

Jhana & Insight

July 23, 2017

The mind feeds, and it suffers because it feeds. That was the Buddha's insight. And a further insight was that there actually is a dimension of the mind that doesn't need to feed. When we can find that dimension, we stop suffering. Without that dimension, there would be no end to suffering. And that's what we're here to find.

Part of the Buddha's path to that dimension was to teach us how to reflect on the way we feed: to see that it involves a lot of stress and that, ultimately, it's not worth it. But the analysis is complete only when it brings you to that dimension that doesn't need to feed.

This is a problem with a lot of insight methods: They point out that the things that we're feeding on are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and assume that that should be enough to make us stop feeding. But that's like thinking that when you realize that food is inconstant, your stomach is inconstant, you'll just stop eating. That's not how things work. As long as there's hunger, you're going to keep on feeding. So an important part of the practice is learning how to bring the mind to its aspect that doesn't feel hunger at all.

That requires that we change our feeding habits. This is why concentration is such an important part of the practice—and such a necessary part of insight. The Buddha often said that you don't get into jhana without insight, and you don't gain insight without jhana. The two of them have to go together. When you get the mind to settle down—when you take it to a place where it can see things clearly—it's easy to remember things, i.e., easier to be mindful, and your alertness is quicker. That way, you can do the work of ardency with a lot more precision and a lot more success.

But also, in getting to that place, you learn an awful lot about the mind: all its processes of fabrication. Because in creating a state of concentration, you're working with fabrication. And fabrication is the underlying process by which we feed. There's bodily fabrication, the breath; verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation—the way you pose topics to your mind and then comment on them; and then mental fabrication: feeling and perception. You bring all those things together to create a state of concentration. You evaluate your breath, you think about the breath, you have a perception of the breath. And the way you relate to the breath—first the in-and-out breath and then the breath energies in the body—should give rise to a feeling of ease and well-being. So you're getting hands-on experience with fabrications and making something good out of them.

You can't simply drop the process of fabrication without first learning how to do it well, because only when you do it well can you take it apart. It's like learning how to make knots. If all you do is make sloppy knots, it's hard to untie them. But when you get clear about the process of how you tie a knot—and you can tie some very complex ones—then you know how to take them all apart.

It's a similar process here. You know what you're doing, and then you begin to realize that, as you go through life, you're doing the same sorts of things: relating to the breath, thinking about things, evaluating them, having feelings and perceptions around things. And you begin to notice when you're doing it in an unskillful way, tying sloppy knots for yourself. You can now notice this because the well-being of concentration not only gives you a sense of nourishment on the path—so that you're not off feeding off of sensuality, ill-will, and all the other hindrances—but it also makes you more sensitive to what stress is, what a disturbance is in the mind.

That's the vocabulary the Buddha uses as he starts talking about the stress in concentration: disturbance. The principle is that if you're not a real connoisseur of pleasure when you're doing concentration, then you don't really understand stress. There'll be lots of subtle stresses that you actually mistake for pleasure. So the concentration provides a foundation not only for mindfulness and alertness but also for discernment: the discernment that sees what's going on in the mind and can begin to make better judgments about what's worth feeding on and what's not.

As your sensitivity gets greater and greater with practice like this, that's what opens you up to the deathless dimension that's always there: the dimension that doesn't feed, the dimension that has no hunger. It's always there. It's simply that your discernment before was not precise or sensitive enough to detect it. Concentration is what puts your discernment in the place where it can do that. Prior to that, if you try to stop feeding, you just get hungry again. No matter how much you may deny yourself certain pleasures, you find that if you don't have something better to feed on, you're going to go back to things that are sometimes even worse than what you fed on before.

So insight requires the well-being of jhana, the well-being of concentration. And the Buddha never makes a clear distinction between insight practice and jhana practice. There is no pure *samatha* practice or pure *vipassana* practice in the Buddha's teachings at all. You do concentration and, in the course of doing concentration, you develop insight. You require some insight to get the mind to settle down, and then as the mind has settled down, your insight's clearer because it's more firmly based. So the two processes go together.

This means that there's no question about how long you do *samatha* before you switch over to *vipassana*. You just do concentration. And as you're doing it, you can't help but begin to notice things. In the beginning, some of the things you notice and some of your insights will be fairly random and crude, but over time they get more and more precise, and they go deeper.

So it's all part of one single practice, simply learning to do it with more sensitivity. And the more you do it, as I said, and the greater the sense of well-being, then the more sensitive you become to little disturbances—like the princess who could detect the pea under many, many mattresses. Because the little things that can create suffering in the mind are like that: They're very tiny, very small when they start out, but then they can grow. And if you don't detect them when they're small, you've missed your chance to really uproot them or to understand them.

So this practice we're doing right here, working on the breath, is giving us hands-on experience in how to use fabrication in a skillful way so that we can get to know fabrication and to master fabrications that are more and more subtle, more and more subtle. As our sensitivity to fabrication grows, it will deliver us to a spot where we can access the deathless dimension: the dimension that has no hunger, that doesn't need to feed. And that's when you can let go of everything else. Not because you tell yourself, "I'm just going to stop eating." It's because you've seen that now there's no need.

That's how this practice works. You stick with this, and you don't have to keep casting a glance down the road asking yourself, "Well, when do I switch to insight?" or, "How much tranquility is enough for insight?" The two develop each other. As you circle around this one problem—how to get the mind to settle down with the greatest amount of well-being and solidity with the breath—you'll find that all these other good qualities gather here together as well.