

## *Fabricated Path, Unfabricated Goal*

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Concentration is something you put together. You've got the breath, your awareness, and your thoughts, and you try to bring them together, keep them together. You've got to have some strategies for keeping them together once they're there. Otherwise, they come together and then they go their separate ways.

This is why we work with the breath. Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels good right now so that you can take an interest in what's going on in the present moment. And, given that you're already shaping the present moment, try to shape it in a good way.

The breath is what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication. When you direct your thoughts to something and you evaluate it, that's called verbal fabrication; you're basically talking to yourself about it. So you can talk to yourself about the breath, the proviso being that you want to talk about it skillfully. Ask questions that actually help you to settle down: What kind of breathing would be more comfortable, satisfying right now? What does the body need right now in terms of the breath energy? What kind of breathing would fulfill that need?

Take an interest in this. After all, it's through the breath that you experience the body, and through the body that you experience the world out there. So pay attention to this medium through which you experience everything else. How's it going? Where do you feel it? Can you feel it throughout the body? If at the beginning you can't feel it everywhere, try to focus on the areas where you *can* feel it.

You'll find that they may or may not correspond to where you think you should be experiencing the breath, but that's a good lesson right there. Your immediate experience may not be what you think it should be. Work with what you've got, what you actually have there, so that you can begin to call some of your preconceived notions into question.

Once there's a sense of ease in the breath, think of it spreading around. What we're trying to develop here is a state of mind where you're still and focused but, at the same time, your awareness is all-around. The focus is so that you can see things precisely. The all-aroundness is so that you can see things out of the corner of your eye that you might otherwise have missed. There's stuff going on all around you in the mind, just as the breath is going on all around you in the body. If you're focused on one problem, often the real cause of the problem is hidden

away in the area that you don't have any awareness. So you want to create a state of mind that's centered, but all-around, still and all-around.

The question sometimes comes up: How much concentration is enough? And the answer is, it's enough if you can actually see what's going on in the mind and can begin to apply some appropriate attention—in other words, asking, “Where is the stress here right now? What's the cause? What can I do to put an end to the cause? What happens when the cause ends?” You can ask those questions on many levels. It's not the case that you try to stay in concentration, and if it doesn't get all the way to *jhāna*, you throw it out and then try another state of concentration, and throw that out. Don't throw out your concentration. Instead, build on what you've got: the quality of being single with your object, or having a single focus.

The Buddha uses the same term in the concentration that he does when he recommends how you should listen to a Dhamma talk. The word is *ekagga*. It's sometimes translated as “one-pointed.” But although the word *eka* means “one,” *agga* doesn't necessarily mean “point.” It means “summit,” and it also means “gathering place,” which is probably the meaning most relevant here. You want your attention to be gathered around one thing when you're listening to a Dhamma talk; the kind of concentration where you can focus on the talk and apply appropriate attention. In other words, you can ask yourself, “What does this talk teach me about my own suffering and the way I can handle it, deal with it?” That's appropriate attention. So you're focused and you can hear and you can think when the mind is *ekagga*.

We take that concentration and apply it inside. In the beginning, you'll be dealing with blatant examples of suffering, or blatant causes of suffering. So, for the time being, that amount of concentration is good enough for you. If you can see through a particular cause of suffering—if you realize that you're losing your interest in it, you're losing your desire to follow it—then that's enough concentration for that problem. Then, gradually, as you clear away the big problems, the mind will settle down even more. Your sensitivity will get greater, and you'll start noticing the little problems, and you'll clear those away. And if you can't clear them away yet, just continue trying to stay with the breath. Get everything centered. Be watchful.

But you can't guarantee that the problem will come along when you want. It's like being a hunter. You go out and you have to be very still but very alert. If you're not still, then the animal will run away. If you're not alert, the animal can come right by and you wouldn't know it. So we're here to catch the animals that are greed, aversion, and delusion in their many forms. You can't get them to make

appointments as to who will come when. You deal with whatever is coming up and disturbing your concentration. And if you can deal with it, undercut it, understand it, drop the cause, then that amount of concentration was enough for that particular problem.

So you take that concentration and you stick with it. And it's in the sticking with it that it has a chance to grow. This is why when you read about jhana, you then have to put what you've read aside. You're here to focus on the breath, not to focus on jhana. You're here to focus on the breath, creating a mind state that allows you to see what's going on in the mind. And whether it reaches jhana at this particular time or not, that's not the issue. The issue is: Can you get the mind still enough to start seeing what's going on? And comprehending what's going on? And apply those questions of appropriate attention: "Where is the stress? What's causing it? What can I do to put an end to it? What am I engaged in that I should learn how to stop engaging in? What am I feeding on that I should stop feeding on?"

In this way, as you pursue these questions and start sensing problems that you didn't see before, that's a sign that concentration is progressing. You've got to clear away the gross trees before you can get to the bushes, and you clear away the bushes before you can get to the subtler plants inside.

But this is all put together. It's all fabricated. As the Buddha said, the goal is unfabricated, but the path there is fabricated. Always keep that in mind. It's not that the path is going to cause the goal, but if you follow the path it gets there. It's like the road to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. There are actually two roads to the South Rim. If you've ever been there you know that if you go from the south, you travel through country that doesn't look like the Grand Canyon at all. It's flat and scrubby, very uninteresting. You can be just a mile away from the Grand Canyon and not know it. Then you hit the Grand Canyon and it's something totally different, totally other. And there is that aspect to the path. Because it does require desire, and you are creating things, you're fabricating things. These are activities that we are engaged in right now. But they're activities of clearing things away.

I was reading a Dhamma book a while back where the author was dividing conceptions of paths into two sorts. One is the idea that the path creates a state of awakening, and you have to work hard, hard, hard to create that state of awakening. The other is that awakening is already there, and all you have to do is relax into it. Now, if those were the only two options, the second one would make more sense, in the sense that you can't create something uncreated, unfabricated. But it turns out that you can't just relax into nibbana either, because the mind is

constantly fabricating things all the time, and doesn't let them go very easily. Our hand has the ability to let go, but also has the ability to grab things. Then it goes back and forth between the two. In the same way, the mind lets go and grabs, lets go and grabs.

You've got to look into that habit of grabbing and take it apart. That requires that you analyze things, and understand things. Because there is a third option for understanding how the path relates to awakening, and that's Ajaan Lee's image of salt water. You want freshwater, and there is freshwater in the saltwater, but it's not going to come out of the saltwater if you just let the saltwater sit. You've got to boil it, distill it. In this case, the effort of the practice is the boiling. You've got to get the salt out and when you do, there it is: the freshwater that was always there. But you can't attain it unless you put the water through a process. This is what we're doing: taking the mind and putting it through this process of getting rid of the salt.

So, even though we're aiming at a goal that's not an activity at all, it requires an activity to get there. As the Buddha said, this is the kind of action that puts an end to action. So there'll be a room for desire: You *want* to get to the goal. There will be a room for a sense of frustration that you're not there yet. The Buddha said that's a useful emotion to develop. He'll most often say that we feel upset about things around us, things we see, or hear, smell, or taste, or touch, or think about, and we try to change them into things that we like to see, or hear, or smell, or taste, or touch, or think about. That, he says, goes nowhere, because the way of the world is that it's going to keep going back and forth. There's gain and then there's loss; status, loss of status; praise and criticism; pleasure and pain.

The best way to get out of that cycle, he says, is to go for what he calls renunciate pain, the thought that "There is the goal, and other people have attained it, but I haven't attained it yet." There's a little bit of conceit in there, and a little bit of frustration, but it's a thought that motivates you, gets you going, gets you out of the other cycle of going back and forth between things you like and things you don't like. So there's a use for that kind of pain on the path. It's to motivate you so you can get to what he calls renunciate pleasure and renunciate equanimity: the pleasure that comes when you do attain the goal, and equanimity when you reflect on the sense of peace that comes with the goal.

One of Ajaan Suwat's images is that we eat food because we want to be full. Now, fullness is one thing, and the activity of eating is something else. It requires that we work. We have to get the food, we have to cook the food, we have to eat the food, spend all that time chewing, and then cleaning up afterwards. Which is very different from the sense of fullness that comes as a result of the eating. The

analogy, of course, breaks down, because the eating does cause you to be full. But you think about the road to the South Rim, to remind yourself that that's one aspect of the path. There's a lot about the path that's not like the goal at all. But it does the work, it gets you there. Once you're at the Grand Canyon, you don't have to think about the path anymore.

But there's another road to the South Rim that comes from the east. That represents a different set of problems, because that road goes along the canyon of the Little Colorado. And if you've never seen the Grand Canyon before, you're riding along the road, and you might start thinking, "Hey, this must be part of the Grand Canyon." It's a fairly large canyon. It's only when you get to the Grand Canyon that you realize, "Oh, that Little Colorado River canyon really is little. It's nothing at all like the Grand Canyon."

This stands for the problem of when you've attained a certain level of calm or stillness, or gained some insight, and you think, "This must be it." And you stop right there. You've gained a sense of peace inside, a sense of Oneness inside, or you convince yourself that you see that there is no self. You figure out that that must be awakening, because it sounds like what's in the books. But as soon as you put that stamp on it, you've gone wrong.

So you have to be careful as you follow the path. Some things look pretty convincing but they're not the goal. So you always have to ask yourself, "Is there anything more in here? Anymore stress inside the mind?" This is why you want to get your concentration as solid as possible, and also learn how to apply these questions of appropriate attention to everything that comes up. When an insight comes up, "Does this totally put an end to stress? Or are you latching on to it simply because you feel proud that you've had an insight? What about the stress in the pride?" Or a sense of Oneness comes up in the concentration: Can you see if there's still a problem in there?

This is one of the characteristics that made the Buddha special: He saw problems in attainments that other people thought were perfectly fine. There were teachers who taught nothingness, or neither perception or non-perception—very refined levels of concentration—and as far as they were concerned, that's all you needed. The Buddha noticed, "There's still something stressful in here. There's still something that's not totally deathless, that's not totally reliable in here. There must be something better."

It was his ability to see problems where no one else saw them that enabled him to become the Buddha. This is something that each of us has to do. We have to see problems where we never saw them before. Which is why, whatever comes up, you learn to apply those questions of appropriate attention and watch very

carefully. Peel away anything that's obviously stress or causing stress, and then be patient, to watch and see if there's anything else that comes up, any other little stress that disturbs the mind.

This is why the Buddha has you ask those questions about inconstancy. Stress does come and go because its cause comes and goes. The perception of inconstancy is not just to say, "Oh, things are inconstant so I shouldn't hold on to them," and then you somehow magically let go. You hold on to things because you think that they're something worth holding on to there, that the effort that goes into it is repaid by the reward you get. There are a lot of things that we know are inconstant, but we still go for them. The perception of inconstancy is there for things that you really think are worth the effort. You have to look into it, "Is it really worth the effort? Does this really reward you as much as you think it does? Is it really as peaceful? Is it really as secure?" And watch. If you see any variation, or any ups and downs in your state of mind, that's a sign that your work isn't done yet. There still a problem in there.

It's like learning how to be the princess with the pea. You want to get so that you know that there's one pea under all those mattresses, because it's a sign that there's still a problem. And as you develop your sensitivity, you finally get to the point where—when you do reach something that's totally different, totally other than the path—you'll know. It's because your sensitivity has been developed through these questions, through these practices, that you can see. That's when you get the fresh water.

So we put in effort to get to a place that won't require effort once we get there. Ven. Ananda's analogy for desire on the path is that you walk to a park because you have a desire to get there. Once you've arrived at the park, the desire is gone because it's been fulfilled. The different roads to the Grand Canyon, even though they're not the Grand Canyon, will get you there if you follow them. Once you're there, you can drop the roads. In the meantime, know that the reward is more than worth the effort put in.