

Fabricating Around Pain

August 25, 2017

Take a couple of long, good deep in and out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. When we talk about “breath,” it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the movement of energy that goes along with that, that actually brings the air in and allows it out. That can be felt anywhere in the body. And there are many layers of energy as well. So focus on what you can see most clearly. Focus on a spot that seems most congenial.

Then notice if the breath is comfortable. If your breathing feels labored, think of the breath coming in and out through all the pores of the skin. You can experiment with different rhythms and textures of breathing: long in, long out; short in, short out; long in, short out; short in, long out; deep, shallow, heavy, light, broad or narrow. See what breathing feels best for the body right now.

We’re trying to bring the mind into a state of concentration with as much mindfulness and alertness as possible. And the mind finds it easier to stay concentrated when it’s with something that’s pleasant, so that instead of feeling a need to send your awareness outside, you can allow your awareness to fill the whole body where you’ve created a sense of ease. You do that by allowing the breath to fill the whole body as well. After all, there is a movement of energy that goes through the nerves as you breathe. And if you’re sensitive to that, you can think of that spreading around, of everything connecting in the body.

Even though there may be pains in the body, you can breathe right through them. If there’s a pain in the knee or a pain in the stomach, think of the energy going right through there. After all, the energy is actually there before the pain. Breath is your first layer of awareness with regard to the body. It’s what allows you to know that you have a body here. And then, through the breath, you’re aware of other aspects of having a body, like the solidity, the coolness, the warmth, pains, pleasures in the body. These all are known through the breath. So, if there’s some part that’s feeling painful, think of the breath being there first. And allow the breath in that area to have the sense that it’s flowing smoothly.

Now, we’re meditating not to get the breath. We’re meditating to get the mind. But you learn a lot about the mind as you deal with the breath because it’s so near the breath. It’s like a mirror right up next against your face. You see clearly all the little details. If the rhythm of breathing feels good, you can think of spreading awareness around to different parts of the body. And notice how the breathing process feels: in the stomach, in the chest, in the head, in the back, in

the arms, the legs. If there's tension anywhere in the body, allow it to relax. What you want is a feeling of well-being suffusing the body. Again, even though there may be pains in the body, think of that well-being surrounding the pains; cutting off connections between pains. That way, when your awareness fills the body, it's setting in with a sense of ease and well-being.

The whole purpose of concentration is first to get a sense of well-being and this state of all around awareness, because you want to see the mind from all around. That way, you can make the body, the whole body, your mirror for looking at the mind. If something comes up in the body and the mind has a response, you'll notice it. And you'll notice how something comes up in the mind and has an impact on the body. You want to be able to notice the influences going in either direction. And this can happen anywhere in the body. When the mind is solidly here with a sense of well-being, then it can watch things a lot more objectively. Pains come up and you don't have to feel threatened by them. Emotions come up that you ordinarily find troubling, but you don't have to feel troubled by them either. You just note that they're there. And, for the time being, you don't want to give them your attention. You want to give your attention to the breath. You're trying to establish a good, solid foundation for observing events in the body, events in the mind, and particularly events in the mind.

All too often we have a tendency to think that we're simply on the receiving end of things coming in from outside. But the Buddha's picture of the mind is a lot more active. Your mind plays a role in fabricating your sense of the world, your sense of yourself. You want to be able to see that clearly, because if we fabricate these things in ignorance, we suffer. For instance, with pain there's a fact of physical pain, which in and of itself is not that much of a burden on the mind. The real burden is all the activity you do around it. The Buddha uses the word *sankhara*, translated as "fabrication." And, as I was mentioning earlier this morning, another way you can translate it is simply "jerry-rigging." We try to put together a way of dealing with the world based on what comes to hand: what ideas, what notions, what images in the mind. And if something seems to work, then it becomes part of our repertoire for dealing with the world.

But our standards for "what works" can often be pretty sloppy. And a lot of our tools can turn on us if we don't use them well. These tools come in three types. There's bodily fabrication, which is the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself about things; and then there's mental fabrication, which are perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the labels you put on things, and these can either be individual words or images that appear in the mind. You see somebody unfriendly and you think, "monster." Or your lizard brain is telling

you that someone is dangerous with little images that flicker through the mind and have an impact on how you see that person. As for feelings, those are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Those are also mental fabrications. These are the things that make us suffer, if we do them in ignorance. So what we're trying to do as we meditate is learn how to do them with knowledge. That will turn them into part of the path.

In a good state of concentration, you've got the breath. That's bodily fabrication. You want to learn how to breathe in a way that's energizing when the body's tired, soothing when it's feeling pained, relaxing when it's feeling tense. In other words, you don't let the breath just do whatever it's going to do willy-nilly. You try to gain a sense of how to get the breath to be on your side. And you do that through verbal fabrication. You're talking to yourself about the breath, focusing your attention on the breath, and commenting on it, asking questions about it. Is long breathing good, or is shorter breathing? Deep? Shallow? Once you've found a breath that's good, how do you maintain it? And then when you maintain it, what do you do with it? These are questions you ask yourself. And they're a legitimate part of the concentration.

As we chanted just now, in the first jhana there's directed thought and evaluation. That's what this internal chatter is. When you get to the higher levels of concentration, you can drop that. But to get the mind to settle down, you need to do some adjusting. So you're learning to use verbal fabrication in a way that's skillful, to help the mind settle down.

Similarly with mental fabrication: You hold in mind the perception that the breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs, it's an energy that suffuses the body. And it's prior to other things in the body. You hold that perception in mind. It makes it a lot easier to breathe and to develop a sense of whole-body awareness with the breath. And through the combination of all these things, you can give rise to a sensation of well-being. So you're using these three kinds of fabrication to create a state of concentration, a state of well being.

And as you get hands-on experience with them, you begin to notice other ways in your life in which you're using these fabrications in not such a skillful way. And you can change. For instance, when there's pain in the body, we have a tendency to try to enclose it in a shell, to make sure it doesn't spread. But that shell then imprisons us. And it creates barriers for the breath. The breathing process gets a lot more restricted. So you use your knowledge of how to deal with the breath; how to ease tension. Breathe through things to help alleviate some of the pain.

Then you look at how you're talking to yourself about the pain. One of the first things the Buddha has you do when you're sick or in pain is to spread lots of

goodwill. There's a story in the Canon where the Buddha was wounded by a stone sliver that penetrated his foot. Devadatta had tried to kill him, rolling a rock down a mountain. When the rock crashed against another rock, a sliver came out and pierced the Buddha in the foot. He was in a lot of pain.

So he lies down. Mara comes to taunt him, "Are you moping?" And the Buddha replies, "I'm lying here in sympathy for all beings." So follow his example. To hold the perception of all beings in the mind, helps put you in the right frame of mind, because you remember: What are all beings doing? All beings are suffering. You're not the only one who's suffering. You don't want to suffer, they don't want to suffer. So you can feel some companionship. That's an important thing to keep in mind. We're all subject to aging, illness, and death. And you don't want to carry any ill will into your illness.

Then you look directly at how you're talking to yourself about the pain. A lot of this is pretty subliminal. To detect it, it helps to get the mind into a good state of concentration where you can be aware of things, but still. So you begin to see what you're saying to yourself about the pain. A good way to find that out is to ask questions. Is the pain solid? Or does it come in moments? And is the pain the same thing as the part of the body it's in? Or is it there, but on another level, like another frequency, like the difference between the different radio waves penetrating the room right here, right now. There are radio stations in Tijuana, San Diego, Los Angeles, Riverside. They're all penetrating here in the same spot. But if you use a radio and you can tune to different frequencies, you get a distinct frequency, a distinct radio station.

It's the same with the pain in the body. The body is one level of frequency you might say. It's characterized by what are called the four properties of earth, water, wind, and fire: solidity, liquidity or coolness, the energy of the breath, and warmth. The pain is something else. Can you see that? Ask yourself that question. When you can see the pain as keeping in moments rather than being a solid, or having a particular shape: When these moments come, do they come at you? Or do they go away from you? A good perception to hold in mind—and this is where you move into mental fabrication—is that the pains are going away. As soon as you notice those moments, they're gone. Notice them, they're gone. And they're not coming at you. It's like sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons with the seat in the back, facing back. As soon as anything came into your range of sight, it was going away from you.

So what you're learning to do is to ask questions using verbal fabrication, and you question your perceptions, which are mental fabrications. You try to replace them with better ones, ones that don't inflict the pain on the mind. And start

questioning this sense of the pain invading your space. Is this a space you want to lay claim to anyhow? Can your awareness be one thing and the pain be something else?

What you're *not* trying to get is a state where you're blanked out, oblivious to everything, because you're not going to understand anything when you're oblivious. The concentration is meant to put you in a state where you're fully alert. But you gain a sense of the awareness being one thing, and things that it's aware of are other things. And you don't have to lay claim to the things that it's aware of. This includes thoughts going through the mind—any kind of fabrication. When you can separate yourself from these things, there's a lot less burden on the mind. You find that the pain itself is not a burden. The burden came because you created a bridge to the pain, through your perceptions, through all the ways you fabricate around the pain: physically, verbally, mentally. You can learn how to step back from these processes and to drop them when you find that they're causing suffering.

It's in this way that concentration gives you a good basis for observing the pain, observing the processes by which the mind goes out and creates trouble around the pain. At the same time, the process of creating a state of concentration gives you hands-on experience with how you can take those various fabrications and direct them in a better direction. Use them for a better purpose with more skill, because you want to learn that even though the mind is here with a body subject to aging, illness, and death, the mind doesn't have to suffer from that if it's skillful.

If it's not skillful, it lays claim to things and it fabricates things in ways that just pile more and more suffering on. The sad thing is that a lot of us think that that's inevitable, that that's just the way things have to be. But it's not. This is what you could call the good news of the Buddha's awakening: There can be pain in the world, but the mind doesn't have to suffer from it.

You look at the four noble truths. It's not the case that pains cause suffering. Craving and clinging cause suffering. In other words, the things coming out of the mind are causing suffering. But they're not things that are there inevitably. If you bring knowledge to them, if you bring awareness to them, you can actually turn them into the path of the end of suffering. That puts a lot of power in your hands. It means that you don't have to be the slave of your pains. You don't have to be driven by your pains. You can approach them with more confidence. As the Buddha said, you want to learn how to comprehend the way the mind creates suffering to understand it to the point where you can stop. So, even though the Buddha's teachings focus on pain, he's not pessimistic about the world. He's very

optimistic. We can live with aging, illness, and death, but without suffering. The skill there lies in training the mind.