

Emotion

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We have a tendency to see our emotions as being especially real, as more real than our thoughts. And many people come to meditation as a way of getting back in touch with their emotions.

But from the Buddha's perspective, emotions are just as fabricated as everything else. They're not your real nature; they're not your real truth. You fabricate them, often not consciously. So one of the important lessons you need to learn in meditation is how you fabricate an emotion so that you can start fabricating more skillful ones.

Again, the idea of a skillful emotion may sound strange. But when you learn that you can consciously direct your emotions and that your emotions do have consequences, you want to direct them in the right direction. Because the problem with an emotion is that it takes hold for a while and it tends to see things from one side.

Lust, for example, tends to come from seeing the body from one side. We're very selective in the things we focus on when we want to encourage lust, while there are huge areas of the body that we refuse to look at, refuse to consider.

With anger, you focus only on the bad points of the people you don't like. You don't want to look at the good ones. Ill will, partiality: These things come from looking at things from one side only. When you start acting on these one-sided views, of course it's going to lead to trouble.

So it's important that you understand how you fabricate an emotion. The Buddha talks about fabrication in dependent co-arising: fabrication comes from ignorance, that's the whole problem. Ignorance of what? Ignorance of what causes suffering and what doesn't. Ordinarily, we're not looking in those terms. We're looking in terms of what we like and don't like. That's ignorance right there—and that then influences the way we fabricate things.

There are three aspects to fabrication. First there's bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath. This is one the reasons why the breath is such an important meditation topic, because it comes in right early in the Buddha's description of how suffering arises. If you breathe in an ignorant way, you can cause suffering. If you look at your emotions carefully, you realize that the way you breathe has an impact on the emotion, and the emotion has an impact on the breath. This is one of the reasons why we tend to have a sense that the emotion is so real, that it's in the body. It's in the body because it's had an impact on the way you breathe, and

that's had an impact on the way you sense the rest of the body, other aspects of the body.

So the first step in learning how to gain some control over your emotions is learning how to breathe with awareness. And particularly awareness of what kind of breathing is easeful and what kind of breathing is stressful; what kind of breathing is good for the mind, good for the body; what kind of breathing is bad for the mind, bad for the body. Learn to get a sense of cause and effect as it surrounds the breath.

This is one of the most important handles you can get on your emotions. You can reason with the mind and give it all kinds of good explanations as to why you shouldn't be feeling a particular emotion, but because it seems to be lodged in the body, you have to attack it not only from the side of reason but also from the side of the breath. When an emotion arises, you can breathe through the tension, breathe through the irregularity of the breath, smooth it out. Often you find that by smoothing out the breath, the emotion starts to have less and less power.

Then you can work on the other elements of fabrication. There's verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation: what you tend to focus on and how you tend to evaluate things. It's called verbal fabrication because that's how language gets formed in the mind. You direct your thoughts, you have a subject or a particular sentence; and then you have your comment on the subject: That's the evaluation.

That means you want to look at the mental chatter in your mind around that particular object, around that particular issue. When there's lust, exactly what are you looking at? What are you focusing on? What are you talking about and what are you saying? What narratives are you concocting that make the object of your lust appealing?

You can start with your own body. There are times when you hate your body; there are times when you love your body. Okay, notice what kind of dialogue is going on inside the mind with the hatred and with the love.

When you want to bring things back into balance, try to introduce new topics. When you hate your body, ask yourself: What's there to hate about it? The body is useful. It's a necessary part of the path. Developing a sense of rapture through the breath so you can fill the whole body with rapture: There are many passages where the Buddha talks about this. Having the body filled with rapture is an important element in the path. It helps put you in a better mood, helps put you in a better position to see things as they are—with less hunger, with less craving.

So you want to get the body on your side, which means you have to see it in a good light as well. Learn how to take proper care of it and how to breathe in such

a way the body does feel full, refreshing, nourishing.

On the other hand, when you find yourself getting wound up in lust, fascinated with your body and other people's bodies, that's when you've got to look at the other side. We had that chant this morning about the parts of the body. Make those the objects to which you direct your thoughts: There's your liver, there are your intestines, there are the contents of your intestines, there's the bile—all kinds of disgusting stuff in the body. And it's right beneath the skin, you don't have to go down into the intestines. Right under the skin: If you took the skin off you couldn't even look at the body, you'd run away. If someone walked in here without any skin, we'd all be out of the sala in no time. And yet that skinless creature is right inside under our skin, in everybody sitting in here right now.

Of all the meditation topics the Buddha teaches, this is the one that people tend to object to the most. But it's very useful. After all, lust can make you do all kinds of crazy things. In most of the murders in the world, the murderer and the murdered person have had sex with each other. If lust were a good thing, it wouldn't turn into murder. But there you are.

So you want to make sure that you're not likely to get enslaved to that kind of emotion. Even when you have a partner: If you want to be faithful to your partner it's good to be able to see other people aside from your partner as unappealing so that you don't start straying away. So this is not just for celibate monks and nuns. It's a useful meditation to have to make sure you don't get overcome by unskillful emotions.

So it's a matter of looking at things from both sides.

The same with other people: You don't want anything bad to happen to the people that you're really partial to, that you really like, but you know that we're all born into this world where bad things are going to happen. It's in the fine print in the contract. There's going to be aging, there's going to be illness, there's going to be death, there's going to be separation. This means you have to learn how to develop equanimity toward the people you love, so that when bad things happen to them, you don't get knocked off course. You can remain calm and clear-headed and be as helpful as possible. So you want to practice that ability to develop equanimity even toward people you really love.

As for people you don't like, you've got to be able to develop goodwill toward them all the time. When you don't feel goodwill for other people, it's easy for you to abuse them physically or verbally, creating all kinds of bad karma for yourself. So it's in your own best interests to learn how to feel goodwill toward others, no matter whom, no matter where, any person, any situation. When people have wronged you, you have to ask yourself, "What good would you get out of their

suffering?” The little child that likes to see revenge: Do you want to identify with that little child, that nasty little creature?

Think about it: If only other people could truly be happy inside. Wishing happiness for people doesn't mean that you just wish them to be happy as they are. You wish for them to find the true causes for happiness. So if they really are behaving in harmful ways, you're wishing for them to see the light so that they can develop a genuine happiness inside. When people are coming from happiness, they're less likely to be harmful. So it's in your best interests that other people be happy.

There's no need to settle old scores first, because exactly how far are you going to go back to settle old scores? When we think of justice, we think of a final accounting from the beginning to the end. But where's the beginning? And where's the end? From the Buddha's point of view, the beginning is unknowable, inconceivable.

There's that story about Somdet Toh. One of the junior monks in his monastery came to complain that one of the other monks had hit him. And Somdet Toh said, “Well you hit him first.” The junior monk said, “No, I didn't! He just came up to me and hit me.” And Somdet Toh said, “No, you hit him first.” So the young monk went to complain to the abbot of another monastery, and the other abbot came along to see if he could talk some sense into Somdet Toh. But Somdet Toh said, “Well, in his previous lifetime he must have hit him.”

You don't know how far you'd have to go back to find the beginning of this particular problem. The idea of settling scores once and for all comes from the view of the Universe in which there is a clear beginning and an end. But from the Buddha's point of view, you can't know the beginning. And the only end is when you decide to pull out of the whole process.

So it's better to wish happiness for everybody and to learn how to make that a habit: that you can wish happiness for anybody at any time. That way, when the time comes to interact with that person, you can act out of goodwill rather than the ill will that's going to cause problems.

This is how you use verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation—to create new emotions, more skillful emotions.

And then there's mental fabrication, which comes down to feeling and perceptions. When you learn how to breathe in a way that feels good, feels comfortable inside, it's harder to hold on to a negative emotion. At the same time, you don't feel so hungry. Often lust or anger comes out of a hunger for immediate gratification. But when you've got a sense of breath energy filling the body with a sense of ease and well-being, you're coming from a less hungry place. When you're

not so hungry, you're more discriminating. When you're hungry, you'll eat anything that comes your way. But when you're feeling full, you can look at even the best food and say, "No, I don't need that. I've got something better right now. I've got all I need." So again, you use bodily fabrication to induce the proper feelings of mental fabrication.

And then there are your perceptions—and this is closely related to verbal fabrication—the labels you have for things. For example, with anger: If you see the person who's done you wrong as an evil person, you're going to act in certain ways. If you see that person as a victim of unskillful thinking and unskillful habits, you're going to react in a very different way, a more skillful way. As for your perception of yourself, if you see yourself as being in a position where you can freely feel anger and hatred for people and not suffer any consequences, you're going to give into the anger more often.

But when you perceive that there are always consequences, you think in a different way. As the Buddha says, see yourself as someone who's tired and thirsty coming across a desert. You need water. So you look for it wherever you can find it, even you find a cow footprint in the sand with a little bit of water in the cow footprint. If you're really thirsty, that's water you want. But you know that if you try to scoop it up, you're going to make it muddy. So you get down you very carefully slurp it out of the footprint.

Our position as human beings is that desperate. You need the goodness of other people to nourish your own goodness. So whether you're looking at yourself or looking at other people, learn how to perceive things in a skillful way. The way you label things is really important. The issues of body: again, hatred for your body—why do you hate it? The body's sitting there, it's not doing anything. Or hatred for yourself, for being a bad person: That's not totally true. You've got your good side as well. It's not that your bad side is more real than your good side. Learn how to be able to label things from both sides, whichever is appropriate for counteracting whatever the unskillful emotion has taken over the mind and for developing a skillful emotion in its place.

So as long as you're fabricating emotions anyhow, learn to do it with awareness so that you create less suffering. Again, it's a matter of perception: not seeing the emotion as the real you or your real feelings about something, but simply as something that gets fabricated in the mind out of ignorance and can cause you real problems if you're not careful. Remember that it's really helpful to know how to fabricate things clearly with awareness—using the breath, using directed thought and evaluation, learning how to adjust the feelings in the body and the mind, and how to change your perceptions. That way, you can get a clear handle

on your emotions so that they can become a very helpful part of the path.