On 'Concept'

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 50:57

But today we're talking about the realm of concept.

We start with the five physical senses, the physical world—very sharp, very clear, very obvious. And yet what we find in our ordinary lives is that often we're completely disconnected from what's happening physically in the five physical senses, because we're lost in the conceptual world of thought and perception. This is quite normal, and we perhaps don't notice what a weird situation it is.

Flowing through the mind is a river of stories. These stories have an enormous attraction for us, so that we get drawn into them. It's as though the physical world often can't hold our attention—there's not enough in it to grab us. Whereas the most mundane, repetitive story will grab our attention. We find ourselves sucked into them, and we find them very difficult to abandon.

So we want to have a look at what's going on in this realm of concept, as it manifests in the river of stories. For me, what seems central is that the stories are attractive, seductive, because they provide meaning. As human beings, we really hunger for meaning—experience has to mean something. And the meanings can be trivial or profound. Something completely trivial, like the thought that pops up in the depths of meditation: coffee now or later? That'll grab my attention. Or the meanings attached to my deepest emotions as they erupt. There's a whole range of meanings, from the lightest and most trivial through to the deepest and most profound. But what's really attracting us is meaning, and the meaning comes out of the stories.

Thinking is seductive because it represents the construction of ourselves—who we deeply think we are and what we deeply think the world is. When the Buddha is talking about a self, he's not referring simply to me in here; he's talking about me in a world. Every being is at the center of a network of sensitivities, physical and mental. Human beings have six sense sensitivities: five of them physical, one non-physical. And the six sensitivities present us with a world. So if there's a self, there's a world within which that self lives. And if there's an experienced world, there's a self to whom all this is happening. The self, for the Buddha, is always a self within a world.

Conceptual thinking creates the self—it's one of the major ways in which we create a self. And this is the world as we conceive it to be. Oddly, this is what we often refer to as the real world.

I've mentioned before that in meditation retreats, sometimes the question comes up: "But what about the real world? What about that?" The context is always that a practitioner is deep in their practice of meditation. Things are happening, some of them unusual, some of them significant. Things are changing;

routine perceptions and responses are being questioned. And then out of that comes the response: "But what about the real world? How does all this that I'm going through now relate to the real world when I leave the retreat?"

If you think about what's behind this question, the assumption is that this world—the world we're actually experiencing right now, of the six senses—this world is somehow not real. The world that the practitioner is imagining, the world that isn't here except as thought, the world which may or may not turn out to be what we're imagining today—that world is real. So this world, that which we are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding—its reality is shaky, and we have to measure its reality against a world that exists only as a concept and may never actually arise in felt experience.

If you think about how many times you've anticipated a future event, and how many times that future event has actually turned out the way you anticipated it, the odds are that the world being imagined will never turn up. And yet somehow that's the real world against which this one has to be measured.

This is an example of how powerful the world of concept is, how it takes over everything. And we just take for granted that that's the way it is.

Concept enables us to define ourselves and our world and to create a functioning identity within it. We create a sense of a permanent self who survives through time, through story. I define myself in part by my past. And what is my past? It's the stories I tell myself about what happened before. And I plan for the future. And what is the future that I'm planning for?

It's the stories that I'm telling myself about an imagined future.

The stories that we tell ourselves give us a stable self that exists through time. And this makes them incredibly attractive and valuable. The self that we're creating, of course, is real only as a concept.

This comes up nicely in the writing of the philosopher Daniel Dennett. I don't know if he's still alive—he must be pretty ancient if he is. But certainly in his time, he was one of the major philosophers of mind in the United States. He wrote a book called *Consciousness Explained*—a very attractive title—and in it he was talking about the nature of the self. He came up with statements that are very Buddhist, although he's anything but Buddhist. He says, "We do not tell our stories. Our stories tell us. They conjure us into existence." And he defines the self as the center of narrative gravity. We're constantly telling stories, but there are certain foundational stories that we keep coming back to again and again. This is the center of narrative gravity, and this is the self.

So this world of story, the world of concept, in practical terms becomes more real to us than the physical world. And I think this is why thinking—or one reason why thinking—is so seductive, and why it's so easy for a meditator to abandon physical awareness in favor of slipping off into some random dream.

This brings us to the whole issue of thinking, particularly in meditation. We've raised this question before:

does this mean that thinking is bad and we should stop? Should we stop having concepts?

This question was addressed in the thirteenth century by the Japanese Zen teacher Dogen Zenji, who wrote a meditation manual called *Zazen Shin*, "The Sharp Edge of Meditation." He raised it through telling the story of the Chinese teacher Hong Dao of Yao Shan, Hong Dao being one of the great Chan ancestors, Zen ancestors.

The story goes: once when the great teacher Hong Dao of Yao Shan was sitting, a monk asked him, "What are you thinking as you sit so strongly?" The teacher replied, "I'm thinking not-thinking." "How do you think not-thinking?" "Non-thinking."

So this is the exchange. Dogen pretty much leaves it at that. You figure it out. Here's all you need to know. But we're going to expand on this a bit.

Basically, we've got three things presented to us: thinking, not-thinking, and non-thinking. Here, thinking and not-thinking are presented as two extremes.

Thinking is our normal everyday life, where we believe the reality created for us by concept. The world that concept presents to us, we take it to be true. This is it. This is the real world. That's thinking.

Not-thinking indicates the development of samadhi, of concentration, unification, integration, where the mind goes so deeply into the meditation that thinking is suppressed. It just stops. This is not-thinking. Now, some people can do this and others can't, but even if we're successful with it, what we've got is a temporary samadhi state, and all our delusions and attachments are waiting for us when we come out of that state. So we're back in the world of thinking. With these two extremes, we move from not-thinking to thinking and back again.

Non-thinking represents a new relationship to thinking, a different relationship to thinking. To get a sense of what this is about, let's look once more at why thinking is considered to be a problem in meditation.

Thinking in meditation is problematic only to the extent that it interrupts our flow of attention. From a practice point of view, this is the issue with thinking—it's bad only to the degree that it interrupts our flow of attention. The aim of mindfulness practice is to attain a felt continuity of awareness.

So awareness remains without interruption on the flow of experience, physical and mental. Thinking is a problem when it interrupts this flow of attention. Instead of maintaining that continuity, we get sucked into the world of concept. Thinking pulls us into this world, and this world can be maintained only because there's a degree of delusion present to sustain it. If the delusion isn't there, it cannot be sustained.

The delusion is found in the assumption that the conceptual object presented by the mind is in fact the pure phenomenal object. If this is a bit too technical, I can put it more simply: it's the assumption that a thought about X is X. That's the basic assumption we have when we enter into the world of concept, and that assumption makes it real and keeps it going. The assumption that a thought about X is X. And that's a

delusion, because actually it isn't.

In other words, a thought about yesterday is not yesterday. But time has power over us to the degree that we are prepared to believe that our thought about yesterday is yesterday. If a thought arises about yesterday or about anything else and we attend to it as simply a thought arising now, then it's not a problem and it does not interrupt the flow of attention. When we recognize thinking as just thinking, we are not falling into delusion, and we are maintaining an uninterrupted flow of attention on experienced events. One of those events is thinking. So I'm mindful of thinking.

But when we mistake our concepts about what is happening for what is actually happening, that's when we lose the flow of attention. That's when we find ourselves living in a secondhand world of concepts defined by the river of stories rather than the actual immediate lived experience. It's like we're haunted by our thoughts, our stories, our dreams, and we can't get beyond them.

Let me give you an example. Let's say I'm minding my own business and suddenly a memory comes up from a long time ago, many years ago—a memory of a past humiliation or past trauma, something that happened a long time ago and which greatly affected me at the time. Now, I know this memory is telling me about something which is not present. It's absent. Yet when the memory arises, my body instantly reacts, instantly responds. The body cringes to some extent, or I feel tension in the stomach, or heat in the face. The body reacts instantly.

How can this be? The body is radically present. Physical experience is radically present. The body knows nothing about the past. It knows nothing about the future. It's always present. A physical experience always happens in the present. If I touch something and feel that touch, when does it happen? It happens now. It doesn't happen in the past. It doesn't happen in the future. It's now.

Yet the body is here responding to something that very clearly and obviously happened in the past, a past which doesn't exist for it. Why does the body respond so strongly? Because the mind convinces the body that this event is happening right now. Without that delusion, the body would be unmoved by the memory. The mind has this power to create an illusion so strong that the body instantly buys into it and believes it.

So the problem is not the memory, and it's not these physical sensations. The problem is the delusion that convinces me that what is not happening now, what is not phenomenally real, is happening now, is phenomenally real. This is the central delusion that comes from the realm of concept. Is this making sense? We hope so.

So let's look at life in the realm of concept. What is life like here? Concept gives us a world of meaning—I know what this means—and therefore a world of names. If you look at the Buddha's analysis of experience, how does experience work? Experience comes through the senses, which are sensitivities to particular kinds of data. Take the eye: the eye is the part of the body which is sensitive to light, so the eye

sees visible form.

So light and colour. And visible form itself has no meaning. But if I'm looking in your direction, I don't just see visible form—I see *you*. Where the concept "you" is a name I place on top of what I'm seeing. So there's what I'm actually seeing, and then there's the name I put on top of it.

Similarly, the ear just hears sounds. But if I'm listening to my friend speaking to me, I'm not just hearing sound waves striking against the ear. I'm listening to something good or something bad, something useful or something useless, something interesting or something boring. My mind takes the direct experience and then creates meaning from it, and it does this through putting layers of concept on top of the direct experience. One term that the Buddha uses to talk about this process is *nimitta*, which can be translated as "sign."

This word *nimitta* indicates a label that we add to the immediacy of experience in order to create meaning. We name the experience to create meaning. We've been playing with this in the meditation when we name what we note—we do that to create meaning. This is what it is.

Let's give an example out of meditation, the sort of thing which you may be familiar with. Let's say I am sitting peacefully in meditation with no thought. Has that ever happened? And then suddenly I *know* that I'm sitting peacefully in meditation with no thought. What happens then? Often what will happen is that immediately this experience ceases. It's gone, because I've just placed a name on it to give it meaning. I name it as, "Oh, that's good. The practice is working really well." I've put a name on it and created meaning out of it, but in doing so I've just destroyed it.

Some of you were talking about this in the morning in terms of noting the thought stream. Remember the first one we did—stop thinking? I think somebody commented that, yes, they noticed the thinking, they managed to stop thinking, but then they thought, "Oh, that's good. I'm doing it." It's the same process. Something happens, but it has no significance, no meaning until I name it. So I put a name on top of it, and now it has significance for me, now it fits somewhere. But of course in this case I've just wrecked it.

When I name an experience, I separate myself from it and create a duality of me, the practitioner, having this experience over there, which is my meditation experience. And then I place some kind of value on it. That's a good experience. That's a bad experience. Then it takes on a role in my personal narrative, and its role is to advance the interests of the practitioner. So I suddenly enter into this world of concept through the process of naming the experience.

Now, this process of naming, signing, conceptualizing includes language, obviously, but signs and names go deeper than language. For example, as I walk about the house, I know where I am going. Have you ever had that experience when you're walking through your house and you know where you're going? But how do you know where you're going? I'm not thinking about it, but still I know. So this is a concept that I'm imposing upon the experience, and one that comes much deeper than mere thought.

I used to play around with this when I was doing my own meditation in a center in Malaysia where I had—this is a fair while ago—they gave me a monk's hut. In those days, the monks' huts, unlike the lay accommodation, had no electricity, because the abbot thought that good Buddhist monks don't need luxuries like electricity. So in order to get a hot drink, I used to take my thermos towards the end of each afternoon and walk down the path to a place where they had hot water on tap, fill up the thermos, and walk back. Every afternoon about the same time, I'd walk down this path, fill up the thermos, walk back again.

One day it occurred to me—because I was practicing mindfulness of walking—is it possible for me to walk down this path and not know where I'm going? So I practiced this for some time, and every now and again it would happen. I'd be walking down this completely familiar path and I wouldn't know where I was going, because the concept dropped away. But it didn't last, because not long after I noticed, "Oh, this is what's happening," it would come up again. It's quite interesting to play around with.

What we normally call thinking is a relatively superficial aspect of the meaning-making of the mind. This making of meaning goes a lot deeper than just thought. In fact, we could say that as long as an experience means something, then we're caught up in the world of concept. We're living in that world.

The *nimitta*, the sign, enables us to navigate our experience and make sense out of it. For example, let's say I'm visiting a friend, and my friend lives at 15 Smith Street. I've never been there before.

So I rely on my navigation app to get me there. My app first finds Smith Street and then takes me to number 15. It tells me I've arrived. I stop the car, I look, and sure enough, there is a sign on the fence saying 15. I've arrived. Excellent.

So I get out of the car and I stand in front of that sign that says 15. And I wait for my friend to appear. Although we had an appointment and he definitely should be here now, there's no sign of him. He's not here. So I wait with increasing impatience. Where is he? I'm where he said to be. I'm at 15 Smith Street. There's the 15. I'm right here. So where is he?

Meanwhile, my friend is in the house wondering why I haven't turned up. If eventually we meet and I berate him for not being there, he'd be quite confused about what I'm talking about. And if I told him what happened, he would have reason to think I'd completely lost it, that I was totally mad. Because he might point out—especially if he's a Buddhist philosopher—that whatever the sign is, it cannot be my friend's house, because it points toward my friend's house. A sign that says X cannot be X, because it points toward X. Whatever else it is, it cannot be that, because otherwise it wouldn't have its function of pointing toward something.

But does that mean the sign is useless? No, because without the sign, I would be lost. I would never find the house in the first place. But I would be equally lost if I stopped at the sign and became upset because my friend wasn't there.

Signs are useful. Signs are necessary. We can't function in the world without them. But if we take the sign to be the reality, if we take the sign to be what the sign points toward, then we are lost in confusion. Then we really don't know what's going on. And the confusion comes because we take the concept to be what is really going on.

From the Buddha's perspective, this is what we do all the time. We are lost in the world created by concepts because we take the concepts to be real.

So again, we use concepts to construct the self. And we need to construct the self. It's not that we can get away with not constructing a self. If we went through life without constructing a self, we would pretty much need twenty-four-hour care. The self is necessary. For the Buddha, the self is real—but it's real only as a concept. In other words, "I" is a useful sign pointing to something. And the problem is that if I try to put into words what that something is that "I" is pointing toward, what do I come up with? Another concept. This is where we get lost in this world.

So when Dogen Zenji—or rather the Chinese teacher Hong Dao of Yao Shan—says "non-thinking" in answer to the question "How do you think not-thinking?", what he's talking about is a relationship to experience in which we don't get caught up in the concepts. We don't mistake the sign for what the sign is pointing toward. This is a mind which is not lost in the realm of concept.

It's the same. But the map is useful, even though it isn't the territory. Whatever it is, it can't be the territory.

So how do we practice cutting through the realm of concept? The Buddha speaks about the signless samadhi, the *animitta samadhi*. He also talks about the signless liberation, *animitta vimutti*. The signless represents the realm not dependent upon concept—it's the realm of awakening, of enlightenment.

Notice that he describes the signless as both samadhi and liberation. Samadhi means a practice, something that we do, while liberation is a realization, something that happens to us. Let's look at it firstly in terms of practice.

We've already talked about this in our discussion of the one-way street. Remember how we spoke of noting as the active awareness of experience—the elemental quality of experience, what Nyanaponika Thera calls bare attention. A sensation is just a sensation, a thought is just a thought, an emotion is just an emotion. This is noting, and this is what we practice from day one.

In its maturity, this is the practice that the Buddha explains to Bahiya of the Bark Cloth. He says: "Then Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, there will be just the seen. In the heard, just the heard. In the sensed, just the sensed. In the known, just the known. In this way, you should train yourself."

This is a very famous passage where the Buddha sums up the complete practice in one paragraph. In the seen there will be just the seen, and so on; in the known, just the known. The known here represents the

sixth sensitivity—the mind—which we explored today in terms of tracking the thought stream. What we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think, or mind is just that. It's just what it is. Nothing else.

In tracking the thought stream, we're learning to pay attention to the activity of thinking, the process of thinking, and see it as just an activity, just a process, nothing more. When we do this, we learn not to take the contents of our thoughts so seriously. As this practice develops, we become actually more interested in the activity of thinking than what we are thinking about, in terms of ordinary everyday thinking. And we begin to recognize the gap between what we think a situation is and what it really is.

Again, we return to the experience of anticipation as an example. How often have you anticipated some event or situation and been excited by it or alarmed by it? And how often does it turn out that the story we tell ourselves about this anticipated event is identical to the actual event when it occurs? In my case, when I've kept account, it's never the same. Never.

It's not simply that we anticipate the future in terms of planning, which is very useful. But we become stuck in the conviction that things will turn out as we are anticipating them now—which is wrong, which is a delusion. If we can learn to recognize that anticipation is just anticipation, then we can plan for the future without losing our sense of adaptability, without losing a sense of being ready for the unexpected. Because we know, as we enter into the event, that we really do not know how things will unfold. And so we're ready to pivot as soon as we recognize what is actually happening.

But if we take the anticipation to be the future, then we charge into that future and don't see where our plans are actually counterproductive, where they're clearly not working. Our tendency is to double down and keep charging ahead because it must be right—the concept is right, the theory is right, so this must be right.

To recognize that a concept is just a concept gives us a great deal more maneuverability in the world.

Now let's look at the signless liberation from the perspective of realization. What is the realm beyond concept? What is that world like?

First of all, the world continues to function as it did before. We are still seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. We're in a world of experience. But we are no longer dependent upon a world of named experience, of conceptualized experience. Rather, we're in an unnamed experience.

An unnamed experience has a particular characteristic to it: it cannot be pinned down as anything at all. Later on, we could look back and name it as something.

But we know that the label has already missed the mark—that there's a gap between the actuality and the name we place upon it. And we can never cross that gap. There's always a gap between the actuality of the experience and the name that we put upon it.

Now, this may sound mystical, but it's something that all of us are familiar with. Let's say, for example,

that I am an enthusiastic coffee drinker. Let's say that I have a friend who very strangely and very oddly drinks tea instead of coffee, which you must admit is kind of incomprehensible. So in my compassion, I may try to explain to him the unique pleasure that comes from drinking a good cup of coffee, and how this is manifestly superior to whatever pleasure you get from drinking a cup of tea. Now, no matter how eloquent I am, can I convey this experience to him? Of course I can't. It's impossible. Because no amount of concepts about the experience of drinking a good cup of coffee can ever replace a good cup of coffee. There's a gap between the concept and the real that cannot be bridged. It's always there.

And in the signless liberation, we learn to live in that gap. This is living in the *animitta*, the signless. It's a world in which names do not apply. Ordinary life goes on—we see, we hear, we think, and so on. But we learn to recognize that while our seeing, our hearing, our thinking are real, they are actually present, what we see, what we hear, what we think—these are not what we take them to be. Our perceptions and our judgments of what we are sensing are wrong. They may be useful. They may even be necessary to get us through the day. But they are fundamentally wrong.

So then we ask, well, what is right? If the concepts are wrong, then what's right? As soon as we reach out to put a label on something, to name it as something, we are clinging to certainty. And this is what the world of concept gives us—it gives us certainty. I know what this is. And we really value certainty. But the price of that certainty is clinging to a meaning, to a concept, and when we cling we are stuck and we are in pain.

But when we recognize that our label does not match the reality, that our concept is wrong, then we can relax. We can relax into uncertainty. And this uncertainty stimulates our curiosity. I don't know. So what is it after all? We become curious. We don't take things for granted, but instead we are alert to what's unfolding right now. We're present to the actuality of the experience, rather than this web of habitual concepts about our present experience.

And this attitude is really important in meditation practice—that we learn not to take anything for granted, to not assume that we know what it is, but to look: what is it? When we think we know, we fall into habit. If I think I know what's going on, I don't really need to pay attention anymore. It's like getting into a car and driving down familiar streets. I don't really need to pay attention to the act of driving because I already know how to drive. So I can drive while thinking of something else. I can pivot my reality into the realm of concept and avoid the activity of driving the car. And I do this because I think I know how to drive and I think I know how to get from here to there.

Now, of course, in practical terms, I do know how to drive and I can get from here to there. But what's happening is I'm operating under autopilot. And the experience of driving from here to there—I'm separated from it by this web of concept. The mind is dull because it's in a state of habit. I'm just drifting and dreaming. I arrive at my destination and I might realize I have no memory of that trip. It might be that I wanted to check whether a certain shop was open because I was driving past it. And I might realize

I've got no idea whether that shop is open or not. I'm not even sure that it's even there. I can't register even seeing it.

So this is the world of habit. And habit—the world of habit—is the world of habitual concept. Concept gives us certainty, which is why it's so attractive. But when we're certain, we fall back into habit, which means we're asleep. When we know that we don't know, then we stay alert. Because I don't know what's going to happen next. If I don't know what's going to happen next, then I pay attention. And then I'm present for the experience. And then the experience has a whole different flavor to it.

This is what in the Zen tradition they call beginner's mind—which is used to describe the mature practitioner.

As I like to point out to people when we start a retreat, I check to see who's new in the audience, who has never done a retreat before. A few people will very tentatively raise their hands, and I explain to them: you have an enormous advantage over these other people in this room. There are people in this room who have been meditating for many years, and they are so lost in their delusions that they think they know what's going to happen next. They think they know this will happen on day one, that will happen on day two, and they can expect this to happen on day three. Completely lost.

Whereas you, as a beginner—you know you don't know what's going to happen next. This is naive beginner's mind. And I promise them that if they practice diligently and skillfully over a long period of time, one day they will know that they don't know what's going to happen next. And this is mature beginner's mind. This is what the Zen tradition greatly values.

And this is the world of the signless liberation—stepping out of the realm of concept.

The way the Buddha explains it to Bāhiya: "When there is just seen in the seen, just the heard in the heard, just the sensed in the sensed, just the known in the known—then you are not by that. When you are not by that, then you are not there. When you are not there, then you are neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

I can't put it any clearer than the way the Buddha puts it.

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