

Off the Continuum

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There are various places in the Canon where the Buddha talked about the Middle Way, and what's important to know about it is that it's not a path on the middle of a continuum. It actually lies off the continuum. It's "middle" in the sense that it avoids the continuum defined by two extremes, as the Buddha says in the first sermon. One extreme, as he says, is indulgence in sensual pleasure, and the other extreme is indulgence in self-torture. For most people, that's what the continuum is. Somewhere along the line between the two is where you're going to find yourself. Sometimes you're indulging in pleasure, sometimes you're indulging in pain. We tend to run back and forth on that continuum.

But with the Middle Way, the Buddha was actually asking us to get off that continuum, to use pleasure and use pain for something that avoids those extremes entirely. The use of pain, of course, is learning how to gain insight into the truth of suffering, the truth of stress. And the use of pleasure is gaining nourishment from the pleasure of concentration.

Some people complain, when the Buddha starts off with the four noble truths, that there's a lot about suffering and very little about pleasure or happiness. Well, it's actually there in the fourth noble truth, the last factor: pleasure and rapture born of seclusion, pleasure and rapture born of concentration, and the pleasure of the mind coming into equanimity. In other words, it's a pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures. It's off the continuum. And it's a pleasure to be developed.

The most important part of the first sermon is in a section that's often overlooked, because it's so repetitive: *Cakkhum udapadi ñanam udapadi pañña udapadi vijja udapadi aloko udapadi*, which we chant over and over again. That's the actual wheel in the wheel of Dhamma. Back at the time of the Buddha, a "wheel" was a series of variables, listing all their possible combinations and permutations. In this case, the variables are the four noble truths, and the three levels of knowledge appropriate to each: knowledge of the truth itself, knowledge of the duty or task you have to do with regard to that truth, and finally knowledge that the task has been completed. So four times three, you've got twelve: twelve permutations. Twelve spokes in the wheel. In knowledge of things as they've come to be, there are three rounds and twelve permutations with regard to the four

noble truths—that's the wheel.

For example, the duty with regard to right concentration is to develop it. You want to work on it. It's not something you just watch arising and passing away. There's a special kind of pleasure that comes with that concentration, because part of what makes the concentration right is that it's endowed with all the other factors of the path, starting from right view on through right mindfulness. This is why the Buddha said that right concentration is developed not only by emphasizing the tranquility or the serenity of the mind, but also by using some insight in order to master it.

As he once said, if you want to master right concentration, you should develop insight together with tranquility, because you have to understand the mind to be able to get it to settle down in the face of all the different currents that would push you in other directions. Now, it is possible for the mind to settle down without much insight in some circumstances, but if you really want to master it, it requires understanding what's going on in the body, understanding what's going on in the mind. Right concentration requires understanding if it's going to be right. And of course, once the concentration gets more solid, it puts you in a better position to see things clearly as they've come to be, and to understand the process of fabrication even more fully. Because that's what insight is all about.

As the Buddha once said, as you're meditating, you've got to learn how to balance both tranquility and insight. If you find yourself leaning too far in one direction, you go to someone else who is skilled in the other direction and ask them how to do that. If you've been developing insight, analyzing things, but the mind can't really settle down, he says to go find someone who has mastered the ability to get the mind to settle down and ask him, "How do you get it to settle down, how do you get it to indulge in this pleasure, so that you really do become settled in there, it really does feel like home?"

If you're a person who's developed some tranquility, some serenity, but doesn't have much insight, you go to someone who's mastered the insight and you ask him, "How are fabrications to be viewed? How are they to be penetrated with discernment?" Notice the issues around fabrication. It's important to see how things get put together in the mind, to see how things get put together in the body, how there is a shaping of cause and effect, so that you can understand how the mind creates suffering even though it wants to create pleasure.

That's what you're looking for: to penetrate your ignorance around this process of fabrication, because so many times we shape our experience without really realizing what we're doing. In dependent co-arising, fabrication comes before contact at the senses. There's a lot going on already in the way you shape

your experience of the body, the way you shape the dialogue going on in your mind, the way you shape states of mind itself. That's already in play, and then contact comes at the senses, and it's going to be distorted or shaped—shaped either for suffering if the fabrication is done with ignorance, or shaped into the path if you're doing the fabrication with knowledge.

This is one of the reasons why we work on concentration because it's a way of understanding the process of fabrication, way of fabricating our experience with knowledge. Look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation: After having you watch the breath for a while—seeing when it's long, seeing when it's short—the Buddha has you be sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in, sensitive to the whole body as you breathe out. This is partly as a way of getting the mind to settle into the body, but it also makes you more sensitive to how the breathing process shapes your experience of the body. It's what he calls *kaya-sankhara*, bodily fabrication. That's what the breath is. It fabricates the body, your sense of the body sitting here. There's the in-and-out breath, but there are also the other subtle breath sensations going through the body, connected with in-and-out breath. The more your awareness can spread to fill the whole body, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, the more you see that process of fabrication.

Once you can see it, then the Buddha says the next step is to calm it. And what calms it? Sometimes it's a perception; sometimes it's a direction in the mind. In other words, you don't just watch things arising and passing away, you play with them. You push them in one direction, then you push them in another direction, to see what connects with what, because that's the only way you can understand the process of fabrication, the process of causality: by testing things. And here the test is: What can you do to calm the effect of the breath on the body until there is a sense of ease, well-being, where it feels like the breath currents in your body are all flowing together, and they're not working at cross-purposes?

The next step in the breath meditation is to breathe in a way that induces feelings of rapture, feelings of ease. This is part of the calming. Again, this requires that you experiment. In what way can the breath induce rapture? It comes when the breath energy allows the breath to just be still in different spots, doesn't interfere with other feelings of solidity or liquidity or warmth in the body, allows them to develop a sense of fullness. Then, as the Buddha says, you try to allow that sense of fullness to spread around. Notice where it goes easily, where it doesn't go easily. Where it doesn't go easily, figure out what's standing in the way.

This is where you start exploring your sense of the body, of what they call proprioception: your body as sensed from the inside. You may notice that certain

parts of the body seem to be missing. Maybe your shoulder seems to be missing, or your flank, or your knees. In other words, you begin to realize that your sense of the body from within has become distorted, because you've been paying attention to other things. This is a very good way of exploring and then healing it, so that you get a greater sense of the whole body working together. You try to identify which parts of the body you're not familiar with, that aren't clear to you. If there is a big blank in the middle, or things are distorted in the middle, see what ways you can breathe to help it to straighten it out. How do you hold the body to help straighten it out?

As you allow the sense of fullness to spread around, as you get more and more in touch with how a sense of rapture or refreshment, a sense of ease can be induced and maintained through the way you breathe, you find it's also maintained by the way you perceive things. This is mental fabrication. Here again, you watch the process of how these perceptions and feelings shape the mind and how they can be calmed down. What kind of perception allows the mind to calm down and settle into the body and feel really good?

So here you've got concentration and insight, or tranquility and insight working together. You're using your insight to bring tranquility to the mind. That's *vipassana* and *samatha*, or insight and tranquility working together.

So what kind of perception would help? Sometimes you can think of the body as being an open sponge, so that when you breathe in, the breath can come in and out from all directions. You can think of the breath channels all connecting so that they can do all the work in getting the breath energy to the different parts of the body. You don't have to worry about breathing in and breathing out. You don't have to force the breath. You don't have to manage the breath so much. Just connect things up inside. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like putting electric wires in an area that hasn't had electricity before. Everything lights up; everything is connected, gets clear. And it's easier to settle in.

At the same time, you've learned a lot about fabrication: how thoughts or perceptions have a fabricating influence on the mind, how the breath has a fabricating influence on your sense of the body. You learn this not by just sitting there and watching things arising and passing away, but steering them or training them in particular direction.

It's like learning to be a cook. If you want to cook an egg, you don't just sit there watching the egg. You do different things with it. You crack it open. You put it over the flame, put it over the fire in a pan, and you see what happens if you turn the fire way up, and what happens if you turn the fire way down. That way, you learn about eggs because you want to make something with them. Then as you

get better and better in fixing the eggs, you can eat them. You have more energy, and more interest in trying to figure out even more interesting things to do with the eggs.

It's the same with the mind and the breath. You try to do interesting things with them, things that are energizing, things that are comfortable, things that can grab your interest. How is it possible to sit here, not worried about whether not you're having sensual pleasures, but still having a sense of intense well-being inside? We're trying to get off that old continuum of rushing from pain to sensual pleasures. The Buddha said the reasons we're so stuck on sensual pleasures is that we don't see any other alternative to pain. But here he's offering that alternative: a sense of well-being that fills the body, a sense of fullness that can fill the body, that comes from understanding the process of fabrication.

This is how tranquility and insight work together. You look at things in terms of fabrication, you try to master the process of fabrication in developing the path, and that way at the same time you learn how to comprehend stress and you begin to see how you can begin to abandon the cause of stress and suffering, so that someday you'll fully complete the tasks and fully realize the cessation of suffering.

These things all work together. The human mind tends to divide things up. We see, well, there's this factor, there's that factor, and we treat them as very separate things. But they all meld into one another. And it's important to see how they support one another, instead of treating them as radically different things. Because when they work together, they strengthen one another. And when the path comes together, it leads to release, something that lies beyond fabrication, but can be attained only by understanding fabrication.

All the raw materials for understanding fabrication are right here. You've got the breath. You've got feelings. You've got perceptions. You've got the mind thinking about things and evaluating things. All right here. It's like one jewel but with many facets. When the path comes together, it has eight folds, but they're folded into one path.