

Sensitive to Fabrication

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A lot of people, when they focus on the breath, want to be with the pure sensation of the breath without any mental images, without any words. But these things are intimately tied together. If you're not clear about the image you're holding in mind about the breath, it goes underground and has an impact on the way you're seeing things. What seems to be a direct and totally pure experience of the breath is actually not. And if you're not clear about the image, if you're not clear about the perception, you don't know what impact it's having.

This is why we consciously think about the breath. It allows us to bring some new perceptions to bear.

The idea that the breath is an energy throughout the body is not one that's really normal in Western culture. I know a lot of people who've said it's impossible. They think that breath has to be the air coming in and out of the lungs. When you talk about the breath in the nerves or the breath in the blood vessels, they say that's unscientific because air doesn't go down there. But that's a misperception, because when we talk about the breath, we're talking about the energy, not the air. And there has to be energy in your nerves. There has to be energy in your blood vessels. Otherwise, you wouldn't be alive. The parts of the body that you feel right now, you wouldn't be able to feel. It's the breath-energy that allows you to sense that you're sitting here with a body and you know where it is. You know where the various parts are.

Now, some of us, as we get to know the body as we feel it from within, begin to realize that some of the parts don't seem to be connected. One of the exercises you can do as you're getting more familiar with your body is to figure out: Okay where is your arm in relationship to your chest? Or where are your legs in relationship to the hips? Where is the front of the body in relationship to the back? And instead of imposing the idea of what it looks like from the outside on your internal sensations, try to explore where your internal sensations are right now. As you explore them, gradually they come back into a kind of alignment. This is a useful process. It gets you in touch with the body.

You begin to see that your perceptions do play a role in shaping your experience, because after all, it's in the interaction among fabrications—bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, mental and fabrication—that you understand the extent to which you are fabricating things right now. At the same time, when you're in touch with fabrications, you're very close to seeing ignorance. Ajaan

Suwat used to make a lot of this point. He said, if you want to see where your ignorance is, look at your fabrications, because they're right together.

So we want to get really, really familiar with the fabrications going on here. As you bring more knowledge to the fabrications, you begin to get a sense of where your ignorance was. So experiment with different perceptions to see what impact they have on the way you experience the breath and the kinds of feelings that come up. Also, look into the stories you're telling yourself about yourself sitting here meditating, what's going on in the mind, because those have a huge impact as well.

When I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, I'd be meditating up alone on the mountain, sometimes for days without really having much contact with anybody. I'd get really frustrated with myself. Old stories from grade school, high school, college would come up—things in the family, things that happened between me and my friends—and I was really frustrated. I wanted these things to go away. I wanted to focus on the breath. I began to realize, though, that a lot of these issues were issues that were unresolved largely because I was looking at them in the wrong way. Sometimes I would talk them over with Ajaan Fuang and he'd have some interesting insights based on karma. Sometimes he'd look at me with a look that made me realize, okay, this was a Western problem that a Western person had to solve. But the basic message was there.

You can take the Buddha's teachings on karma, you can take the Buddha's teachings on rebirth, you can take the Buddha's teachings on experience in general and use those to recast your stories of who you are, where you come from, what's happened in the past. That way, you can settle a lot of issues.

So if you want, think about Ajaan Fuang talking to you when an issue comes up. When the members of the committee are getting obstreperous, how would he describe the story? How would he describe the issue? How would he sort things out among them? If Ajaan Fuang doesn't seem to be the one to settle things, think of the ajaan you most respect or the person in the Pali Canon you most respect. Add that voice to your committee. In this way, you're dealing with all three types of fabrication, and you're using them with skill, instead of the old way, which was just willy-nilly.

We fabricate things sometimes simply because we're bored. There's that story of the luminous brahmas who, as the universe is beginning to reform, just for a lark, say, "What does this taste like?" They see a film developing on the ocean of the world. They taste it with their fingers: They stick a finger in the film and taste it. "This tastes really good. It tastes like ghee mixed with honey." So they fall on it.

At first it's just a lark, but then they become earnest. As a result, their luminosity disappears and they fall to a lower realm.

That's the way it is with a lot of us. Something starts out as, "Just do this for a lark." Then it takes over, and the state of your mind falls. So you have to be careful about these fabrications because the wandering on that we do in samsara gets blown around, just by whim sometimes—like the old line about that tsar of Russia who ruled with a whim of iron. In other words, whatever came into his head, that's what he did, and he insisted on its being that way. Well, the mind is a lot like that. Random ideas come in and all of a sudden they take your fancy. And you just go with them. Then they take over. They become more and more ironclad. You find yourself having to live with the results of those whims, sometimes for a long, long time. So you have to be careful about the directions you choose; how you fabricate things.

The Buddha's saying basically that we suffer because we do all of this wandering around, all of this fabrication, out of ignorance. But if you can start learning how to do it with knowledge, you can stop wandering. The knowledge required is not just being aware of doing it. You have to try to look at these things in terms of: Where is the stress? What's causing the stress? What can you do to put an end to stress? If there's a way of thinking that's weighing you down, learn how to think about that topic in a different way. Or you may decide that the topic isn't worth thinking about at all.

Usually, when stress comes, our immediate reaction is that we want to run away or push it away. But the Buddha says, no, comprehend it as clinging-aggregates, which is not the first thought that usually comes to our mind. But ask yourself, "Where's the clinging? What are you feeding on here? Is it a form? Is it an image you're holding in mind? Is it a feeling? Is it a perception? Is it a fabrication? Is it just the fact of consciousness? How are you feeding on these things? And why do you want to feed on them? What is it about them that you like? Where is their allure? Can you step back enough from that to see where their drawbacks are? Can you see when you feed and when you don't?"

This is one of the reasons why we look for inconstancy: to see the rise and fall in the level of stress. Then we can ask ourselves, "Okay, when the stress level in the mind goes up, what were the perceptions that brought it on? What were the feelings? What were the thought constructs?" The perceptions usually are the big troublemakers because they're quick and they have an immediate impact. They deal with the mind on its lizard-brain level.

So again, as you're working with the breath and becoming sensitive to how your perceptions shape your sense of who you are and what you're doing right

now, what you're dealing with right now, you can get more and more sensitive to these little images as they come and go in the mind. What happens when you drop an image that raised the level of stress? As you're involved in that particular project, you don't really have to think too much about developing the path because you're working on right view right there. And you're concentrated. And you're mindful. And you're engaged in right effort. Whatever's unskillful, you let it drop. Whatever's skillful, you develop it. All of these things are happening right there.

The ajaans like to make this point. It's not as if you do some comprehension work on stress and then you do some abandoning work on the cause or some separate developing work on the path. These things all happen together. But working with the breath is what gives you the tether to the present moment, the tether to that level of mind where you can see how these fabrications happen, as you get more and more sensitive and you bring in that issue of where's the stress and what can be done to put an end to it. That's called fabricating with knowledge as opposed to ignorance. We're applying appropriate attention; we're applying the right framework to this fabrication. That's what the ajaans keep reminding us.

That's why it's good to have the voices or the attitudes of the ajaans in your head as members of the committee. They keep bringing you back to these questions: "Where's the stress? What are you doing to cause it?" If you don't like the idea that *you're* causing the stress, then, "What is it in the mind that's causing it? What makes it go up? What makes it go down?" Look for the perceptions and the other fabrications, because those are the culprits.

One of the reasons we work on concentration is, as the Buddha said, that the levels of concentration all the way up through the dimension of nothingness are perception attainments. You have to learn how to hold on to a perception that you find congenial, that helps you to settle down. Then these perceptions get more and more refined. When you've learned how to hold a perception in mind for a long time, then you get a lot more sensitive to the little whispers of perception that come in and want to change.

So when you're focusing on the breath, realize that you're going to be using perceptions to stay focused. Just learn how to be very, very sensitive to what they are. And learn how to play with them so that you can develop even more sensitivity, because it's in that realization that you can really choose which perceptions you're going to apply: That's how karma applies to the present moment.

The realization that you do have choices right now can open a lot of things in the mind. Otherwise, you just run by your old ironclad way of doing things.

Whatever ways you've been driving yourself crazy in the past, you're going to continue to drive yourself crazy now. But you might decide, "Okay, I've had enough of that. I want to see what other possibilities there are."

This is one of the reasons why it's good that there is no specific rule in life that there's some meaning that's been assigned to us. We get to assign meaning ourselves. And if we decide that the meaning is going to be freedom—and we stick with that—we can make a huge difference.