

The Forerunner of All Things

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There's a passage at the beginning of the Dhammapada, that the mind is the forerunner of all things. Everything you experience, everything you do, is shaped first by the mind. Usually people read that and say it's a nice idea, but they don't realize how deeply it goes into the Dhamma. When the Buddha explains the very complex causes for suffering in dependent co-arising, one of the first things you notice is that sensory contact comes halfway through the line-up. Everything prior to that has to do with your mind, which means that when you see a sight or hear a sound, then depending on how you've been training your mind, you either are or are not setting yourself up to suffer, regardless of how good or how bad that particular contact may be.

This is why we meditate: to train the mind. And the big distinction between a trained and untrained mind that that the Buddha said is that if we shape the ideas that we bring to the present moment in ignorance, they're going to lead to suffering. If we shape them with knowledge, they're going to be a path to the end of suffering. So as we meditate, we're getting to know the mind so we can train it, so we can know what's going on, to see where it's doing something unskillful, where it's doing something skillful, to abandon the unskillful habits, to develop the skillful ones.

This is why we're focused on the breath, because the breath is right near the mind. I've heard sometimes people say "What are you going to do when you die? You've been focusing on your breath all your whole life, but the breath is going to leave you." The reason we focus on the breath is not to get the breath itself, but because it's so close to the mind, so close to the processes the Buddha calls fabrication: physical, verbal, and mental. Physical fabrication is the breath itself. Verbal is the way you talk to yourself, what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation: You focus on a topic and then you comment on it. And finally there's mental fabrication, which is composed of feelings and perceptions. Feelings are feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Perceptions are the images or labels that you apply to things—the messages from your lizard brain, which has images that get you breathing in a certain way, which will create a certain feeling. If it's a threatening image, you're going to breathe in a way that's fearful, and that gives rise to feelings of dis-ease. And then you start thinking about it. So all these fabrications interact.

If you do these things in ignorance, you tend to fall into your old habits. But if you're aware of the breath, you start seeing these processes, and you can actually learn how to shape them in a skillful way. Right now we're shaping them for the sake of concentration, breathing in a way that's soothing, calming, or energizing if the body needs energy, but breathing in a way that brings the body to balance. And then talking to yourself about the breath: Is the breath good? If it's not good, what can you do to make it better? If it is good, what can you do to maintain it? How do you watch for a way of breathing that felt good for a while but then all of a sudden isn't quite right for the body anymore? And how do you make these changes? You don't want to squeeze things. You simply bring to mind the fact that you could breathe a little bit longer, you could breathe a little bit shorter. It is possible, simply through the power of suggestion, to change the way you breathe.

So you learn how to talk to yourself about the breath and the mind's relationship to the breath. You're trying to create a feeling of well-being, a feeling of ease, fullness. And you hold in mind a perception of the breath that allows that sense of ease to spread through the body, so that the breath isn't confined just to the nose and the lungs, and the ease isn't confined to the nose and the lungs. It can spread out.

In this way, you're getting practical, hands-on experience with how to fabricate with knowledge to get the mind to settle down. But you don't want to leave this understanding about the process of fabrication on the meditation seat when you get up. You want to remember that even when you're dealing with other people, the important thing is not so much what they're doing. It's how you're approaching the situation, how you're already fabricating it, and how you might do it with a little bit more knowledge.

If someone does something that would normally set you off, you can remind yourself, "I don't have to breathe in a way that makes me suffer. I don't have to think in a way that makes me suffer. I don't have to hold onto perceptions in the mind that are going to make the situation worse." Because the whole point about fabrication is that you have choices.

This is one of the reasons that we not only meditate but also learn about what the Buddha had to say, because he gives lots of different ways of perceiving situations: a set of values, and a sense of what is good for us in the long-term, and how long long-term can be, so that we don't get stuck in our old ways of perceiving that lead to suffering.

So the Buddha *is* saying that you're suffering because of what you're doing, but he's not saying that all the blame lies with you. It's not a blame game anyhow. There are people out there doing horrible things. What he's saying is that you have

the opportunity not to have to suffer from the horrible things in the world. If the end of suffering required that everything in the world be perfect, it would never happen. We have to learn how to not suffer in the midst of a lot of noise, a lot of activity, a lot of unskillful intentions aimed at us.

One of the things the Buddha has you remind yourself of when someone says something really harmful or ill intended, is that this is the nature of human speech. People have mouths and they can use them in any way they want. Don't be surprised. You're on the human level. If you wanted a place where everybody says nothing but nice things, either you have to go to some of the deva levels, or you have to go to Mercury in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, where the Harmoniums say simply, "Here I am. Here I am. Here I am. So glad you are. So glad you are." That's not the human world. So when people are being unkind, it's not all that unusual.

Think of the Buddha himself, all the false accusations that were made against him. While working on the story of the life of the Buddha, I've been struck by how many really difficult situations he had to deal with. We tend to think of the Buddha after his awakening as floating through the world three inches off the ground, with a pool of light instead of a shadow, and everybody bowing down before him in the same way the grass would bow down before a wind. But that's not the case. There were people who had their hearts set against him, made all kinds of false accusations, all kinds of attacks. One person even tried to kill him. But he was able to fend off the attacks, and not get knocked over by them. So if even the Buddha was going to be subject to unfair treatment, what about us? It's only normal. That's one way of dealing with situations like that.

The other way of course is, as the Buddha said, simply tell yourself, if someone says something really nasty, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear," and leave it at that. Think of yourself as an elephant going into battle, he says. People are going to shout all kinds of things, all kinds of insults at the poor elephant, and yet it has to do its job. There'll be horrible things to see, horrible things to hear, horrible things to smell, to touch. And the elephant still had the attitude, "I can't let myself be pulled aside from my job by these things."

So as you go into human society, you can't expect everybody to be nice. If you have that kind of expectation, you're setting yourself up to suffer. Think of it more as going into battle. You want to make sure that your actions are skillful, and you don't want to weaken your case. As I was saying this morning, you don't want your goodness to have to depend on the goodness of other people. And you don't want their misbehavior to become an excuse for your misbehavior. Because your misbehavior then just becomes your bad kamma, regardless of what other people did. That's part of the long-term that the Buddha has you think about. When all is

said and done, the story of your life is not so much what other people did to you. The story of your life is what you did. That's what you carry with you.

So you want to make sure to remember that you're not going to go to hell because of what other people do. You go to hell because of what *you* do. You go to heaven because of what you do. You gain nibbana because of what you do. So you want to make your goodness independent, something that doesn't have to rely on anybody else's goodness. After all, all of us born in this human world have good kamma and bad kamma in our past. If we had nothing but good kamma, we wouldn't be here. We'd be in a much better place. So it's only to be expected that some of that bad kamma is going to come back at us. It's a natural part of the human world.

Ajaan Fuang had a student, a young nurse who was very good looking, and her fellow nurses seemed to be jealous of her. They liked to gossip about her, and over time it was beginning to get to her. One day she went to sit and meditate with Ajaan Fuang at Wat Makut, and she had a vision of herself in a house of mirrors. She saw herself being reflected back, back, back, back, back, many, many times. And she thought about how she had probably been gossiped about in many past lives as well. The whole idea of all that gossip got to be oppressive. After she came out of meditation, she went to talk to him about it, hoping that he would give her some words of comfort.

Instead he gave her a cold water bath. "Well, you were the one who wanted to be born here anyhow. What did you expect?" And that brought her to her senses, that this is the kind of place we're in. But we don't have to be those kinds of people. We can make ourselves better. We can develop a goodness inside that's independent.

This is another reason why we meditate. The sense of well-being that comes from settling in is not just for the sake of having a nice place to stay. It's meant to give you strength, realizing that you don't have to depend on the words of other people for your own well-being, you don't have to depend on their actions. You have to ask yourself, do you really want to feed off other people's words? Ajaan Lee reminds us that people spit out their words. If we feed off of their words, it's like feeding off of some food they've spit out—and then when our stomach hurts, who are you going to blame?

The meditation offers you something better inside to feed on, a sense of well-being, a sense of spaciousness inside, a sense that you've got your own territory here and it provides you with all you need. You don't have to let other people invade this territory inside, and that includes your mind. No matter how much they may want to invade, it's up to you as to whether you're going to pull their

words in, pull their actions in, and make them an issue. So a useful perception is that their words just go right past you, and you have to choose whether to suck them in or not. If they're not good, just let them pass. You keep your eye focused on what you're doing, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of your own actions, your words, your thoughts. When you take care of that, then if other people are not taking care of their own actions, that's their business. You've got your responsibilities covered.

You've got a goodness inside that you can depend on because it's independent of others. It depends on the skills you develop as you shape your mind, train the mind to treat itself well, and then take that mind into the world. And that will be the mind that shapes your experience. Then whether other people change or not, that's going to be up to them.

But the way you shape your experience won't be causing you any suffering. That's a gift to yourself and a gift to other people, too. You're trying to get more and more sensitive to how you're shaping things. The more knowledge you can bring to that, the less you're going to suffer. The less you suffer, the more strength you'll have to keep on maintaining that goodness. That's a real treasure, a treasure that spreads its goodness around.

We talk about the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as being a treasure or a gem. In the old days, people believed that gems had a protective power. Well, if you develop the Buddha's qualities, the Dhamma's qualities, the Sangha's qualities, they have a protective power. They protect you from doing things you're later going to regret, and from doing things that are going to cause you to suffer right here and now. So as you carry this awareness of your own mind into the world, that's what's got you covered.