

Into the Cave with the Tiger

November 23, 2021

As you focus on the breath, you want to be alert to what you're doing. You want to be sensitive to the fact that you are *doing* something right now. The mind is not totally passive. It's an active principle. The fact that we experience the present moment comes from fabrication. If it weren't for the fabrications we're doing right now, there wouldn't be any experience of the present moment. The problem is that we tend to do these things in ignorance and so we suffer—which is why we have to be alert. We want to bring some knowledge to what we're doing.

In beginning, the instructions for the meditation focus on the breath. Think about the breath. Watch it for a while. See it if it's comfortable. If it's not, ask yourself what would be better. The instructions also give you ways of perceiving the breath: in other words, mental images to hold in mind that help the breath energy flow through the body.

So, you've got all the forms of fabrication right there. Breath is bodily fabrication. Thinking and evaluating: That's verbal fabrication. And feelings—feelings of pleasure or pain or neither pleasure nor pain—and perceptions, the images you hold in mind: Those are mental fabrication. We're trying to do these activities with knowledge so that we can understand that the present moment is not just a given. We're not here passively watching the present moment. We're shaping it.

This is a pattern that goes through all the practices of the path. With generosity, you're shaping the present moment. You've got something, and the normal tendency is to take what you've got and consume it. But you decide, "No." You can perceive it would be better if you gave it away. Okay, there's perception. Then there's the thinking and evaluating going on. In fact, one of the reasons we engage in generosity is to get the mind thinking in these terms: that it's better to give than to get, and that you can find some joy in figuring out what you would like to give, what you have that you can share, how would you like to share it.

The Buddha gives you free rein here. When he was asked where a gift should be given, he answered, "Where you feel inspired." When the monks are asked where should a donation be given, they should say, "Give where you feel inspired, or where you feel it will be well used or well taken care of." In other words, we have to recognize the freedom of the donor. Honor it, protect it, because a lot of the joy of giving lies right in the sense of freedom that comes with giving—that you're not a slave to your thirst, a slave to your hungers.

Similarly with the precepts: A lot of the joy in the precepts comes from learning how to think in ways that find happiness in holding to your principles, even when you might have to do without, as in cases where you have to tell the truth. If you lied, maybe you could get a financial advantage, but no, you're not going to lie for that. You're not going to sell your precepts. The fact that you have something that's worth more than money, that money can't buy, gives you a strong sense of self-worth. You begin to see how you approach the present moment, how you shape it, really does make a difference.

The mind is not just an epiphenomenon of physical processes. In other words, it's not just the result of chemical or physical processes going on in the body. It can shape things. It's the forerunner of all phenomena. So we want to learn how to shape things well. If you learn how to do it well, then it's a lot easier to sit down and meditate. Because if you look at the kind of conversation that's going on in the mind before you try to settle down, and it's a nice conversation—thoughts of generosity, thoughts of virtue—then it feels good to settle down, easy to settle down with a sense of well-being.

This may be one of the reasons why when Ajaan Suwat was teaching in Massachusetts that time, he looked out across the room and he noticed that the meditators in the retreat seemed to be pretty grim. His comment was, "They probably don't have any experience with the Buddha's way of approaching generosity and virtue," so they were coming to the meditation without any sense of joy. And, who knows what had been going on in their minds? When you sit down, and the mind won't settle down because it has thoughts that you're not particularly proud of, meditation does become a grim process. But if you look at the thoughts and they're enjoyable thoughts, honorable thoughts, thoughts you can be proud of, thoughts that lift up your spirits, then it's a lot easier to settle down.

Remember the Buddha talking about how he got on the right path. He divided his thoughts into two types. Thoughts that were not skillful—based on sensual desire, ill-will, harmfulness—he would try to keep in check, in the same way that a cowherd would beat back the cows that would try to get into rice fields when the rice was ripening. But then there were skillful thoughts based on renunciation, goodwill, compassion: Those, he said, he could allow to have free rein. They could wander around because, at that point, he said it was like a cowherd after the rice has been gathered and harvested, put away, stored for the next year. There was nothing in the fields that the cows would eat that would cause any damage, so they could wander where they liked.

The only problem then was that as the mind wandered like that, thinking a lot like that, it was going to get tired. So he'd incline the mind to concentration. A mind that's been engaged in skillful thinking—and has been

developing a sense of self-worth that comes from skillful thinking—finds it a lot easier to settle down.

Of course, when it settles down, it's still thinking. It's still engaged in these forms of fabrication, but now you're doing it with more finesse. You're looking more directly at them, particularly with the breath.

In doing generosity and virtue, the breath is really in the background. But now that you meditate, here it is coming up to the fore. When you sit down and watch your body in the present moment, the most obvious process that's going on is the fact that it's breathing in, breathing out. And you can work with that.

We work with it because it gives the mind something to stay engaged in. It can capture your imagination. Think of the breath going down, breath going up, breath going in different parts of the body that you don't normally think of it going, realizing that the breath as an element or as a property is all through the body. It even has a part that surrounds the body, like a cocoon. Can you be sensitive to that? You take that as a challenge. It's engaging.

Then you learn how to think about the breath and evaluate it. Hold different perceptions in mind. Think of the breath coming in from the outside. Or think of the breath originating inside the body already. After all, it is an element in the body. You get a sense that the breath energy originates at one of the spots in the body that Ajaan Lee pointed out, and you can watch it spread. Or you can hold in mind the perception that every cell is breathing. No one of them is more prominent than the others, and you're fully present to all of them. That gets the mind even more firmly established here.

So, there's still a doing. There's still an activity. It's just that it gets more and more subtle, which is precisely what you want. You want to develop the subtlety of your discernment. As the Buddha said, right here in the present moment is where you're causing yourself suffering. You're not causing yourself suffering in the past, you're not causing it in the future. You're causing it right now. There may be things coming in through the senses that come from past unskillful karma, but the fact that you're suffering from that is based on how you're shaping the present moment. And it's happening right here.

When the Buddha talks about fabrication, he talks about it in two contexts: fabrication as it affects death and rebirth, and fabrication as you experience it in the meditation. Some people say they're two very different kinds of fabrications, but what would be the advantage of saying that? You can learn a lot more by seeing that they're connected. In terms of death and rebirth, bodily fabrication is simply whatever you do in terms of physical action; verbal fabrication: the words you say; mental fabrication: the thoughts you think. These are going to have impact, and they can have an impact for a long time to come.

As for the three fabrications as you experience in meditation—breath, directed thought and evaluation, perceptions and feelings: This is the level of fabrication from which those other fabrications grow. You can't move the body without the breath. You can't speak without having engaged in some directed thought and evaluation in the mind first. You can't think without feelings and perceptions. So, you're dealing with the raw material here. On this level, fabrications can have their impact right now and on into the future. So, try to get really sensitive to what you're doing, because right in here in this process of fabrication is where, whenever it's done with ignorance, it's going to lead to suffering.

In fact, Ajaan Suwat once said that if you want to see ignorance, look at the way your mind fabricates. Look at the fabrications you're doing right now. Ignorance is lurking there.

It's as if when you come into concentration, you've found a safe place. You've come into a cave where you're not subject to the sun, the wind, and the rain outside. You think you've got a safe place. But then you turn around. There's a tiger in the cave, and you realize that you weren't suffering nearly as much from the sun and the wind and the rain as you were from the tiger. So you've got to kill the tiger. And what is it? It's the same processes of fabrication you've been doing all along. There comes a point when you realize that the only burden on the mind is this process of fabrication. When the concentration has gotten really good, it's not distracted, you really are well settled here: Then you begin to see that even this state of concentration has its drawbacks.

This stillness in the present moment, this awareness in the present moment: There's still a process of fabrication going on if you want to stay at this level. When you see that, that's when the mind begins to incline to something unfabricated. And that, as you find, is going to take you outside of the six sense spheres entirely. You're freed from the cave. And that experience is wide open. You're freed from time, freed from space.

You realize that your experience of the present moment has always been something fabricated. That's what's described in the phrase that goes along with the arising of the Dhamma eye: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." The important word there is *origination*. It doesn't mean simple arising. It means things that are caused, and in particular, things that are caused from within the mind. But now you've found something that's not caused from within the mind. It's not caused at all, which is why the idea of "whatever is subject to origination" would naturally occur to the mind at that point. In opposition to whatever is subject to origination, there's what's *not* subject to origination—and that's also not subject to cessation. Because it's outside of space and time, time can't touch it.

You come back from that and you see how much stress there is in simply engaging in the six senses, even in concentration in the present moment. But your relationship to those senses is different now because you've seen there's something outside. That's when you know what the Buddha said was true. There really is a deathless element, and it can be found through the path that he described.

So that's what we're doing right now. And where does he locate the path? Right here in the present moment: what you're doing in the present moment to shape the present moment. So, as you're focused right here, you're focused at the right place. It's simply a matter of getting more and more sensitive to how you're doing this, getting more skillful in how you're doing this. And that's what a lot of the effort of the practice is all about—developing your sensitivity to what you're doing as you develop this skill—which is why alertness is so important. It's got you focused on the right spot. It's up to you to develop your sensitivity right here.