

Questioning Your Unconscious Actions

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We practice to overcome our ignorance. What kind of ignorance is it?

The way you normally hear the Buddhist teachings explained, our ignorance is the kind of ignorance of someone coming out amnesia. The questions are: *Who am I? Where am I?* The answers that are usually given to those questions are these: *Who are you? – You’re a bundle of five aggregates. Where are you? – You’re in samsara.*

But if you look more carefully at how the Buddha taught, those aren’t the questions—and so those aren’t the answers. For example, in the Buddha’s analysis of the five aggregates, they’re not what you are. He said that they’re activities, the activities out of which you create your sense of self. And *samsara* is not a place. It’s something you do; it’s a wandering on.

So the real questions aren’t *Who am I?* or *Where am I?* The real question is *What am I doing?* That’s a different kind of ignorance. That’s the ignorance of someone who’s been doing something habitually and not really paying much attention, and suddenly realizing that what he’s doing is causing problems.

So as we meditate, that’s what we’re looking at: What are you doing? What have you been doing that’s been causing suffering? Can you actually see the action itself? Can you see the connection between the action and the suffering? A lot of these actions are subconscious. To see them, you have to get the mind really quiet and have it focused in the right places—and ask the right questions.

When we think about subconscious things, we usually think about *the* subconscious or *the* unconscious as a particular room in the mind, like the basement, and things are going on down there, whereas we’re up here above, in the first story, the second story. To see the subconscious, we think we have to penetrate the barrier of the walls and the floors. But the

unconscious or the subconscious are not really that clearly defined in the mind. They refer to any activities that the mind does without being fully conscious, and there are a lot of those.

What's subconscious is not located at any particular hidden place. It's right here. It's simply that these things happen very quickly, at a very subtle level. And we've been doing them for so long that we don't even notice them. They're like the hum of a refrigerator. The refrigerator has been on all day, to the point where we don't really notice the hum. One of the reasons we look for inconstancy is to see the moments when the refrigerator turns off. Then you notice, *there was something there* that you didn't notice because it seemed so constant. This happens on the level of the body; it happens on the level of the mind.

The Buddha talks about bodily fabrication, which is a physical thing, although the mind is also involved in dealing with physical sensations and doing bodily fabrication. He also talks about verbal and mental fabrications, which are more purely aspects of the mind.

Bodily fabrication is the way you shape the way you breathe. We're doing this all the time. As the breath comes in, there's going to be something monitoring it that says, *Okay that's enough. Now it's time for it to go out.* If you look carefully enough at the mind, you'll notice that there are some perceptions in there about what's actually going on with the breath, what level of breathing is enough. Some of this is on the purely chemical level—as when there's too much carbon dioxide in the blood, and the signal goes in to breathe in. But some of it has more to do with how it feels: what kind of breathing feels satisfying right now. But because our attention is diverted elsewhere, we don't really notice what's going on. We don't notice the extent to which we're shaping this.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you see this as bodily fabrication. He tells you to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. As you do that, you begin to notice that there's more going on than just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There's a movement of energy—certain muscles are expanded, stretched; others

are contracted. They have a rhythm. But to what extent is that rhythm caused by things going on in the mind that you're not fully aware of?

The best way to see that is to consciously change the way you think about the breath, to change the way you breathe, to go against what's subconscious. That's how you dig up some of the subconscious assumptions. There's a resistance. What's going on? What's resisting? If you find that you're having trouble adjusting the breath because your perception is off, well, change your perceptions.

This is where mental fabrication comes in and has an influence on bodily fabrication. When you breathe in, where do you think the breath is coming in? What picture does your mind of the breathing process? Change the picture. If you're not sure what the picture is, use one of Ajaan Lee's pictures—such as the breath coming in at the base of the skull going down the spine, down through the legs; coming in through the middle of the chest going down through the abdomen. And you can try other images as well: the breath coming in and out the eyes and going deep into the brain, or coming in through the top of the head and going down into the brain. Change the picture, change the image, and see what that does to the breathing process.

The same with verbal fabrication. You're sitting here telling yourself, *Stay with the breath*. There are other parts of the mind that'll say, *No, go someplace else; I've got something else I want to think about*. You don't see those other voices until you've made up your mind to stay with the breath. Normally, we just drift from one thought to another to another. It's like boats out on the ocean: One boat comes near your boat, and you jump onto that boat; and then that boat gets near to another boat, and you jump on that third boat. Everything is just drifting around. It's all so smooth and seamless that it seems like a very natural process. Yet if you ask yourself, *Where have you been?* it'd be hard to trace things back.

But if you've got something really solid to hold on to, you can be more conscious of your motions. Make up your mind that you're going to stay right here with the breath. That gives you a point of comparison. When the mind goes drifting off, you realize it has drifted.

Some people complain that when they meditate they begin to see what a mess their minds are. Well, the mind has always been a mess; it's not suddenly a mess because you're meditating. Ajaan Fuang's example is of a house that you normally don't clean. One layer of dust settles on the floor today, and there's a new layer tomorrow, and there's a new layer the next day. You don't see the layers of dust because they're just being added to the dust that's already there. But if you start cleaning the house, wiping down the floor every day, you notice every little speck of dust as it settles.

It's the same when you use the breath to clean things out. Every time a new thought comes in that's not related to the breath, you're going to notice it. You may not notice it at first—you just slip into it the way you normally have been. But as you get better and better at noticing the mind and noticing the warning signals that the mind is about to leave the breath, those warning signals tell you *a lot* about what's going on in the mind.

It's as if a discussion was made maybe five minutes ago, and it was decided, *Yes, we're going to leave the breath when we get our first chance*. As soon as there's the slightest little bit of lapse in your mindfulness, you're gone. It's a *fait accompli*. But once you get sensitive to those little decisions, you can say *No*. You can change them.

So look for that. The next time you notice that the mind has wandered off and you bring it back, make up your mind that you're going to look for the warning signals. You don't tell yourself, *Okay, I'm going to stay with the breath, I'm never going to leave it this time*. You're setting yourself up for a fall. There's a lie that's going on in the mind some place. There's a wall that was put up, and there's something sneaking behind the wall. You've got to learn how to pull those walls down. One of the ways of doing it is to make a vow, *I want to see the warning signals*. As soon as the breath gets little bit wobbly or your focus on the breath gets

a little bit wobbly, you have to be extra careful. You'll begin to notice that certain decisions are made—decisions you weren't aware of before.

It's in this way that we bring things up to the conscious level, by laying down a few rules. We say, *We're going to stay right here with the breath*. Then watch the mind as it disobeys the rules, to see what kind of reasons it gives. At first, it doesn't give any reasons; it just does it right in your face—it switches off. But if you can get more and more alert to the little things going on in the mind, then the more quiet you can get the mind, the more clearly you can see these little decisions, both with the verbal fabrication and with mental fabrication.

The feelings that come up, the little perceptions that come up, are like the subliminal messages on TV that flash very quickly and then disappear. They plant a seed. If you're alert to them, you can wipe out the seed. It doesn't take much. It's harder once the seed has sprouted and turned into a big plant. Then you have to uproot it, because it's established itself. But at the moment when it's still just a seed, it's just a little, tiny decision that was made in the mind, and you can undo the decision right there if you catch it in time. Otherwise, it starts burrowing around, finding other friends inside the mind, so it has its team, its gang. It's going to gang up on you.

So you begin to see that the subconscious is not a place in the mind. It's not some subterranean dungeon. It's simply the mind's ability to do something very quickly and then to pretend that it has forgotten. But if your mindfulness is more continuous, your alertness is sharper, and you really are determined that you're going to stay here, then you can see those moments in the mind. You see the tricks that the mind plays on itself, the way it hides things from itself, the way it's already shaping things.

In dependent co-arising, the factors of fabrication come prior to sensory contact. In other words, when they're unskillful, when they are done through ignorance, they've got you primed to suffer no matter what comes up—no matter what you see or hear or smell or taste or touch or think about. Once these little decisions are in place, they've got you primed to suffer. But if

you can bring awareness and appropriate attention to this process, you can prime the mind in another direction. Appropriate attention is a matter of asking the right questions. Remember, the questions are not *Who am I?* or *Where am I?* The question is: *What am I doing?* That's how you prime the mind in another direction.

Think about the Buddha on his way to awakening. The questions were never *Who am I?* or *Where am I?* The question was: *What am I doing?* He tried different methods of meditation, different methods of austerities, and he wasn't getting the results he wanted. So he turned around and said, not *Who am I?* or *Where am I?* The questions were, *What am I doing? What can I change?* To see the little things that the mind was doing, he had to make the mind very, very quiet, in an all-around way.

This is why the meditation involves getting focused on the breath and then being aware of the whole body, because different thoughts get associated with movements of energy in different parts of the body. They leave markers as we hold on to a thought for a bit. If you've got your awareness all around, and you've got the breath energy smoothed out, then there are fewer and fewer places to leave markers, fewer and fewer hiding places for the unskillful thoughts, urges, feelings, and actions, with which you shape your experience. When you bring the light of awareness to these things, you can turn fabrication from a cause of suffering into part of the path.

So always remember that the questions are not *Who am I?* or *Where am I?* The question is: *What am I doing?* And try to be really vigilant with yourself in being very precise in your answers. Bring things that the mind has been hiding from itself out into the open air. This is what changes fabrication from a problem into the solution to the problem.

So look carefully. No one else can do the looking for you. But if you look in the right places and ask the right questions, you're bound to see.