

Beyond Nature

August 8, 2007

It's good to come back to a place like this where you can hear the crickets chirping in the evening, the sound of the doves in the late afternoon. There's something in the body and the mind that responds to being out in nature like this. The mind gets the chance to settle down, to put aside a lot of its cares. And for those of you who've been living in the city, cut off from nature, there's often the thought that if only you could get back to nature and stay there, that would solve all your problems. But go ask people who live in nature all the time, and they can tell you a long list of problems they still suffer from, living out in nature.

Think about human history as a whole. The times when people get really romantic about nature are the times when they don't have to live in it. The idea of romanticizing wilderness didn't come into force in America until the frontier had been closed, and nature had been tamed to some extent—to the extent that human beings can tame nature. It's important to keep this in mind as we practice. Coming out here doesn't solve all your problems. What it does is that it gives you a place to practice, so you can look deeper into where the real problems are.

When the Buddha talked about how conditions cause suffering, he wasn't talking just about your social conditioning. He was talking about conditions of nature. That chant we had just now—"the world is swept away"—doesn't refer just to the human social world or your psychological world. It also refers to the world as a whole. Everything in nature is marked with inconstancy, stress, things that lie beyond your control. This applies not only to human beings but also to animals of every kind.

You sometimes hear people romanticizing the mental life of animals, that they don't suffer because they don't have a sense of self. That's not the case. Animals often suffer more than we do. They live in constant fear, with no real understanding of what's going on around them. All they know is that they're hungry all the time, yet the need to go out and search for food forces them to place themselves in danger.

And you can read the writings of the forest monks: They certainly don't romanticize nature. Even Ajaan Lee, when he talks about the advantages of living in the forest and the lessons you learn there, doesn't talk about how nice it

is to get back and be one with nature. His focus is more on how nature is a dangerous place where you have to learn to be heedful all the time.

We don't suffer only because of our social conditioning. We suffer because we live in a world of inter-eating, where beings are constantly feeding on one another. We have this inner desire, this inner need to survive, to feed. To create, to keep these worlds that they call *bhava*—our emotional worlds, our mental worlds, and the physical world we live in—to keep our experience of these worlds going, to survive, requires that we feed on one another, emotionally, mentally, physically. And there's suffering not only in being eaten, but also in having to eat.

So the conditions the Buddha's talking about are not just social conditions. We don't suffer only because we're neurotic about our cravings. Craving in itself is a cause of suffering. It's also the cause of continued being and becoming. This is how nature keeps going: Animals crave. People crave. This is how we keep going, this is how we survive, this is how we die, how we get reborn.

So the ways of nature are not an ideal to which we're trying to return. They exemplify the problem, which is that as long as you have to feed, there's going to be suffering. As long as your happiness depends on conditions of any kind, there's going to be suffering and stress. The advantage of coming to a place like this is that you get to look deep inside the mind to see where the wellsprings of these cravings come from, this process of fabrication that lies deep within the mind.

As we meditate, we're trying to study fabrication as we experience it. This is the conditioning process in the mind and in the body. The basic fabrication in terms of the body is the breath. And as for the mind, there are two types of fabrication: verbal and mental. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. These are the processes with which you put sentences together in the mind. You focus on a topic and then you make comments about it. That conditions the mind. Then there's purely mental fabrication, which is feeling and perception, "perception" here meaning the labels you apply to things, while "feeling" means the different feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.

Normally, the way we put these things together causes stress and suffering. If you do this with ignorance, you suffer. If you can learn how to do it with knowledge, you can turn these processes of fabrication into the path. This doesn't mean that when you're on the path you don't suffer. It's simply a different type of suffering. It's a suffering that leads to the end of suffering, the kamma that leads to the end of kamma. There's still going to be a subtle level of suffering in the breath even when you're concentrated on it. The breath can get

very subtle and very pleasant, even rapturous, but there's still an element of stress there. But for the time being, you're going to use that as a path.

In fact, you put all three types of fabrication together to get the mind into concentration. You think about the breath—that's directed thought—and you evaluate the breath. You explore to see which ways of perceiving the breath help in the process of making it feel more comfortable, so you've got perception and feeling there as well.

In this way you're taking the process of fabrication and turning it into a path to the end of fabrication. As you do this, you begin to see how much your intentions really do shape these things. The Buddha's picture of your experience is not that you're simply a passive observer of things, commenting on them. In other words, it's not like watching a TV show. The TV show is a given, and you simply like it or dislike it or you're neutral about it. That's all. But that's not the Buddha's picture of experience. He says that you're actively engaged in shaping your experience all the time. In fact, the extent to which your intentions are shaping your experience goes a lot deeper and is a lot more radical than you might imagine. This is one of the insights of Awakening: how much your present intentions are needed for you to experience even the present moment. As the Buddha points out, all of the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness—have an element of intention in them.

There are lots of different potentials from your past kamma that you can focus on in any given moment. Your choice of what to focus on is going to determine what you experience. For instance, there are potentials for different kinds of feelings. There are places in the body that, if you focused on them, could get you really tied up in anguish or pain. You could take the germs of a pain and build them into something really overwhelming. There are other places in the body where there's a potential for pleasure. If you learn how to focus there, you can develop a strong sense of refreshment, rapture, wellbeing. Then you can let that pleasure and refreshment permeate and fill the body in the same way that the cool water in a spring coming from the bottom of a lake can fill the whole lake with its coolness.

So you have the choice of what you're going to focus on now—which sensations in the body help create a sense of wellbeing, which ones could create a sense of dis-ease, what you're going to think about, what you're going to focus on. Those are choices you make all the time. You take these potentials and turn them into an actual experience. When you realize how you do this, you can learn how to make your choices more skillfully.

This is the advantage of coming out into a relatively natural place like this. It's not totally natural. If we turned off the water, the avocado trees would die and the chaparral would take over. There wouldn't be any shade during the day.

So even here in the orchard it's not totally natural. But at least there's enough peace and quiet for you to look into the mind and see that the source of trouble is not your social conditioning as much as it's just the plain old fact of conditioning or fabrication—this process of becoming, which is fed by craving. When you hear those crickets cricketing out there, they're not doing it in total pleasure and joy. They're hungry. When you watch the animals around in the orchard, you see that they're hungry. They have to be wary as they venture out for food.

As a meditator, you have to be wary as well. Even when you create good states of concentration, that's still a type of becoming. It still depends on causes and conditions. At least it puts the mind in a position where it can observe the process of becoming and dig deeper, to watch the conditioning, to see how it happens—and ultimately to dig down to an area where there's no conditioning any more, which is something that stands outside of nature as we know it.

It's not the case that the conditioned comes from the unconditioned. The way the Buddha explained causality is that causes and effects influence each other. An effect turns around and has an influence on its cause. So there's no prime mover or first cause or ground of being in the Buddha's teachings at all, for every cause can get shaped by its effects. And if anybody had been qualified to talk about Buddha nature, the Buddha would have been the one. But he never talked about Buddha nature at all, never said that Buddha nature was the ground of being. He simply noted that there are causes and conditions that affect one another.

So if something is going to be unconditioned, it has to lie outside of the causal process entirely—something that's already there, but as long as you're entangled in fabrication you're not going to see it. The only way you can see it is if you turn the fabrication in the direction of the path, so that the way you breathe, the way you think, and the way you feel and perceive things is conditioned not by ignorance, but by knowledge, by awareness—in particular, awareness of which activities cause stress and which activities don't. That kind of awareness you develop gradually. It's a skill you work on as you get more and more sensitive both to the process of fabrication and to the stress that it causes even at very subtle levels. Ultimately, you bring the mind to the point where you realize that no matter which direction you fabricate, which direction you intend, there's going to be stress. If your discernment is sharp, you drop all intention at that point. That's when the mind opens up to this other dimension, which is totally separate.

So it's not the case that we're returning to a place we've come from. After all, as the Buddha points out, even little babies have their greed, anger, and delusion. It's just that their faculties and bodies aren't strong enough to act on those defilements very powerfully. But they suffer powerfully: You can see that very

clearly. As soon as a child comes out of the womb, it cries. A lot of the child's early life is spent in crying because it has all sorts of desires and yet can't fulfill them. It has all sorts of pains but doesn't know what to do about them. So we're not trying to return to that state or to a state of nature like an animal. We're trying to find something that goes beyond nature as we know it. After all, if we were simply returning to a state where we were before, what's to prevent us from coming back out of that state again? If we could forget our true wonderful nature, was it really all that wonderful or true? And what would prevent us from forgetting it again?

So instead of returning to something old, we look at this process of fabrication that's going on all the time to see if we can learn something new about it. Learn how to understand it, learn how to take it apart, use it as a path. Learn how, once it's taken you as far as it can take you, you can let it go. That, as the Buddha said, allows us to see something we've never seen before: to attain the as yet unattained, to realize the as yet unrealized. In other words, we're heading into totally new territory.

Keep that in mind as you practice. You can create wonderful luminous states in the mind, but remember that those, too, are fabricated. No matter what comes up in the practice, always learn how to familiarize yourself with it. And then learn to look for where there's still a level of inconstancy and stress in here — because that perception of stress and inconstancy will be your way out.