

Recollection of Hell

February 9, 2010

We're sitting here fabricating, putting together a sense of the body, putting together feelings, perceptions, more fabrications, even putting together our consciousness of these things. It's something we do all the time. And the things we put together are not totally mind-made. The raw materials come from our past actions. Sometimes those materials are good and sometimes the range they offer is pretty limited. But the mind has this obsession to keep on fabricating, keep on making these things. They last for a while, and then you have to make new ones, scrounging around for whatever you can find to give rise to a sense of pleasure. We go for the pleasure but deep down instinctively we know that it's not going to last, which is why we tend to gobble our pleasures when they come, then cast around to see what we can do either to maintain the ones we've got or to create new ones to gobble down next.

The pleasure we get out of this process is what keeps us going. And our sense of control leads to our sense of possession: that we have the ability to create these pleasures and to consume them. As long as the raw materials are good, we're doing fine.

Like right now: There are many good aspects to what we've got going on around outside us. The rain may be cold, but there's something about a rainy day or rainy night that tends to focus the mind inside. All around us outside is wet, so instinctively we look inside to see what potentials we have here for security and warmth. And all of this would be okay if it weren't for the fact that it's so precarious. It depends so much on the range of materials that are available and yet that range can change so quickly and radically.

This evening I was reading a piece on Germany in the early 1930s. People were saying, "Oh, dictatorship couldn't happen here." That was just a year before Hitler took power. And for many of the people who were saying that, things turned very bad, very quickly. The range of options open to them suddenly narrowed down horribly. So there is political change, economic change, earthquakes, storms, illness, death.

Death is the most radical change, because you have no idea where you'll get thrown the next time around. The ground can disappear from beneath your feet. And yet the mind keeps going with that insatiable drive for more feeding, more fabricating. That's why we get reborn or experience rebirth. We keep looking for more. We keep craving things to feed on, to cling to, to fabricate, to turn into the kind of food we enjoy. Yet there are times when we suddenly find ourselves in places where the options are not appetizing at all. If the uncertainty of the human realm isn't scary enough, you can think about the Buddha's descriptions of hell: all those hell beings trying to fabricate some happiness out of horrendous surroundings.

What seems particularly horrible about the hell realms is that they hold out a glimmer of hope for happiness. Think of the glowing iron hell with an open door on the far side. Everybody is running through fire, their bodies aflame, to get to the door, hoping to get out. But right as they get to the door, it slams shut. Then a door opens on another wall, so they go running through the fire to get to that door, which—just as they get to it—also slams shut in their face. This keeps up until finally they do get through one of the doors, and it turns out that the door leads to a hell of shit. And things just get progressively worse.

There are hells where the hell guardians finally pull you out with a hook. You think you've escaped. They even play nice cop and ask what you want. You say you're hungry and thirsty. Your first thought is your need to feed. So they laugh, pour molten copper into your mouth, and then throw you back in.

These are some of the possible places where fabrication can lead you—this need we have to keep turning the raw materials of experience into form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. So it helps you realize that when things are going well, you want to fabricate a way out. Because for most of us, what do we do? We

play around. Things get comfortable and we like to play, just fabricating for the pure joy of fabrication. This is what music and art are all about. Fabricating purely for entertainment, without realizing that the fabrications we make are a kind of kamma. If we neglect the opportunity to create something good and solid out of these fabrications—in other words, creating a path that leads to something secure—then those periods of play, those periods of joy, are just little interludes. They can suddenly come crashing down.

Which means that when things are going well, we have to be heedful. We've got this opening. We've got this opportunity. We want to make the best of it. Even when things aren't going well, we want to make the best of what we do have, to figure out what's the most skillful path to make out of these potentials.

The Buddha says the most skillful thing we can fabricate is the noble eightfold path, like we're doing right now: focusing on the breath. That's a form, one of the elements of form. You direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath: That's a type of fabrication. You hold the perception of breath in mind, all this so you can create a sense of feeling that's pleasant, easeful. You want to spread that throughout the body. Then you've got a consciousness that's aware of all this. The fabrication of mindfulness is trying to keep you here. That's what mindfulness is: a kind of fabrication, reminding you what to do. Alertness is also a fabrication, as is the ardency with which you try to do all of this skillfully. You're trying to turn these aggregates into factors of the path—right mindfulness and right concentration—a way out of all the potential heavens and hells to which the aggregates, these processes of fabrication, can lead you.

Even the development of discernment in right view is a kind of perception. You apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the aggregates. First, as you're sitting here trying to create a sense of ease for the breath to get the mind concentrated, anything else would count as a distraction. Whatever's a distraction, try to see it as stressful, inconstant, and not-self. That helps you to wean yourself away from the attractions of playing around with those distractions.

Ultimately, once the outside distractions have been dealt with, you start turning around to apply the same perceptions to the state of concentration you've got going here. You realize: Here are aggregates as well. And although the stress may be subtle, it's still there. The inconstancy may be subtle, but it's still there—which means that these things are not totally under your control. They're not the ultimate happiness.

As you keep that perception in mind and convince yourself of its truth, that's when the mind begins to incline toward the deathless. It perceives the deathless as a desirable goal, and that perception can help open the way to an actual experience of the deathless. Yet even then, the mind has this tendency: It likes to keep fabricating, so it can create a sense of passion around the deathless when it experiences it. That's why there are different levels of awakening. The lower levels still have a sense of passion. There is still some fabrication going on around the perception of the deathless. This is why, when the Buddha describes the contemplation of the aggregates, first there's: "All fabrications are inconstant. All fabrications are stressful." Then there's: "All dhammas are not-self." The word *dhamma* here applies to unfabricated phenomena, like the deathless, as well. Whatever passion you fabricate for that, you have to learn how to let go of that, too. Only then can there be full awakening.

So it is possible to use these aggregates as a path to a truly safe place. Some of the epithets for nibbana—haven, harbor, refuge, security—emphasize its aspect as genuinely safe. Without that safety, the mind just keeps gobbling things down and trying to fabricate more. If it can't find good things to gobble down, it just stuffs horrible things inside itself. It takes whatever it can get. If it can't get good things, it takes pain and gobbles down the pain, fabricating even worse pain for itself. It gobbles down molten copper and shit. That's our tendency. We want happiness, but we take whatever potentials we've got, and we turn them into suffering, we turn them into stress. We turn them into misery, all because of our ignorance. And then we gobble them down.

Only when we learn how to look directly at this process of fabrication and do it with knowledge, understanding where there's stress, what's causing the stress, what can be done to put an end to it: Only when we bring that knowledge to the process can it become a path that really does lead away from stress and suffering, does really lead to security where there's no more potential for any more stress.

When the Buddha described those hells that can open up to us if we don't reach that security, he said at the end of the description that he hadn't heard these things from other people. He'd seen them directly for himself. They're really out there: these horrendous states of suffering we can fall into. And all our continual obsession right here with fabricating and feeding and fabricating more and feeding more is what can lead us there if we're not careful.

So now that things are going relatively well, you don't want to just fool around and play, looking for fun. You realize that there's work to be done. Remember the old story of the ant and the grasshopper. During the summer, the grasshopper just sang and sang, and the ant kept working, working, working away. The grasshopper kept saying, "Why are you working? It's so nice out. Let's just sing." And the ant replied, "Winter is coming. Winter is coming." The grasshopper said, "Well, I'll take winter when it comes. I'd rather sing right now." Then, of course, when the winter came, the ants went underground. They had food and they survived. The grasshoppers all died of the cold.

So as you're fabricating here, remember: Meditation is not just an opportunity to sing and to have a good time. We've got this whole hour here; we've got whole days to meditate. We don't know how much longer these days are going to last. The world is a very precarious place. Our kamma is very precarious. You have no idea what good and bad things lurk in the dark pool of your past kamma. But what you do know is that you've got this opportunity right here, right now. So do your best to fabricate it into a path, a path that really goes someplace safe, secure—a refuge where there's no lurking danger at all.