

The Dead Snake Around Your Neck

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We've talked a lot in the past about how the three types of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—play a role in shaping our experience. Recently, though, I read a weird piece by a scholar saying that these three kinds of fabrication apply only to meditation, as if they didn't apply to the rest of your life. But of course, the mind that's meditating is the same mind that goes out and deals with the world. And it's precisely because these same processes shape our experience in ordinary, everyday world as they do in meditation that the meditation is really a good tool for getting to understand how your mind creates suffering—because that's what the four noble truths are all about.

It's not that life is suffering. It's that we create suffering in our clinging. The source of the suffering is not outside. It's what we do as we approach experience, as we create our experience out of the raw materials that come from our past karma and then cling to it. This applies to experience both in meditation and out, so, as you're getting to know the mind in meditation, you're also getting to know the mind in everyday life.

As you put concentration together, start with the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels good and nourishing: restful if you're feeling tense, energizing if you're feeling tired.

Then talk to yourself. That's what verbal fabrication is. Talk to yourself about how the breath is doing, what you might do to make it better and, when it's pleasant, what you might do to let that sensation of pleasant breathing spread around. Talk to yourself also about what perceptions to hold in mind as you do this.

The perceptions and feelings, of course, are mental fabrications. The perceptions are the labels you apply to things, or the images you hold in mind. What kind of image of the breath is helpful for concentration? Think of the breath as energy flowing through the body. It can flow through the nerves and blood vessels. You might try visualizing an image of the nerves or of your blood vessels and the whole circulatory system, spreading out to the little pores of the skin, with the breath energy suffusing that whole intricate system.

And then there are feelings. You've got a feeling that's easeful. Well, what do you do with it? Do something with it that makes it nice to stay here. As the sense of breath flows through the body, think of the sense of ease flowing together with it. Think of your awareness extending out through the whole body that covers the whole range of the breath and the feeling. That's how you put concentration together.

Then, whatever comes up, you can talk to yourself about how to deal with your distractions. With some distractions, all you have to do is note them and you can go back to the breath. No big deal. Those are the distractions without much of a hook. They just seem to

be churned up randomly. But there are others that have hooks and can be pretty tenacious. Those are the cases where you have to look at the drawbacks of that kind of thinking.

The Buddha gives you here another mental fabrication and an image to hold in mind: that you've got the carcass of a dead snake or a dead dog around your neck and you want to get rid of it. So learn to look at your distracting thoughts like dead dogs or dead snakes hanging around your neck. In other words, don't let yourself see them as interesting or enticing or worth thinking about. When you do that, the contemplation of the drawbacks will have a chance to work.

You also have to see the allure of the distractions. Why did you like to go for them to begin with? Sometimes you don't see the allure until you tell yourself, "I'm just not going to think that thought." The mind will then come up with a reason for wanting to think it. Sometimes it'll be a verbal fabrication; sometimes, a mental fabrication. This is how the mind creates distractions to begin with. This is how it operates as it goes through the world. You're beginning to see that. And the Buddha's giving you new tools to use against that.

This is why there are so many analogies in the Canon: new ways of perceiving, or different ways of perceiving from what you ordinarily do. Most of us don't think of thoughts of lust as a dead snake or a dead dog. But that's a good image to hold in mind not only with thoughts of lust, but also with thoughts of anger or anxiety. Perceive them as something disgusting you really do want to get rid of.

Once you can get your mind on the side of the Dhamma in this way, that's half the battle right there. Because there's a large part of the mind that says, "I don't want to give up my lust or my anger or whatever. These have been my defenses. These have been my ways of finding entertainment in the past." Again, more verbal fabrication, so you need verbal fabrication to fight it. Or thoughts just seem to be running random and unstoppable. In that case, you can tell yourself, "Okay, I'll just let them be there, but I'm not going to get involved."

Here the image is of a person closing his eyes. The distractions are there, but you don't have to look at them. You look away. You've got the breath. Thoughts don't destroy the breath. And they're not why you're here to begin with. So focus in on the breath and, for the time being, let the thoughts have whatever corner of the mind they're going to occupy.

What you're learning is how to use these processes of bodily, mental and verbal fabrication to fight your old ways of using bodily, verbal and mental fabrication. You may notice that when you're thinking about something there's going to be tension in part of the body. Well, breathe through that. You can use your bodily fabrication there. There are lots of ways that you can think to yourself, talk to yourself, or bring to mind images to counteract the ones you've been hanging around with all along—because these forms of fabrication are all karma.

That was another weird point in that scholar's article: He talked about how fabrication in the five aggregates, which he claimed was something different from the three types of fabrication, is not really karmic. It's just the result of old karma, but doesn't create any new

karma. But if it's not karmic, what are you doing? The way you look at things, the way you think about things, is going to incline your mind in that direction. If you have old ways of looking and don't change them, your mind gets stuck in a big rut. And of course it's going to have karmic consequences.

So you've got this power here: the power of choice, the power of intentional action. As we're meditating, we're learning how to use this power well, learning how to divide things up so that we can get a handle on what the mind is doing. When you get the mind in a state of concentration like this, you can fight off the distractions. You begin to see that you're engaging in these kinds of fabrication all the time.

Emotions are a big example of that. Different emotions will employ different ways of breathing along with different ways of talking to yourself. You can breathe in a way that exacerbates anger, or you can breathe in a way that stills it. You can talk to yourself in a way that excites anger, but you can also talk to yourself in a way that gets rid of anger. The same holds true with your perceptions.

All too often, we're not just waiting for something outside to happen before we suddenly think thoughts of anger. Actually, we're often out there looking for something to get angry about—when, for example, we feel that anger is our protection, or that we can ward off danger by finding fault with things before they can do us harm. There are a lot of ways we talk ourselves into wanting to be angry or wanting to be lustful. We've got to learn how to look at these emotions in a different way, use different images in the mind, use different ways of talking to ourselves, to counteract our old images and inner conversations.

So as you're getting the mind into concentration, it's not just resting. You're getting hands-on experience in how you shape a state of mind. And then you can use that same knowledge to look at the other states of mind: emotions and other distractions, both while you meditate and as you go through the day.

In particular, look at the way the mind talks to itself. There's one kind of clinging the Buddha calls clinging to habits and practices. Many people interpret that simply as a matter of holding onto rules: petty rules and petty rituals. But it's not just that. It's your idea that "I've got to think in this way or I've got to act in this way, and if I don't do that, something really bad is going to happen," even though those ideas about how you have to think and act are actually causing you trouble. There's a sense of "ought" in a lot of our clinging. It's not just pure lust or pure desire. Sometimes we tell ourselves, "This is the way it's got to be." And then we get ourselves into trouble and wonder why we're suffering. That's verbal fabrication.

So learn how to question these things. And you do that first by mastering an alternative skill, using fabrications as you meditate in a skillful way. Once you know how to fabricate in a skillful way, why go back to your old ways? What keeps pulling you back? The fact that you've got this alternative skill gives you a perspective you wouldn't have acquired otherwise. It also

gives you a good place to stand as you're taking apart your old habits. So see the importance of fabricating a state of concentration and maintaining it.

Again, the issue of talking to yourself is going to be important. Sometimes you tell yourself, "Well, I'm sitting here. My mind is in concentration and nothing is happening." An important part of the concentration is just that: learning to be patient when things don't seem to be happening. It's not the case that you get the mind into concentration and immediately move on to the next stage. Sometimes you have to stay, stay, stay right here, because things in the mind don't necessarily show themselves right away. So you have to learn how to content yourself. See the concentration as a skill that you want to take time to develop. And take some pride in your workmanship.

It's like sharpening a knife. When I was over in Thailand, we didn't have knife sharpeners where you can go zip, zip and the knife is sharp. They had a big stone and some water. That was it. You had to rub the knife, usually a machete, against the stone, and wet the stone every now and then to make sure that it didn't dry out. And you had to talk to yourself while you were doing this, so that you didn't get bored and that you've maintained your alertness. After all, you don't want to sharpen some parts of the blade too much, because that would spoil the blade. There has to be an evenness to your effort, a consistency. And you have to learn how to give yourself pep talks all along the way. Otherwise, as your mind wanders off someplace else, you find you've ruined the blade. So you stay on top of things and then you talk to yourself just enough to keep yourself content with staying on top of things right there. It'll take a while. But if you stick with it, you get a good, sharp blade.

The same with concentration: Sometimes you sit here and ask yourself, "Where's the entertainment? Where are the lights? Where are the cameras? Where's the action?" You have to tell yourself, "Nope, this is it." After all, where was the Buddha on the night of his awakening? His mind was in the fourth jhana: the mind right there at the breath, very quiet. Yet he was able to see what was going on in his mind, going on in his breath, in a way that led to awakening. So you're at the right spot, once the mind settles down. The question is simply learning how to look at this spot with more care from the right angle.

In the beginning stages, it's learning how to be content to be here. So again, this requires more verbal fabrication, mental fabrication, and bodily fabrication that not only get you into concentration but also keep you here. You learn how to keep yourself happy to be here, to fight off thoughts that say, "This is boring." Again, what is that thought? It's a verbal fabrication. Well, you can also use other verbal fabrications that say, "Who cares if it's boring? I'm here doing something I haven't done before, making the mind really consistent in its concentration. And I haven't yet seen the full potential of these states, so I'm going to stick with it until I do." As long as you're going to fabricate your experience, you might as well do it well. When you really learn how to do it well, that's how you learn how not to fabricate anything at all. That's a stage that comes with practice.

But where's the practice going to happen? It's going to happen right here: as you're fabricating your state of concentration as you're breathing, as you're talking to yourself, as you're using different perceptions and making use of your feelings of pleasure here. And it's in doing these things that you gain your insight. Dogen has a nice passage where he says that the duty with regard to the third noble truth is to realize it, the duty with regard to the fourth noble truth is to develop it, and those two duties are basically the same thing. As you're developing the path, the goal appears. He's not saying that the path is the goal. He's saying that the process of paying full attention to developing the path is where you're going to realize the goal, the cessation of suffering. It's all right here. It's just a question of learning how to be content to stay right here and to be stable enough right here so that you can really see what's happening right here.

So. You're at the right spot. Just learn how to fabricate it well.