

Robert Cusick 04-07-2010



Robert has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1997 and is a student of Gil Fronsdal. He trained as a Buddhist monk, under the Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw, at Pa Auk Forest Monastery in southern Myanmar (Burma). He also trained in the Soto Zen tradition at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center and with A.H. Almaas (Hameed Ali) in the Diamond Approach (DH6). Before leaving for Burma, Robert participated in the second Buddhist Chaplaincy training offered through the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and he completed the first Dedicated Practitioners Program (DPP1) at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. He subsequently served there, upon his return to the U.S., in the role of Retreats Program Manager. Robert is a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher.

Mind and Mind Objects

“The Buddha’s great insight was that everything that matters happens in the mind.”
Richard Gombrich

Everything of importance happens in the mind. The mind is the knower. The mind in its natural state is still; nothing disturbs it. Objects of the mind are the things that make up our experience, such as emotions, sensations, and thoughts. Anything that moves or changes is a mind object, a phenomena.

One way to envision this is to think of the mind as a mirror. The mirror doesn’t move - the images in the mirror are the things that move and change. Images in the mirror are mind objects – all the thoughts, passions, sensations, and feelings passing through the mind are like the images in the mirror. They are impermanent, imperfect, and they are not the self.

About this mind... In truth there is nothing really wrong with it. It is intrinsically pure. Within itself it’s already peaceful. That the mind is not peaceful these days is because it follows moods. The real mind doesn’t have anything to it, it is simply (an aspect of) Nature. It becomes peaceful or agitated because moods deceive it. The untrained mind is stupid. Sense impressions come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness and sorrow, but the mind’s true nature is none of those things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind, but only a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things, it forgets itself. Then we think that it is we who are upset or at ease or whatever.

But really this mind of ours is already unmoving and peaceful... really peaceful! Just like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind — the "fluttering" is due to those sense impressions; the mind follows them. If it doesn’t follow them, it doesn’t "flutter." If we know fully the true nature of sense impressions we will be unmoved.

Our practice is simply to see the Original Mind. So we must train the mind to know those sense impressions, and not get lost in them. To make it peaceful. Just this is the aim of all this difficult practice we put ourselves through.

- Ajahn Chah

"Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen — clear, limpid, and unsullied — where a man with good eyes standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting, and it would occur to him, 'This pool of water is clear, limpid, and unsullied. Here are these shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also these shoals of fish swimming about and resting;' so too, the monk discerns as it actually is, that 'This is stress... This is the origin of stress... This is the stopping of stress... This is the way leading to the stopping of stress...'"

Samaññaphala Sutta, Digha Nikaya

Once we realize that we are not our thoughts, that our emotions are not us, we can start to discern mind from mind objects. This process allows us to slow down the reactions and knee-jerk responses that otherwise would occur. Mind objects are an endless chain of causality – one thought leads to another, one emotion leads to an action, which causes another thought or emotion. This chain can be broken by the moment of clarity, like seeing the mind as the mirror. All those things that are happening are not the mirror – they are just reflections and images. By recognizing this difference, we can return to the place of stillness, the place of knowing, and act from clarity, not confusion. Seeing the difference between the mirror and the images in the mirror is Right View.

Through cultivating the habit of living with the awareness of our deepest intentions, we incline the mind 'naturally' towards the experience of wholesomeness in an on-going way.

By clarifying our intentions, we

- begin to cultivate "right view" (i.e., the effort to discern clearly where we go wrong and how we create our suffering)
- begin to see the distinction between what is "mind" (i.e., the knower, our fundamental nature that in itself is very peaceful, in itself still) and what are the "objects of mind" (i.e., the phenomena arising or moving in the mind – or the characteristics, complexities and diversity of things which easily lead to judgments or preferences, wishing things to be a certain way (other than the way they are.)
- slowly begin to know and see how we get entangled in the objects and phenomena of the mind, how we create identity thinking mind objects are us, our mind or that 'this is me.'
- begin to distinguish what is or isn't "Dhamma" and then begin to see and take Dhamma as our Refuge. We begin to recognize the way things actually function -- arising and ceasing according to causes and conditions, arising and ceasing according kamma. (The Buddha's great innovation was to make ethical value depend not upon what is overt but rather on intention. So, we begin to see clearly that kamma is a 'process,' an ethical principal of continuity. Its action or result arises out of our own intentions.)

This purifies the mind stream because we're able to step out of the sense of desire and judgments, as well as out of the realm of 'self.' In doing so, we're able to apply our efforts skillfully to create a sense of well being, clarity and balance (or equanimity). This naturally...

- deepens tranquility and
- cultivates laser-like focus (for vipassana practice)

Right Effort includes the Balance needed to...

- keep returning to the place of knowing, the heart of clarity, where there is a sense of the 'mind' itself.
- to establish a fresh start (over and over again) from a place of stillness
- to receive the circumstances of our lives from that point (of view or place of stillness). This allows the Dhamma to unfold naturally in our lives.
- clearly see how our expectations and comparisons (with others or with our own previous experiences) gives rise to the judging, comparing mind and leads to a proliferation of thoughts and emotions

Because we don't see things clearly, we're blinded by our passions and preferences. Our emotions control us because we don't see things, as they really are. One very skillful way we can begin to live from a place of clarity and learn how to skillfully respond to the ever-changing conditions in our lives is through investigating the difference between mind and mind objects...

When we're able to see clearly, we see through our sense of 'self' and are able to step out of the realm of judgments and personal desires for things to be a certain way. Only then can we apply our efforts effectively, in order to create a sense of well being, stability and peace in our meditation and in our lives.

This is actually like a returning 'home' to The Dhamma. It is a process where 'no effort' at all is involved. There is just a subtle balance, a surrendering, a natural relinquishment – then the mind settles.

So, how can we be with our experience in ways that allow us to dwell in the refuge of Dhamma? How do we put forth effort, or hold our attention, so that the 'mind' is stable and peaceful? How can we recognize the characteristics of the true Dhamma?

We can look to The Buddha for the answer. The characteristics of the Dhamma that the Buddha pointed to over and over again are described as those 'cooling' qualities of dispassion, disenchantment and a sense of relinquishment.

Cultivating the Paramis is another way of developing peace and stability of mind in accordance with the Dhamma. The ten (10) Paramis or spiritual perfections include...

1. generosity (dana)
2. virtue (sila)
3. renunciation
4. patience
5. effort
6. discernment
7. loving kindness (metta)
8. equanimity (ekaggata)
9. truth
10. determination

The cultivation of these qualities leads us to the refuge of stillness.

But, even these must be tempered with an underlying quality of relinquishment, disenchantment and dispassion. By doing so, we can fully embrace the qualities of restraint, virtue and generosity. Through developing these qualities, we slowly come to recognize the difference between the underlying heart of stillness, the mind of clarity and the objects of mind or the myriad ways in which the world displays itself. By putting our effort and attention here, we give ourselves the opportunity to rest in virtue and the recollection of cultivated goodness and it is also here that we can establish a directly experienced sense of 'non-self.'

"When these are the conditions...everything clicks. The mind settles and drops into a place of profound stillness. You're right there with it and this space is very peaceful and blissful. There's a genuine sense of well being because you're not trying to force [things] to be a certain way or anyway at all. You are not coming at [your meditation] from an [imagined] ideal of how things should be. Conditions are just right. They accord with Dhamma. Action is grounded in dispassion, equanimity, disenchantment and clarity. From that place, we can be extraordinarily vigorous and resolute. We recognize that things are the way they are based on causes and conditions (i.e., based on our kamma, the ethical principal of continuity that holds us responsible for our intentions and actions).

This practice is one of trying to simplify how we view and investigate things, so that we can really start to get a clearer handle on the difference between the fundamental mind, [the knower] and the objects of mind or the phenomena of mind. There is actually a [qualitative] difference of feeling, in how we experience this [in our meditation and in our lives.] Exploring this and investigating how to return to that fundamental 'mind,' our 'original home,' is the abiding place of our true Refuge."

...loosely quoted from a talk given by Ajahn Pasanno, at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery

By sharing the merit of our good intentions, we create good kamma. Let our efforts be a supportive cause for the awakening of others.