

Artillery All Around

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The mind is such an old hand at fabrication that it doesn't really notice all the fabrication it's doing all the time. You sit here watching the breath and you think it's just awareness with the breath, pure and simple. But the type of awareness you bring is already fabricated, and the breath itself is already fabricated. The Buddha calls the breath bodily fabrication, and, from the side of the mind, you're bringing in verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. There are the places where you direct your thinking and your evaluation of what's actually going on: That's the verbal fabrication. And there are the feelings and perceptions you also bring: That's mental fabrication. We're doing this all the time. Every experience we have is taken from some raw materials from the past, which we then fabricate into a present experience.

It's like baking a cake. You don't just have a ready-made cake appear out of nowhere. You've got the eggs, you've got the flour, and you've got all the other ingredients, and you put them together and then you have a cake. We approach our experiences as if they were ready-made cakes, but they're not. We're actually back there in the kitchen, cooking up these things.

So an important part of our practice is opening the door into the kitchen so that we can watch what's happening, and understand how we are fabricating things. To see that, you've got to get the mind very still. And it turns out that the only way you can get it very still is to fabricate it to be very still. So we use fabrications in order to understand fabrications. Not only that, in the process of fabricating a state of stillness, you're going to learn an awful lot about the process of fabrication as you master it.

So it's important that you realize that concentration and all the other factors of the path, all the other right factors, are things that we put together. We fabricate them, we develop them, as they say in the suttas.

And because we have different kinds of defilements, we're going to have to fabricate the path in lots of different ways. You look at the Buddha's teachings: He didn't teach just one meditation method. There's no one-size-fits-all technique. He did spend more time describing breath meditation than any other method, and it works as the foundation for many other types of meditation. It, as the Buddha said, is the safest and most pleasant of all the meditation methods. But simply working with the breath is not going to be enough. On the one hand, it does give you experience in dealing directly with the bodily, verbal, and mental

fabrication, but all your different strategies for fabricating your experience come from lots of different directions, so you're going to need different tools, different techniques to deal with all the different problems.

And it turns out that one of the functions of discernment is learning how to read a situation and figure out which technique you need. It's like going into the kitchen and tasting some dish you've got on the stove and realizing that something is wrong. And if you have some experience, you can figure out: Maybe it's because it's too salty, or maybe because the heat is too low, or the heat is too high. And you know what to do to fix it. That's your discernment as a cook. But if all you know is one cooking technique, and you try applying that to everything, you're going to end up with some very strange dishes. If all you can do is fry, you end up not only with fried eggs, but also fried cakes, fried salad, fried strawberries. So you've got to realize that there are other ways of fixing food. And the same with your mind: There are other ways of dealing with issues in the mind.

In the commentaries, they count forty different meditation topics. And there are a lot of others that don't even make it onto the list. So it's good to know some basic ones, and to realize that you can use different techniques to deal with different issues as they come up. Your exercise of your sensitivity in reading the situation, and your ingenuity in learning how to apply different methods: These are important means for developing discernment. Otherwise, you just do one method, one method, not even thinking, not taking any responsibility, and that's not going to develop discernment at all. Your defilements have their different tricks and techniques, and they're going to run all over you because they're going to know. They can see you coming from a mile away. You've got your one technique and they know how to hide, how to get around it.

It's like what happened in Singapore during World War II. The British figured that the Japanese were going to come from the ocean. So they put their cannons in cement, pointed out toward the ocean. All their artillery was pointed at the ocean and was fixed that way. But then the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula, and all the artillery was useless. It was pointed in the wrong direction.

So you need to develop an all-around view of your mind, and have a good range of techniques at your disposal.

As the Buddha said, there are essentially two main techniques. One is just watching a particular cause of stress. In that case, you just have to sit here very quietly and watch how that cause of stress arises and how it passes away. And with some of the defilements in the mind, just watching them is enough to make them embarrassed. You see right through them. But there are a lot more for which that doesn't work. This, the Buddha said, is where you have to exert a fabrication. In

other words, start with bodily fabrication. Use your breath in different ways. Sometimes irritation is aggravated by breathing in an irritable way. So try to soothe the breath down, smooth it out. And as the breath gets more and more comfortable, you find that you're less and less inclined to want to go with that irritation, or whatever the problem was.

Then you've got your verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. For instance, you may realize that you need to do some more metta practice: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for other people. That's exerting a fabrication. You're dealing with your directed thoughts, evaluations, and perceptions.

If you're feeling lazy, it's good to think about death, realizing that death can come at any time. You may feel that we're living in a safe environment here, and it is relatively safe, but it's not absolutely. You go out at night and there are snakes. We've had cougars come through, and of course there's always that earthquake they keep threatening. Lots of things could happen. And then there's your own body: Things outside can be perfectly safe, but suddenly your body has something go wrong. Something gets lodged in the blood vessels that nourish your heart, and that's it. The question always is: Are you ready to go? And the answer usually is: No, not yet. In which case you've got to figure out: Okay, which qualities of mind do you have to develop right now? You've got to get to work on your meditation.

If you find that you're getting discouraged, you can contemplate the Buddha, you can contemplate the Sangha, think of their noble example. And if the Buddha seems a little bit outside of your range, well, remember the Sangha. All kinds of people, all kinds of backgrounds, educated, uneducated, rich, poor, everything in between, men, women, children, and a lot of them had real problems. Yet they were able to overcome them. And, as the Buddha said, it's good to think about the fact that "If they can do it, so can I. They're human beings; I'm a human being. They were able to develop nobility of character; I can develop that, too. I don't have to spend my whole life just giving in to my impulses, giving in to my hunger and thirst, giving in to my laziness." Part of being a human being is developing some dignity. So think about whatever it is about the Buddha and the Sangha that inspires you to develop some dignity, and also gives you encouragement that this is something a human being can do, and that it's a good use of your life. That way, you can energize yourself on the path.

You can also contemplate the parts of the body, as in the chant we have of the 32 parts, starting with hair of the head, hair of the body, and all the way down the list. This is good for several things. One, of course is lust. Another is the sense of attachment we get to the body: You come to realize that no matter how nice it looks from the outside, you look inside and there's not much you'd want to look

at. There's just a little film of skin over the top that makes it presentable. As the Buddha once said, whoever would think, based on a body like this, that one person could exalt himself and disparage others, either in terms of skin color or beauty or whatever: What is that, if not blindness? This contemplation is a great leveler.

It's also good for times when the mind wants to fall asleep. Sometimes you're getting bored with the breath, or something interesting is coming up in the mind but part of the mind wants to hide it from you. You start getting sleepy all of a sudden, for no reason at all. The mind is playing tricks on you. I've always found that switching over to contemplation of the body is a good way of dealing with that kind of sleepiness. Sometimes it may be an issue of lust lurking around, trying to put an end to your meditation. "So, you're interested in the body? Well, let's look at it and see what it's got." There are other times when the mind is really scattered and isn't willing to settle down with the breath. Okay, if it's got the energy to think, come back and think about the parts of the body, visualize them, try to figure out where are they right now. Where are the different bones in your body right now? Where are the different organs?

And even as you're working with the breath, there are lots of different ways of working with the breath. Another cure for sleepiness that I've found is that if focusing on one spot in the body gets you really blurry, make up your mind to focus on one spot for three breaths, and then another spot for three breaths, and then another spot, and another, and another, and just keep chasing these spots around the body. That could wake you up. Or if the mind is feeling really irritable, you can think of relaxing everything going down to the legs, down to the toes, think of yourself sitting in the middle of the breath, putting the breath all around you, with relaxation spreading out from the center in every direction.

So: lots of ways of playing with the breath. Lots of ways of playing with these different perceptions and feelings. And as the Buddha says, lots of ways of exerting a fabrication to deal with the different defilements that come up.

So an important part of being a skilled meditator is having a range of tools, a range of skills, and developing the sense to know how to read your situation, and how to figure out which of the tools is appropriate for that situation. Otherwise, you've got your artillery there set in the cement, pointing out uselessly to the sea, while the enemy army is swarming all behind you. So learn to develop an all-around vision, an artillery that can swivel around in all 360 degrees, so that no matter where the enemy comes from, or what technique or tactic they use, you've got the means to fight them off.