

Countercultural Conditioning

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When we hear that the Buddha taught the path to the unconditioned, one of our first thoughts is that he's going to do away with our social conditioning. Actually, he's doing something a lot more radical than that. But in the process of doing something more radical, he'll first make use of our social conditioning. After all, when he taught the Dhamma, he used language. And he didn't insist that his language was the only one that Dhamma could be taught in. A group of monks once decided to turn his teaching into a Veda, which would have made it exclusive property of the brahmins. He found out about this and said No, everyone should memorize the Dhamma in his or her own language.

So he wants us to use our conditioning, simply to use it in a new way. He does talk of the customs of the noble ones, as we chanted just now. And they're customs that go against a lot of the customs of the world: customs we've learned from our parents, we've learned from schools, we've learned from the media. But even the customs of the noble ones are a kind of acculturation, because the mind works with its conventions. It works with its conditions. The Buddha's basically giving you new conditions for the purpose of putting an end to suffering.

As he said, the purpose of our thinking is to put an end to suffering. It's why we start thinking to begin with: If we didn't have any suffering, who would think? You'd just bliss out. But we start thinking and talking because we're suffering. Then we get waylaid. We start looking into other issues and have ideas of other responsibilities, other duties that we have to take on, depending on our culture. *His* culture, though, is a culture with one big aim, and that's to put an end to suffering.

We see this in the four customs of the noble ones we chanted just now: We learn to be content with whatever food, clothing, or shelter we have. As long as it's good enough to practice, it's good enough. If you start wanting more than that, it cuts into your time to practice, cuts into your values. But the Buddha was subtle enough to see that even contentment can become a source of defilement. You may be proud of the fact that you're more content with little than other people. So as he said, you're sensitive to the dangers in using things, how the mind can create defilements even around this. You learn to let them go.

In the fourth custom, you delight in developing and delight in abandoning, which means that you delight in developing skillful qualities and in abandoning unskillful ones. The unskillful ones include your cravings. Now, there are skillful

desires. But the cravings that go deep and cause trouble are three: craving for sensuality, craving to take on an identity in a world of experience, or if you've got an identity you don't like, you crave to destroy it. All those things, the Buddha said, lead to suffering.

The problem is, we *like* them. And the cultures in which we grow up tend to emphasize and extol these things. So much of *every* culture revolves around sensual pleasure, indulging in sensual desires, and then taking on identities within that culture. Then you have duties based on who you are within that culture. The Buddha's trying to give you a different set of duties. So he looks deeply into the issue.

It's not just culture. The conditioning that he's talking about when we're trying to go beyond conditioning is the fact that any experience that's going to make any sense has to be composed of those three kinds of fabrication that he said, when they're based on ignorance, will lead to suffering.

There's bodily fabrication, which is your in-and-out breath.

Verbal fabrication—your directed thought and evaluation, the way you talk to yourself, choosing your topics and then making comments on them.

And then mental fabrication—perceptions, which are the labels you hold in mind, and then feelings: feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.

These are the things we use to shape our experience. In fact, even before we have sensory experience, we're already started shaping experience in these ways, so that when something comes in by way of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind, the mold in which those things are going to be squeezed has already been set. *That's* the conditioning the Buddha wants to change by giving us new conditioning.

He recommends new ways of breathing: Breathe in a way that, one, you simply pay a lot of attention to your breath. And then, two, you learn how to breathe in ways that give rise to rapture, give rise to pleasure. Breathe in ways that gladden the mind, concentrate the mind, that are conducive to releasing the mind—things that we usually don't think about. He says that if you pay attention to your breath, it has lots of potential, and it's going to have an impact on the mind.

Then there are new ways of talking to yourself—first, to get the mind into concentration. Usually, we use our thinking to find something else to comment on: things in the world. But here's the Buddha saying: Talk to yourself about the breath. Talk to yourself about the breath in a way that helps the mind to settle down, so that the mind and the breath fit together nicely, where the breath is calm

enough so that it has a calming effect on the mind, but not so subtle that you lose focus.

The subtlety of the breath will develop as your powers of your concentration get stronger, and you can be with more and more subtle breathing. But in the beginning, it's important that you watch out: If the breath gets too subtle, you tend to drift. There's a sense of ease or well-being, and you tend to drop the breath to just wallow in the ease, wallow in the well-being. So you've got to watch out for that. You have to learn how not to be overcome by pleasure. The pleasure is there. The Buddha isn't trying to have you deny pleasure. In fact, it was through the discovery of the pleasure of concentration that he realized he had found the heart of his path. But you have to learn how to relate to that pleasure properly.

That's where the perceptions come in. How do you picture the breath to yourself? We have so many perceptions, so many labels we've picked up from our time in whatever society we've grown up in. We have some cartoon ideas about how the breath works. We have to examine them, because some of them are helpful, and some of them are not.

The Buddha talks about the breath as part of what he calls the "wind element" in the body. That should alert you right there: We're not talking about the air coming in and out through the nose. We're talking about the flow of energy in the body. How does it flow? When you breathe in, where does the in-breath seem to start? And when you breathe in, how do you know that you've breathed in enough? Part of the mind will say, "Well, you just let the body breathe on its own." It can do it, but what happens then is that your old, habitual ways of breathing—which may or may not be conducive to a sense of pleasure inside—begin to take over.

So look at your perceptions around the breath. Get to know them really well, so that you have a sense of what kind of breathing, what way of visualizing breathing to yourself helps you maintain a sense of fullness, even as you breathe out. Think of the breath flowing down through the nerves, flowing down through the blood vessels, out to every pore. Expand your range of awareness. Expand the range of your perception, your mental image of the breath, to see it as a whole-body process. Be sensitive to the whole body.

In these ways, the Buddha is giving you a new way to condition your experience in line with the values of the customs of the noble ones, the culture of the noble ones which, unlike the cultures of the world, is designed specifically to put an end to suffering. Now, eventually, you go beyond even that culture. As the Buddha said with the path, the path takes you to the goal, but it's not the goal itself. There come points where you have to let go of it to get to the goal. But

before you let go, you develop it, and you do that through this conditioning—the conditioning in terms of the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, and the images you hold in mind—to create feelings of well-being so that you can be more and more centered right here, ready to see the mind in action.

That's what this is all about: to watch your mind in action. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is found by committing yourself to doing it and then reflecting. Commit yourself to getting the mind to settle down, and then reflect on the mind settled down: When it's settled down, is it totally without stress, or is there still some level of stress in there? After a while, you find there are subtle levels here and there. Look for the ones that are caused by what the mind is doing, how the mind is picturing things to itself, how it's talking to itself. In what ways can detect and abandon levels of stress that are even more subtle? In this way, your conditioning is heading toward the end of suffering.

Now, as I've said before, the culture of the noble ones is countercultural wherever it goes. In India, it was countercultural. In Thailand, when Ajaan Mun decided he wanted to follow the way to awakening, he was accused of deviating from Thai culture. Here in the West, again, the Buddha's values are very countercultural. But they're healthy, and they do lead to the end of suffering.

So we respect the values we picked up from our parents, we respect the values we learned from society, but we also learn when to put them aside whenever they get in the way, so that we can take advantage of the conditioning the Buddha recommends.

This means that when he directs us to the unconditioned, it's not simply to get rid of our old social conditioning. It's to help us get beyond the way we condition the raw material every present moment. It's that radical. So pay close attention to how he recommends that you fabricate your present experience, because it's aimed in the direction of going beyond all fabrication and all conditions—even going beyond the present moment. He wants you to do that a thorough a job.