DISSOLVING *THE HOOK*

*Shenpa* is a Tibetan concept that has caught my attention over the years. Googling the term persistently brings up articles by Pema Chodron, who is an established author and proponent of *Lojong*, a training discipline in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Chodron has provided a translation that is not literal but is quite useful: the *hook*. I am a proponent of working with meditation as a craft, a skill one acquires through instruction and diligent practice. The concept of the hook is similar to the Theravadin terms *tanha* and *upadana*, *craving* and *clinging*. Another Theravadin concept that applies is *papanca*, (pah-pahn-chah), the proliferation of concepts from an initial sensory perception, that is, the process of jumping to a conclusion that creates *a sense of self that is separate from “the other”* which could be an external object or an unpleasant feeling like pain.

We are almost constantly confronted with situations that stimulate the hook. The most pervasive and unconscious hook is the “selfing story’, the internal narrative that runs almost nonstop, particularly for those of us who haven’t developed proficiency in vipassana practice and the cultivation of samadhi/passadhi. The hook reinforces a felt need to create a self in order to confirm that I’m alive and real. I became aware of this fabricating process on a retreat; after a period of persistent samadhi/passadhi, a nonsensical story formed in awareness and it occurred to me that the story, as silly and irrelevant as it was, provided an assurance that I am still here! This is an underlying condition that prompts the realization of dukkha, that life (as created through identifying with the selfing story) is inherently dukkha, that is, richly endowed with persistent greed, hatred and ignorance. The product of these three roots of dukkha is distress and confusion.

The more frequently thoughts and actions are controlled by the hook, the stronger and more seductive they become. The strongest and most seductive part of the hook process is self-creation. The ego is broadly considered as a noun—my ego—and it is really a dynamic sorting process. When the senses are stimulated by light, sound, etc., that signal is undefined. As the signal passes through very complex channels of neural activity, some possible meanings are organized as to what the signal represents. This process has happened from the very beginning of life, and the sorting process automatically creates a dichotomy—the stimulus and awareness of the stimulus; the processed experience (papanca) and awareness of the dynamic, ongoing process of moments of awareness. These moments blend together because the awareness does that, and that awareness is identified with as *myself*.

This indicates two levels of processing: The *myself* or *observer* process, along with the mentally created *other*, which can be stimulated by an event separate from the body, such as a sound, or internally through the experience of pain or pleasure. Mistaking this process as reliably true and inherently believable and then feeling compelled to act on the process is shenpa. The bait on the hook is wanting pleasure and avoiding pain and the hook is identifying with that process as “This is who I am and this is how the world really is.”

I like to think about meditation as a craft--craftsmanship is a deliberately cultivated set of skills that are intended to produce something useful. Something useful could be an object (such as jewelry, which I used to make professionally) or a musical performance. For our purposes, this craftsmanship is dedicated to liberation from dukkha. We take the raw material of sensory experience and transform that flow of stimulation into a coherent sense of being the *operator* who creates a response to that experience. For the most part, that creation is functional to the extent that we can continue to live, but often that living is tinted with distress and confusion.

The basic strategy of Buddhist practice is to mindfully investigate the process that creates the self and the response to the circumstance. This investigation can identify the hook and desensitize to impulsively reacting to the urgent demand of papanca and instead creating a response that is organized by benevolent intention, that is, kindness, compassion, generosity, tolerance and patience.

There are strategies for developing this capability, and they are based on the fundamental practice involved in mindfulness of breathing meditation. Here are some of the ways this capability can be established and reinforced:

* Establish a persistent daily mindfulness meditation practice with the commitment to cultivate samadhi/passadhi (stability of attention/tranquility). Samadhi/passadhi creates a process of awareness that doesn’t have to have a subject/object perspective—the mind is stable and smooth in the flow of awareness, with few or no intrusive thoughts or urgent feelings, so there is less likelihood of the presence of an *other* for the self to form around.
* Practice noting the *beginning* of each in-breath with as much clarity of present-moment awareness as possible and do the same procedure at the very *beginning* of the out-breath. This practice develops and strengthens the ability to notice the “beginnings” of internal events so that you can notice the beginning of the *hook* process sooner rather than later.
* Of course, the mind will wander away from breath awareness; practice noting that wandering as soon as possible with as much clarity as possible. In this way we train to notice the hook process when it is still forming; the intention to note the beginning of the in-breath transfers to the intention to note the beginning of the hook process when it is less potent in its urgency and demand for identification.
* Over time, with diligent practice, insight into what is ordinarily unconsciously conditioned papanca processes becomes more evident. At the highest level of practice, the hook to be dissolved is the subject/object dichotomy; this leads to increasing awareness of anatta, the absence of an enduring and autonomous self.