

Fabricating the Present

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Bring the mind to the breath, for this is where everything important is happening. You want to be as still as possible so that you can catch sight of all these important things happening, because most often we don't see that there's anything important here. The breath goes in, goes out. That's all we see, we've got other business to do, so we let it go on automatic pilot. As a result, we miss a lot of the things that are going on. But when we meditate, we stop to take time to look at this process.

Ajaan Lee once made the comment that when you have the mind with the breath you've got all four of the foundations of mindfulness right here, all four of the potential frames of reference that you can use in your practice. There's body, feelings, mind-states, and the mental qualities that are either helping or hindering you in seeing what's going on. It's all here. If you want to see the relationships among these things, you watch right here. You don't watch anywhere else.

What are you watching for? Well, you want to see the how the mind shapes things. Ajaan Suwat once made the comment that if you're looking for ignorance, you don't have to look very far. Just look at the fabrications of the mind. The principle of dependent co-arising says that fabrications are conditioned by ignorance. So if you're wondering where this ignorance is that we're trying to track down, it's right here where the mind is fashioning things – fashioning bodily sensations and mental events. From fabrication comes consciousness, and consciousness leads to name and form: physical and mental phenomena.

It's worth thinking about: Fabrication, this process of making, comes before phenomena themselves. We hear so often how people shape their reality, how our perceptions tend to filter the ways we see reality, and yet we don't see it as it's actually happening, even though it happens very directly right here. Even in your own sense of the body there are lots of different sensations coming in, through the various nerve ends. The mind has its habits for selecting among these sensations to present itself with a picture of what's going on. Sometimes the physical sensations get mixed up with the mental sensations, for lots of mental information is coming in at the same time. And so we select things, block some things out, highlight others, to create the story of our mind, our sense of what's going on in here.

And there's ignorance underlying it all. What we're trying to do here is to replace that ignorance with clear knowing. This is why we bring the mind to the present moment: so we can watch this process as it happens. Bring it right to that frontier where the body and the mind meet, where mental and physical

phenomena meet: the mind watching the breath. It's right here that you can see the process of fabrication really clearly, if you look. But first, you've got to create the conditions for it to be clear. This is why we practice concentration. We've got to get the mind still and engaged in mastering a skill: the skill of being still. That's when it's easiest to see the mind, when the mind is clearest: when it's aware of what it's doing and of what the results are. Even if it's not doing anything at all, you want to be aware of the fact that it's not doing anything and aware of the results of not doing anything.

People often talk about how, when they're practicing a skill, if they get really good at it, there come times when they get into what they call the zone, where everything seems automatic and even the slightest things become apparent—where they're one with the baseball, or one with the bat, or one with the basketball. In the same way, when you meditate you want to get one with the breath. Try to get fluent in the breath. Try to get on good terms, be comfortable, be familiar with the breath, so that there comes a point where it seems like your awareness and the breath become one. Only when we allow them to be one and to stay that way will they actually begin to separate out naturally through the process of fabrication. You can see it clearly as it happens.

This is why we work so much with the breath: One, the mind working with the breath puts itself in a good position to observe itself. Two, by working with the breath, things get calmed down. It's a lot easier to see events in the mind when the breath is very still than when the breath is moving all over the place. That's why step number four in breath meditation, after you're aware of the whole body, is to allow what they call bodily fabrication to calm down. "Bodily fabrication" means the in-and-out breath. You allow the breath to calm down. Try to be sensitive to whatever mechanical ways you have of breathing, or to any un-thought-out ideas of what the breath should be. Often those ideas will keep you pumping and pumping and pumping, even when the body's full of breath energy and doesn't need much more. It can get by with very little in-and-out breathing.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy is of a big water jar—you see these all over Thailand, enormous jars for catching rainwater running off house roofs. As he says, there comes a point when the jar is full, and no matter how much more it rains you can't put any more water in the jar. The same with the breath energy in the body: There comes a point where it's full. You're sitting here and the breath energy seems perfectly capable of just being there, without pumping much in, pumping much out—just an energy-exchange around the edges. Try to be aware of that: the sensation of energy at your skin. If you feel any tightness in your skin anywhere, think of its opening up all around you. That allows all those little muscles in the pores to open up a bit, and that in turn allows the breath energy to come in. As the mind settles down and is still in the midst of all this, you need less and less and less oxygen. It's not that you're stifling the breath or forcing it to stop. You're just getting more and more sensitive to how heavy or long the

breathing has to be. After a while you find that it naturally gets lighter and shorter, if you're paying attention. There may be longer and longer gaps between an in-breath and an out-breath – that's perfectly fine – until everything gets still. There may be a little bit of breathing in and out right at the surface. Ajaan Lee's analogy is of the vapor coming off of an ice cube. But otherwise what you've got here seems to be a big energy field. And it's hard to say whether it's a physical energy field or a mental energy field. It's just an energy field – energetic, but still.

Learn to stay there for a good long while because this is where the interesting things happen. This is also where you get the energy you need. When you've got the energy flowing around, everything is connected. This gives you strength, gives your meditation strength. It gives you the range in which you can watch the process of fabrication. Little things seem to stir here, stir there. Sometimes they don't amount to anything. Sometimes they catch hold and turn into thoughts. Or else they turn into major physical sensations. It depends on which way you interpret them, how you read them.

Just this in itself allows you to see how much the mind shapes things. But for the time being you don't want to follow these things. You want to get good at zapping them. In other words, where there's a slight complication in the energy field, just comb it out. Open it up so that it doesn't tighten up into something. Get good at that again and again and again.

Like those cartoon frogs with very long tongues: They sit there and a fly comes by, and no matter which direction the fly comes from, zap, they get the fly and then the tongue goes back into the mouth. In other words, your center is right here, wherever you have a sense of being centered in the body. And then your awareness goes out to zap any of those little fabrications as they come. Then you return to your center. Why do you do this? So that you can get clearer and clearer about how the process of fabrication begins. Where are those points when the mind begins to label things? "Ah – this is a thought of the future; this is a thought of the past. This is your arm. This is your leg. This is warmth. This is coolness. This is energy. This is solidity." The mind can choose these things – choose what to focus on, how to label it. And once it chooses to give a particular interpretation, it will find all sorts of evidence elsewhere in that range of your awareness to support it, to provide the context for whatever that perception was. If you get hoodwinked into those little worlds, you can't see what they're doing because all of a sudden you've got a different context.

So instead, you want to maintain this context of a broad awareness, at the borderline between what's physical and mental. As you get more and more used to being here, you start seeing a lot of interesting things about the processes of the mind. Those are the processes we want to understand: the fabrication, the sankharas the Buddha talks about. Unless you see very clearly how they happen, there's no way you're going to find what's unfabricated, because you keep falling into their little worlds, the little contexts they create for you. And you miss the processing itself.

It's like the difference between getting involved in the story of a TV show and watching it to see how the director manipulates things. So much of our lives is spent in these stories. It's a good idea to step back and ask – "Who's directing this?" and "How are they directing it?" and "What skill do they have?" "How do they draw you in? What's the hook?" To make another analogy, it's like learning how to write magazine articles. The editors will tell you that the first sentence, the first paragraph, needs a hook, something to draw the reader in. Otherwise the reader won't get into your context. This is how the mind works: It hooks you into a little world and takes you wherever it wants you to go.

And the raw materials are pretty meager – just this energy that begins to collect here and to clot there and turn into something. Like those little seed crystals they use to make rain. The water vapor gathers around the seed crystals and turns into raindrops. As the raindrops add up they become a rainstorm. Without the seed crystals the vapor wouldn't coalesce. These little seed crystals of fabrication form in the mind, then thoughts and other things form around them, and all of a sudden you've got a thought storm. You don't see this until you learn how to hang around this place where you're just with the field of energy: awareness energy, breath energy. It has the potential to turn into any kind of energy depending on how you interpret it. If you hang out here, you start seeing lots of interesting things, learn a lot about the mind – which is why we use the breath to bring us here. And why we continue using the breath to help us maintain this stance.

When Ajaan Fuang's students would get to this point in their meditation, he'd have them play with the elements: fire, water, earth, space, and consciousness. You begin to see that the way you sense your body depends on exactly what you focus on. The potential for all six elements is all here, throughout this range of energy. It depends on which sensations you're going to focus on, which ones you emphasize. Seeing this serves three purposes: One, it gets you really focused on the present moment. Two, it helps make you more comfortable being here. And three, you see the process of fabrication at work. You see how you've got raw materials here in the present moment and how the element of fabrication shapes them into experiences. As a meditator you want to see this clearly again, and again, and again, so that ultimately you can detect even the most subtle of fabrications and zap those as well.

So this is why we're here: to get rid of our ignorance as to why there are fabrications going on, why our intentions are constantly shaping things. We want to see if we can find that spot where we stop fabrication – not by stomping it out or holding it in suspension, but finding the point where there's no intention. The mind gets cornered. It knows that no matter which direction it goes it's going to head toward fabrication. It's going to reap the results of fabrication, which are stressful. It sees an opening and it goes for it.

That's how this strange practice of just focusing on your breath can lead you to the end of suffering. You reach the point where you can confirm for yourself that what the Buddha taught about there being a deathless element is really true.

And that, the Buddha said, is even better than sole dominion over the entire Earth. So check and see if that's true, too.