

Cornered

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There's a passage in the novel, *Joseph and his Brothers*, where Joseph has been thrown into prison. So with nothing else to do, he starts interpreting his own dreams. He starts interpreting the dreams of his fellow prisoners. He starts interpreting the dreams of the wardens, of the person in charge of the prison. Ultimately, when the pharaoh has his dream about the seven lean cows eating the seven fat cows and no one else can interpret it, Joseph is brought in to interpret the pharaoh's dream. That's how he got out of prison. At first it looked like he was cornered. There was no way out. But by looking inside and developing his own internal resources, he found his way to freedom.

We have a similar example in the life of Ajaan Lee. It's actually more relevant to our purposes right now. He'd gone into the forest. He wanted to get away for three months. A younger monk had said he'd found a really nice secluded place way up in the forest. It required three days to walk in. He got there and within a couple of days he had a heart attack. So here he was, cornered. There was no way to get out of there except to walk out. And with his heart in that condition, it was going to be hard—impossible, basically.

So what did he have? He had his breath. He had his attitude. In technical terms, this would be fabrication. What he was doing in the present moment was going to make all the difference. And because outside circumstances were not helping at all, he was totally thrown on his internal resources: how he breathed, how he talked to himself, the images he held in mind, the feelings he could develop through the breath. It was because of these things that he was able to pull himself together and strengthen his heart to the point where, at the end of the three months when the rains retreat was over, he could walk out. It took three days. He lived for another eight years.

So here we are, sitting for an hour, thinking of ourselves as cornered right here. We have to stay in this sitting position and the difference between suffering right now and having a sense of ease and well-being right now is going to depend on your own inner resources: the way you fabricate your experience right now. As they say, necessity becomes the mother of invention.

What are you going to do? Well, you've got Ajaan Lee's guidance about working with the breath. And you've got the Buddha's recommendations for working with the breath, along with his recommendations for ways to talk to yourself, questions to ask about what you're doing right now, what you could

change about what you're doing. So take advantage of that, because someday the body will have you cornered. Illness will come. Aging will come. Death will approach. And the usual ways you have of diverting yourself and distracting yourself—getting up, moving around, fantasizing about this, that and the other thing: Those will no longer be available. You'll be thrown back on how you fabricate your experience immediately right here, right now.

Now, some people will try to escape into fantasy worlds: worlds of delusion, dementia. But those are really unsafe. Especially when death comes, you want to have your wits about you. You want to be clear about what you're doing, because choices will come. If you're mindful, alert, and ardent, you can resist the temptation to go places that won't be conducive to the practice. You can either direct yourself to places that will be conducive to the practice, or you can deal with what's coming up in the mind right then and there, and gain release. That's possible, too. But it all depends on how you learn to fabricate your experience here in the present moment while the body is still strong.

So what have you got? You've got the breath. You could breathe long, short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. Then you can ask questions: Which of those ways of breathing is best right now? That gets into verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate it. What kind of breathing would be best right now, would be the most conducive to sitting here with a sense of ease and well-being for the whole hour? And what ways of breathing would be antithetical to that?

One thing I find helpful is not to breathe out in a way that feels like you're squeezing the energy out of the body. Sometimes there's a cartoon idea in the mind that you've got to squeeze the breath energy out like you're squeezing toothpaste out of a tube. There's no way you're going to develop a sense of fullness that way. So you do the breathing in. Let the body breathe out on its own. You don't have to squeeze the breath out.

Another thing to watch out for is the moments between the breaths. Instead of trying to squeeze the end of the breath to make a marker that "now the out-breath has ended" or "now the in-breath has ended," use that moment of poise between the in-breath and the out-breath to spread your awareness, spread a sense of well-being, stillness through the body. You'll notice that as you're doing this, you're engaging not only in verbal fabrication and bodily fabrication, but also mental fabrication: your perceptions, the images you hold in mind of the breath as a whole-body process, and the body not just as a big lump of flesh, but as a body of breath energy. Then you can ask yourself, are the breath channels in this body connected, or have the plugs been pulled out? Okay, where can you plug them

back into one another again? When everything is plugged in, you create a really good energy field right here. It fills the body. It also can surround the body as well.

We were talking earlier this afternoon about going to places that have negative energy. You can try to create a good energy field throughout your body, and it becomes a protective shield. When you fill the body with good energy, negative energies can't get in. Then you think thoughts of goodwill: That's another way of using verbal and mental fabrication to protect yourself. Whatever the source of the negative energy outside, may that source be happy. You have no ill will toward it. And from there, you can spread goodwill to everybody. This too is a skillful verbal and mental fabrication.

So as you're cornered right here, you find that you do have these resources inside where you can make a difference right now. This is a very important lesson.

Sometimes, when you listen to the way vipassana is explained, it seems fatalistic: that you have to put up with whatever is there because, after all, causes and conditions have decreed that this is what you've got to experience right now. If there's a pain right there, you've got to put up with it. But that way of thinking gives no role to the function of your intentions and your fabrication right here, right now. At the same time, though, you can't believe that you can change everything as you want it right here, right now. There will be limitations. If there were no limitations, there'd be no need to try to find something unfabricated. You'd just sit here and make skillful fabrications and turn pain into pleasure, turn the desert into a lush paradise just simply with a thought. It doesn't work that way.

You'll find that there will be parts of the body that don't cooperate, or you'll learn how to work around them. It's in exploring how you fabricate right here, right now, that you begin to sense what in your experience right now is the result of past karma that can't be changed, and what is the result of your present karma that can be changed. That's an important distinction. What are the limits of well-being that fabrication can create, and where do those limits constrict you? In other words, what is the area within those limits where you can create well-being, and then where do you find you're running up against a brick wall?

This is how you develop your discernment. Discernment means seeing distinctions. It's easy to say that everything is fabricated, is inconstant, stressful and not-self and then wonder, "Okay, well what next?" What does all that mean? What do you do with that insight? The insight is useful only in the context of figuring out what you can do in terms of either the four noble truths or dependent co-arising.

If you look at dependent co-arising, right next to ignorance is fabrication: these three kinds of fabrication. There's a passage where the Buddha says that you can look at any one of the links in dependent co-arising and, if you bring knowledge to it, you can cut the connection that would lead to suffering. What does it mean to bring knowledge to a particular link? You bring knowledge to how you fabricate around that issue—and that brings you back to that first connection: Either ignorance is going to be conditioning your fabrication, or knowledge is going to be conditioning it. So you want to bring knowledge of what's skillful and what's not.

Insight is not a matter of understanding the nature of things. It's understanding the nature of actions, the nature of cause and effect. And how do you understand cause and effect? You experiment. You try to develop a skill. You'll find yourself running up against your lack of skill here and there, but over time you begin to realize there are some things that you actually can change. You can develop more skill in some areas. In other areas, it's just beyond you. This is where you discover the limitations of fabrication within yourself. And that kind of knowledge is much more useful than just a blanket judgment, where you say that everything fabricated is inconstant, stressful and not-self, and just try to drop everything.

Think of the Buddha's image of the raft going across the river. If everything is inconstant, stressful and not-self, and you let go of it, what are you going to build your raft out of? All you've got to use as raw materials are inconstant, stressful, and not-self things. But you do have some control over them. You can make them easeful, more lasting than other things to at least some extent, enough to get you across the river.

So having yourself cornered like this throws you back on your resources. And you begin to realize: What do you have here, and what can you make out of it? The Buddha says that you can make your breath, your thoughts, your perceptions, your feelings into a path. Now, if you listen to that possibility with an ordinary, everyday mind, you might say, "Well, maybe some other time. I have other things that are more pressing right now," which is why it's good to corner yourself like this on a regular basis.

Sitting still for a whole hour is not a natural thing to do. But it does force you. It throws you back on your resources. And you find that you can develop the skill that makes sitting here for an hour a really pleasant thing, an experience that clarifies what's going on in the mind. Your breath and your thoughts can become a path, a path to the end of suffering. That's quite a possibility. So, if it means that you have to be cornered, okay: Corner yourself. Force yourself to explore these

dimensions of your experience, and you'll have something really valuable to take away from the hour.