust in a healthy human being. This is different from the way the word is used in Buddhism. Of course even a healthy child does become attached in the Buddhist sense to her or his parents, but a healthy adult grows out of that childhood dependency, at least to some extent, and the liberated person grows out of it completely.

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION: SEEING ATTACHMENTS BEING FORMED

Our strongest attachments are usually in areas of life we've been involved with for some time. The moment the attachment formed may be too long ago to recall clearly, and it's likely we've rebuilt the attachment many times since. Meditation offers the clarity of mind that can help us see an attachment forming or re-forming in the present moment. The practice of choiceless attention, also called mindfulness of changing objects, described at the end of chapter 4, helps us see this. Practicing choiceless attention, we are mindful of whatever sense contact draws our attention. We can investigate that sense contact in the present moment to try to understand where attachment might form.

Dependent origination (Pali: *paṭicca samuppāda*) has been called the most profound of all the Buddha's teachings. He laid out a chain of twelve links of cause and effect that describe the origin of suffering in vivid detail. Tibetan artists depict this sequence in a widely known painting called the Wheel of Existence.

To explain dependent origination fully would require more detail than this book allows. Of the twelve links, the first five and the last three take us into territory that is more philosophical than our concern here. So I will focus on the four central links, which are experiential in nature. They are contact, feeling, craving, and clinging.

Contact

The first of the four central links of the wheel, or chain, of dependent origination is contact (Pali: *phassa*). You will recall that contact means the coming together of three things that make a sense experience appear to us: sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness. Contact may occur in any of the six senses and is purely a momentary happening. If contact seems to be ongoing, that is only because we are not seeing the rapid arising, passing, and rearising of the sense impression. Contact is the first moment of the encounter with a new sense impression, and so it is the beginning of our relationship to the experience. In a meditative state, one can attend mindfully to this first moment of contact.

Feeling

Contact is followed by the next link in the chain, feeling (*vedanā*), which is also the second aggregate, as we saw in the *Honeyball* discourse. These two factors—contact and feeling—are linked in a relationship that might be described as "contact *conditions* feeling" or "dependent upon contact, feeling arises." We don't describe it as "contact *causes* feeling," because other factors are at work too, like our personal background and tastes, and also because the causal relationship of later links is even less direct.

Feeling has the quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. Every sense contact brings with it one of these three feeling tones. If, in meditation, we notice the moment of contact, then we are prepared to also notice the associated feeling tone. You could softly name it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, as explained in the instructions for the meditation on feeling, at the end of chapter 3. We tend to like what is pleasant and dislike what is unpleasant. If our relationship with the sense experience were to stop here, we wouldn't have a problem. But if we're not paying close attention, feeling tone easily leads to the next link in the chain.

Craving

The third link is craving (Pali: *taṇhā*). You may know this word from the Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths, where it is named as the cause of suffering—not a good reputation to have! In dependent origination too it is a pivotal link in the generation of suffering. Craving is the yearning for something. It can be more of something or less of something, but we want *something.* We can feel this urge over and over when we meditate. The moment is not quite satisfying in itself and we want it to be different. It is not actually that the moment is inherently flawed—rather it is that we have a deep-seated tendency to *think* it is flawed.

Mingyur Rinpoche says of our tendency to find fault:

> We continue to stick with misguided views. These views all share one misunderstanding: the belief that there is something wrong with the present moment. Whatever comes up, we identify a problem with the present moment.[8]

We might say that there is an underlying mood of insufficiency or discontent that leads us to want a different moment than the one we are with.

Feeling conditions craving, or we might say craving arises based on feeling. When the ingrained tendency to want meets the feeling tone of a new sense contact, we tend to react in a predictable way. A pleasant feeling ignites greed: I want more of that. An unpleasant feeling ignites aversion: I want that to go away. A neutral feeling activates delusion: I can overlook that. These reactions of greed, aversion, and delusion are the different forms taken by *taṇhā*, the force of craving.

In Pali *taṇhā* was originally a common word that simply means "thirst." This is a powerful word for the Buddha to use for the cause of suffering, because thirst can never be fully and finally quenched. If we satisfy it now, it will come back again. It is this relentless, restless quality of wanting the Buddha was pointing to. We translate *taṇhā* as craving, which emphasizes the activity of desire or greed, generally considered to be for pleasant experience. However, craving encompasses all three forces of greed, aversion (or hatred), and delusion. With greed I want more of what is pleasant. With aversion I want the unpleasant to go away. In both cases I want the moment to be different from the way it is. Craving also includes delusion, because when we are fixated on pleasure and pain, the neutral experience is regarded as worthless and uninteresting, and so we ignore it. Neutral contacts, however, are just as real as pleasant and unpleasant ones, and it is the job of clear mindfulness to see what *is*, regardless of its valence.

Once craving is activated, we are on the road to suffering. One more step is needed to firm up the situation.

Clinging

The fourth link is clinging (Pali: *upādāna*) or, as it is sometimes translated, grasping. This refers to the activity in the mind that fixates on an experience and takes hold of it. Grasping might refer to the immediate act of taking hold, while clinging might mean the tendency to keep holding on to something that has previously been grasped. Grasping is the origin of attachment, and clinging is the ongoing activity of attachment. Both meanings are included in the Pali term *upādāna.* Craving (the third link) almost always leads to grasping. We can

feel the fixation taking hold as it happens in our direct experience. Sometimes meditators ask, "Who is it that is grasping?" But this is not a suitable question. In the light of not-self, there is no one doing the grasping. Grasping is only an activity in the mind.

As a simple example of grasping, if we have a delicious meal at a restaurant, we will often make an effort to store the name of the restaurant in our memory (or on our phone) so we can repeat the experience. Eating the dish we ordered (contact) led to a pleasant taste (feeling), which led to wanting more (craving), which led us to hold on to the name of the restaurant (clinging). This is not to judge or condemn any step in the process. It is not a problem for most people to have a good meal or to go back to a good restaurant. But we are interested in learning about how the mind works, and this is a rather harmless example of our tendency to try to repeat or sustain pleasant experience. Other pleasant experiences can lead to more unsettling forms of attachment, such as addictions to alcohol, drugs, sex, television, money, or power. The mechanism is the same for all of these; only the intensity changes.

You might think that we cling only to pleasant experiences since they stand a chance of gratifying us, but we also grasp unpleasant experiences—though that grasping takes a different form. For example, after a long run we discover a new pain in our knee (contact). All our attention may be drawn to that painful sensation (feeling). We start to feel some fear about its condition (craving) and keep the situation in our mind through many thoughts (clinging): Will I have to stop running? Do I need to see a doctor? Should I get an MRI? Will I ever walk again? We can dwell on these kinds of thoughts for quite a long time as the knee now occupies center stage in our mind—proof that we have taken firm hold of it through grasping and clinging. Again, I am not judging the process. If our knee has been injured, we need to take care of it. But we do not need to obsess about it.

Let's summarize how these four links of the chain of dependent arising work together. If we're awake, contact is happening at one or more of the six sense doors. That contact brings a feeling of pleasure, pain, or neutrality. Based on the feeling tone and an underlying sense of insufficiency, craving inclines the attention to this experience out of some kind of wanting. We lean into the experience

out of craving. Grasping fixates and takes hold to try to make the relationship ongoing. If we were to reflect, we would know that the sense impression is impermanent, but we have forgotten this. Grasping is like trying to freeze the experience. Now we have solidified around what might have been a fleeting sense impression. What exactly has become solid? The sense of self. Let's see how this happens.

CLINGING CREATES SELF

Once we have grasped something, we think about it—a fact we can verify in our meditation. Because the grasping came from underlying urges that were not well understood—craving and a sense of insufficiency—it is inevitably colored by the unconscious forces of greed, aversion, and delusion, which give it an emotional investment on our part. In other words, grasping is not a neutral, unfeeling activity but is deeply rooted in unresolved forces in our heart and mind. As we continue to hold on to the thing, we turn it over in our thoughts, and our thoughts are also colored by the same craving and sense of insufficiency. Proliferating thoughts beset us—thoughts about I, me, and mine. So when we grasp, we create anew the sense of self. In fact grasping is identical to creating the sense of self. The sense of self arises through grasping.

As we've seen, the Buddha described seeing the five aggregates with proper wisdom: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self." He goes on to say:

> It is when one knows and sees thus that in regard to this body with its consciousness and all external signs there is no I-making, mine-making, or underlying tendency to conceit.[9]

Note that the Buddha expresses this in terms of verbs: "There is no I-making or my-making." This makes it clear that the sense of self is not intrinsic to human experience but is being generated by us moment after moment through our own mental activity when we're not seeing with proper wisdom. We engage in I-making (Pali: *ahaṁkāra*) when we take the "I" to be something, and we engage in my-making (Pali: *mamaṁkāra*) when we take something to be "mine." Together we could call I-making and my-making the activity of *selfing*. We

understand *conceit* in this passage to mean a general sense of self. When we see with wisdom, we do not generate the sense of a self.

It is so easy to engage in selfing. When there is a mood of sadness, we immediately think, "I'm feeling sad." The "I" is born in that moment as the one who is sad. If we don't think that way, then the "I" doesn't come into being. When there is a pain in the knee, we immediately think, "My knee hurts." The "I" is born in that moment as the owner of the painful knee. Without selfing, that "I" doesn't come into being.

We see in these two simple examples how the "I" is inserted as an addition to a simple contact such as a volitional formation of sadness or a physical sensation of knee pain. If we examine our thoughts and speech, we can see this taking place again and again. The "I" is constantly defining itself in relation to something that exists: I think, I feel, I hurt, my home, my partner, and so on. An interesting question for reflection is: Does the sense of "I" ever arise on its own, without reference to an object of one of the six senses? Can you find such an "I"? What is its nature?

This question has been intriguing meditators since the time of the Buddha. There is an account in the Pali Discourses of a monk named Khemaka, who is a "nonreturner," which means he has reached the third stage of enlightenment, a very high attainment. The monk tells a group of other bhikkhus that the sense of self is still with him even though he does not identify with any of the five aggregates: "Friends, although [the notion] 'I am' has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates . . . , still I do not regard [anything among them] as 'This I am.'"[10] He calls this sense of "I am" a form of conceit and compares it at his stage to the scent of a lotus that cannot be traced to the petals or the stalk or the pistils but is nonetheless present in the flower. As he was describing his understanding, Khemaka attained full liberation—as did sixty other bhikkhus who were listening.

Khemaka as a nonreturner had reached a level of subtlety with respect to the "I" that most of us have not yet found. He no longer identified with any of the aggregates yet still had an I-sense. When we are nonreturners, we too can focus on this more subtle sense of self. For our purposes now, it is enough if we can see the self being born again and again by claiming the aggregates as "I" or "mine."

Some births are pleasant, as when we get a new job or a new friend, and some births are painful, as when a partner leaves us or our new car gets in an accident.

SELFING LEADS TO SUFFERING

Once a new self has taken birth, it will inevitably die. That is the truth of impermanence, of trying to hold on to changing conditions. Some births are painful to begin with: getting bad news or not getting what we want. Other births are pleasant to start with but become painful when they die: a friend disappoints us or the job goes away. Ajahn Chah said that grasping either pleasure or pain is like picking up a poisonous snake. If you grab the head, it will immediately bite you. This is grasping pain. If you grab the tail, eventually the head will swing around and bite you. This is grasping pleasure.[11]

Either way, the sense of self is problematic; birth is suffering either now or later. Sometimes the suffering is subtle and we hardly feel it, as when the cookie tin goes empty. At other times the suffering is intense, as in death, divorce, or bankruptcy. In every case, the suffering is built on the precondition of our having grasped at a passing experience at one of the six sense doors. A chain of feeling-contact-craving-clinging, of which we weren't fully mindful, led to the birth of a sense of self and then, inevitably, to suffering.

This picture of the human condition may seem bleak, but not every link in the chain is inevitable. Sense contact and feeling take place all the time, but we don't have to generate craving around them. Nor do we need to continue to grasp the aggregates as *who we are.* Understanding this opens the doorway to freedom.

MEDITATION

Mindfulness of Thoughts

If we're not mindful, when thoughts arise we tend to get swept up in their content and spin out in proliferation. In the meditative approach, we see a thought simply as a present-moment phenomenon that arises, persists, and passes away. Doing this, we can maintain mindfulness even when thought is present.

- Begin with mindfulness of breathing. When you have established some mindfulness, let go of the breath as a focus. Simply wait attentively and notice the first thought that comes. Pay attention from the first moment of its arising until it has ended. See if it is possible to stay mindful all the way through one thought. When it has ended, return your attention to the breath.
- Now let go of the breath and see if you can notice two thoughts in a row while remaining mindful. Return to the breath.
- Now let go of the breath and see if you can notice every thought that comes in the next, say, fifteen seconds. If you get lost in the content of the thoughts, return to the breath and try again to notice two thoughts. Then try once again to notice every thought for a short time. By building up gradually, you will find a greater ability to be mindful of thoughts without becoming lost in their content.