

Purity Comes Through Discernment

October 27, 2005

We suffer for a reason, but it's not just one reason. There are lots of different kinds of reasons. There's one word that covers them all—craving—but there are lots of different cravings in the mind. Which means that we need lots of different tools to use against those cravings.

The Buddha classified them two broad areas. He said some forms of the cause of suffering will go away simply when you watch them. You just sit there and look at them and they'll go away. Others, though, won't go away, either because they're stronger or they're more subtle. They require that we do some fabrication.

The main kinds of fabrication the Buddha talked about are directed thought and evaluation, and feeling and perception, although the breath also comes under the topic of fabrication. The way you breathe in relationship to some things actually will change your relationship to them. This is why he starts meditation with the breath, getting to know the breath, getting on familiar terms with it, and experimenting with it, learning how to breathe in and out through whole body, be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out, learning how to calm the breath, how to breathe in ways that give rise to ease, breathe in ways that give rise to rapture, and breathe in ways you can really observe the mind very clearly.

This is a kind of fabrication and it's an important skill to have in your arsenal, an important tool to have in your toolbox. As you get to know the way you breathe, you begin to see what's in the mind, because the breath is a mirror of your mind. The fluctuations and changes in the mind will cause fluctuations and changes in the breath. But the causal pattern works the other way as well. You change the way you breathe and it can have an impact on the mind. That's why it's good to know how to calm the breath in the face of anger, in the face of fear, in the face of any emotion that threatens to overcome the mind.

So it's one of the tools that's good to master. But you need other tools as well. This is where directed thought and evaluation come in. On the one hand, you use them to bring the mind to concentration. They're factors in the first jhana. Direct the mind to the breath; evaluate the breath. That right there is a kind of fabrication. It's a good tool to have. It's the normal thinking process, the normal verbalization process in the mind: You think about something and then you evaluate it, you pass judgment on it, you play with it. You use your ingenuity. All that comes under evaluation. It's a process we're using all the time but oftentimes it works against us. We think and evaluate in ways that cause suffering rather than

putting an end to suffering. So what we're trying to do is to take that problem and learn to convert it to better uses.

In other words, you use it to create a state of concentration. This brings in perception and feeling as well. You learn how to identify certain comfortable feelings in the body and work with them, solidify them, consolidate them, steady them, so that you can use them as your allies. And you learn to keep the perception of breath in mind. When the breath gets so still that you can't follow it any more, you can think of the whole body, or of space. In other words, you can use these other ways of perceiving. They become your tools as you develop your powers of concentration. Otherwise, we can perceive things in ways that cause us a lot of anguish. Feelings rise up, and you grab hold of the pain, grab hold of the anguish, identify with it, so that your breathing and your directed thought and evaluation and your feelings and your perceptions are all contributing to suffering.

So as we practice, we're learning to take these things and convert them to another use, to help put an end to suffering, as you learn to keep a steady perception in mind, as you learn to keep your thoughts directed consistently to one thing that's a healthy thing to think about, a helpful thing to think about as well. This is how you create a state of concentration, from which, if you want, you can just look at things. You see thoughts arise and pass away, and they really pass away. They're gone. But you find that other thoughts arise and pass away, and yet they keep coming back, coming back, coming back.

That requires that you dig a little deeper. This is where you take all the tools you've used in developing concentration—the breath, directed thought, evaluation, perception, feeling—and you apply them to the issue of why that particular thought, why that particular emotion is so persistent. Where is the attachment that keeps digging for it and bringing it out? Simply watching the thought come and go, come and go, come and go won't always work.

This is why the Buddha said that purification of the mind doesn't come through equanimity, it comes through discernment. You have to understand the coming, understand the going. The first thing is to learn how to distance yourself from it. That's why the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self are so important. The thought that seem to be deeply embedded in the mind: When you really look at it, you see that it comes and goes. And even when it's there, it vacillates. It's not always consistent. It's not always steady.

You missed that because your mind wasn't steady. Your directed thought and evaluation, your perceptions weren't steady. But if you learn how to steady them, you begin to see the unsteadiness in these other things in the mind. That should serve as a warning signal: This thought is something you can't really depend on,

can't really identify with it. And as you look into the coming and going, you see the stress: another good reason not to identify with it.

When you see that it's stressful, why would you want to identify with it? That's when you let it go. Or at the very least you get some more distance from it. You can look at it more objectively, so that it's not the "me" or the "I" that's feeling the pain, or the "me" or the "I" that's feeling the fear. There's just fear present. There's just anger present. That's when you can really look at. That's not yet the end of the matter, but it's when discernment really can get to look at it. What is the underlying attachment here, the underlying misunderstanding about these thoughts that keeps them firmly embedded?

You've got the tools to work with it. This doesn't mean you're working on these issues all the time. As we mentioned this afternoon, there are times when the mind really needs to rest. Just take your tools and turn around and make them tools for concentration, so that the mind can gain not only a sense of ease and respite, but it can also gain the steadiness and sense of well-being that enables you then to turn back and look at those thoughts again without feeling overwhelmed by them, and without their dragging you into their mood.

When the mind is rested enough, you take the tools and you turn them around again and use them as tools for analysis.

This is why the Buddha never made a sharp distinction between developing concentration and gaining insight. He says concentration requires two qualities of mind, tranquility and insight, just to get the mind to settle down. It's not that you can simply force the mind or lullaby the mind into concentration. You need to understand it at least to some extent, so that it can stay focused on one topic without getting duped by its normal tendency to wander off.

Once the mind gets more solidly concentrated, more solidly centered like this, then the tranquility gets greater, and the opportunity for gaining any insight gets sharper. The less you stir up the water of the mind, the more clearly you can see the things that are there in the water. It's one of the standard images in the Canon. To see the four noble truths is like seeing a clear still pool of water in the mountains. You see the fish and the rocks very clearly because the water is still. Why is the water still? Because you're not stirring it up. When you're still, you can see even the slightest movements in the mind. You catch yourself, "Oh, I had that assumption. Oh, I was doing this, which causes stress, when I didn't have to."

In this way, you can let go of more and more refined attachments, more and more refined intentions in the mind. Even skillful intentions: There comes a point where you have to let go of what's skillful as well. That's when the mind opens up to something else entirely, something that's outside even the present moment.

That's true liberation, when the mind is truly pure. You get there through discernment and, of course, discernment needs other qualities to help it along. Concentration is an important ally. Mindfulness. Alertness. All the factors play their part, but it's the insight, it's the understanding, it's the discernment that's going to make the difference. And an important part of developing that discernment is learning, one, to master the tools of the mind so that they're not creating suffering and, two, to know when to use them to create calm in the mind, when to use them just to stay very, very still, and then when to use them to actively analyze things, understand them, probe them, until the mind reaches a point when it knows the work is complete.

Until that time, you have to keep your tools sharpened. You have to keep exploring new ways in which to use them. Like the simile of the raft: When you get to the other side of the stream, you can let the raft go. But while you're still crossing the stream, you can't let it go, because you'll get swept downstream. So you hold on to the raft. You work with your tools. You try to understand them. Learn to master them, get a better and better sense of when they're useful for stillness, when they're useful for analysis.

It's in that way that you get over and beyond the causes of suffering, and you can actually uproot the causes of suffering. Simply watching them doesn't do it, because you can get stuck just on that one tool. Anybody who's been a fighter who has only one trick up his sleeve will find out that he gets pummeled from all sides. You need to have lots of tricks. You need to have lots of approaches. Your central approach is developing concentration, but you also need to learn how to use those tools of concentration in lots of different ways, through your own exploration, through your own ingenuity. That's what enables you to get rid of the causes of suffering on all sides.