

Becoming

July 23, 2007

Try to keep track of the breath. Don't think about the fact that you're going to be here for a whole hour. Just think about this breath, and then this breath, each breath, one breath at a time. Think about it and watch it, see what it does. What do you notice when it comes in; what do you notice when it goes out? What way of coming in feels best for the body; what way of letting it go out feels best for the body? The breath is called the fabricator of the body, or bodily fabrication—*kaya-sankhara*—both because the way you breathe has a huge impact on the way you experience your body, and because there's an intentional element in the breath. It's one of the few bodily processes that can be either voluntary or involuntary. So make the most of the fact that you can exert some voluntary control over it. You can choose when to breathe in; you can choose when to breathe out. Then it's a matter of learning the best reasons for choosing to breathe in or breathe out in any particular way.

Can you sense how the body tells you that now's a good time for an in-breath, now's a good time for an out-breath? It has its signals, you know. There are certain feelings in the body that you can learn to recognize over time, and you can explore how best to respond to them. Take their cue in such a way that it leads to a sense of fullness. For example, you can breathe in till the body feels full, and then you don't squeeze it out. Allow it to stay full. Even though the breath will go out, you can still maintain some sense of fullness. When the next breath comes in, add a little bit more fullness. The same with the next and the next. It builds up over time. Simply by approaching the breathing process in a particular way, you can create a state of ease, you can create a state of fullness—even a sense of fullness that's a bit too much. Sometimes people can begin to feel that they're going to drown in breath energy. You might want to temper that a little bit. But as long as the fullness feels refreshing and blissful, stick with it.

There was once a senior monk in Bangkok who was learning meditation from Ajaan Lee. He was well read and knew his Buddhist doctrine. After a while of practicing concentration, he complained to Ajaan Lee, "As we bring the mind to concentration like this, aren't we developing states of becoming and birth?" *Bhava* and *jati* are the words he used. You may have noticed as we were chanting the Sutta on Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion just now: The craving that leads to further becoming is the craving that leads to suffering as well. The senior

monk was reasoning from this point, saying that we should be trying to abandon states of becoming and birth, and yet here we are creating them. And Ajaan Lee said, "Precisely. That's what we're doing. If you want to understand becoming and birth, you have to consciously create these states. Create a state of wellbeing, create a state of fullness, get good at it. That's when you understand the process. Before you take things apart, you have to learn how to put them together."

And that's what we're doing right now, creating a state of becoming, a state of wellbeing or well-becoming. We do this both so that we can get good at creating it and so that, in the course of creating it, we can put the mind in a good spot where it can watch things more carefully, more clearly. When the mind is comfortable in the present moment, at ease in the present moment, it can stay firmly in the present moment and watch processes transparently as they come, as they go. You get a better sense of your raw materials.

The creating of a state of becoming in the mind like this is the kamma of your meditation, right here, right now. A lot of people believe that kamma is one of those teachings that's not particularly relevant to their meditation practice. But essentially, kamma is what the practice is all about. After all, kamma is what you're doing to create suffering. Changing your kamma is what's going to bring suffering to an end. The Buddha tends to avoid talking about metaphysical issues, but kamma is the one big metaphysical issue he talks about a lot. The nature of action, what action does, when it gives its results, the fact that action is real, that it gives results both immediately and over time: These are metaphysical issues. And the reason the Buddha focuses on these and not on other issues is because the nature of action is important for understanding why we suffer and how we can stop suffering. There's the kamma that leads to suffering; there's the kamma that leads to its end.

So we're here trying to understand what action is all about, what action does, and what it creates. And our state of concentration is Exhibit A, our primary example of action right here. We're creating a state of wellbeing. You can't let go of states of wellbeing until you learn how to make good ones. Ajaan Lee's example, when he was talking to that senior monk, was of having a chicken that lays eggs. Some of the eggs, he said, you can take apart and analyze; some of the eggs you can eat. If you don't have anything to eat, you don't have the strength to take things apart and analyze them. We're feeding on the sense of ease that comes from the concentration because that gives us the strength to analyze things.

How do you analyze things? You take things apart in terms of what you're fabricating and of the raw materials with which you're fabricating them.

For example, we all know the teaching that you create a sense of self out of any of the five aggregates, all of which are activities. Well, you can watch

yourself as you meditate: Exactly how do you create a sense of *me* or *mine* around what you're doing? One thing you tend to see very quickly is the way your sense of self gets involved as you watch yourself doing the meditation well or poorly. When things aren't going well, you think you're a hopeless meditator. You get all tied up in knots. When they're going well, you get complacent and think you're a great meditator. Either way, you set yourself up for trouble. But when you realize that this is the process of I-making and my-making in action, you learn to leave things at the level of the raw materials. You don't have to make an "I" out of them, just notice that there are feelings, perceptions, fabrications. As you watch these things even more carefully, you begin to realize that even these aggregates have an element of fabrication, an element of intention, in what you thought was their raw form.

As the Buddha says, we create form for the sake of form-ness. Your sense of the form of the body is something you fashion out of sensations so that you can breathe and move. You can create formless states as well. This is what you learn when you move from the fourth jhana into the four formless states: the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception. You realize that you do create a sense of form with regard to the body by the way you move the breath around. When the breath is very, very still, that sense of form begins to disintegrate, to dissolve away, and you have the choice of not applying the perception of form to the body. You become sensitive to the space that permeates between the atoms of sensation making up your sense of the body. All the places where you feel space in the body begin to connect and then they connect with the space outside.

It's as if you have a mist of atoms here. In order to breathe, you applied perceptions—i.e., mental labels—to that mass of mist; you had an image of the form of the body that allowed you to make it move. But when you don't have to move the body around—you don't even have to move the breath around—everything grows very still and you can drop that sense of form if you want to. You can choose instead to focus on the perception of space permeating the mist. That's when you experience the infinitude of that space—and at that point you begin to realize that even the perception of form or the experience of form contains an element of intention. You then begin to see this process in relation to the formless realms as well: When you drop the perception of space, you're left with a perception of "knowing." That's how you move from a sense of the infinitude of space to the infinitude of consciousness. These experiences can be willed, and the fact that they're so subtle allows the willing to be transparent.

What you're doing is to take your experience apart, layer by layer, seeing where the different levels of intention get involved and learning how to drop them. As you progressively do away with these layers of intention, you get down

to what the Buddha calls knowledge of things as they have come to be. As he said, only when he had gained knowledge of things as they have come to be—in terms of the four noble truths, and the three levels of knowledge about each truth—did he claim full Awakening. That’s the kind of knowledge we’re working our way down to. And the only way you can get down to that level of unintended, unshaped, unfabricated experience, getting down to the absolutely rawest of the raw materials of the present moment, is first by consciously putting them together into something. Otherwise, you miss a lot of subtleties.

Sometimes you hear people say: “Try to sit with things simply as they are, right from the very beginning of the meditation, and you can get into a state of equanimity or pure mindfulness. And then you realize that that equanimity is unfabricated. Equanimity and mindfulness: That’s it, that’s the unfabricated.” But that’s not the case at all. Equanimity and mindfulness, when they’re pure, constitute the fourth jhana, not the unfabricated. There’s an element of fabrication in mindfulness; there’s even an element of fabrication in equanimity. But unless you learn consciously how to fabricate mindfulness and equanimity for long periods of time and then how to observe them, you won’t notice this. This is why you have to build up these states of concentration before you can start taking them apart.

There’s a sutta where the Buddha talks about the issue of thirsting for becoming, thirsting for non-becoming, and seeing things as they have come to be. He starts out with two extremes: There are people who just love becoming this, becoming that, creating states of being as much as they can; and there are other people who want to destroy states of being. They’ve gotten sick of what they’ve done in terms of creating their world and their experiences, and they just want to destroy the whole thing. The Buddha says that neither extreme is proper. In creating things, you just create more suffering. That point is obvious. But in destroying these things, you create a different kind of state of becoming, the process of searching for non-becoming. That, he says, simply leads to more becoming. You take on the identity of the destroyer, the annihilator. The trick is to see simply what has come to be, i.e., to see the raw materials you’ve been shaping into the present simply as that—as raw materials—and then learn to develop dispassion for them.

It’s as if you’ve been building houses with what you thought were bricks. But if you look carefully at the bricks, you realize that they’re actually frozen meat. Of course any house built out of frozen meat, as it gets exposed to the heat, is going to turn into a big pile of rotting flesh. When you realize that, you develop dispassion for the activity of building houses; you develop dispassion for the raw materials. That’s when you let go. You don’t have to destroy the houses. They disintegrate on their own. The issue here is learning to see the raw materials

simply as they are, as something that's come into being through your past kamma. And no matter how skillful you are at building an elaborate house with lots of gingerbread and balconies and whatever, it's still frozen meat and it's going to thaw.

So when you develop dispassion for what's come to be, you find true freedom. You stop this process of fabricating, building, creating states of being. You don't have to destroy the states of being. Simply the fact that you've stopped creating them, stopped clinging to them, lets them fall away on their own. And your dispassion means that you won't replace them with new ones.

It's a subtle skill, which means that you can't go straight to the letting go. First you've got to learn how to build properly. Only then can you see the subtleties of the intentions in the mind and, at the same time, get a felt sense for your raw materials. Otherwise you hold to the intention of being equanimous, and think that that's it. Or to the intention of being totally passive, nonreactive, and think that that's it—without seeing that that, too, is an intention; that, too, has an element of will that keeps it going.

So try to be as skillful as you can in staying with the breath, in creating a sense of wellbeing through the breathing, because it teaches you a lot of important lessons about the element of kamma, the element of will and fabrication that goes into the present moment. It teaches you about the raw materials and the many levels of intention there within them. You take these raw materials and turn them into a transparent state that allows you to watch these processes in action, so that someday you, too, can reach that point where, after putting things together, you can take them apart, see things simply as they come into being, develop dispassion for them, and drop them. That way you can test for yourself: When the Buddha said that there is an unfabricated, is what he said really true?

It may seem like we're going in the opposite direction as we fabricate concentration here, but the only way you're going to see what's unfabricated is if you're totally sensitive to every level of fabrication possible. So although we're creating a state of becoming here with the breath—a state of wellbeing, a state of rapture, ease, unification of mind—as Ajaan Lee says, you're going to need to eat some of these eggs. You can't take them all apart; you can't destroy all of them. You've got to eat some of them in order to keep going. So feed yourself well.