Fabrication Theory

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Sit with your back straight, facing forward, your eyes closed. That’s called getting your body in position. The next step is to get your mind in position. Focus your attention on the breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it’s coming out. Know when it’s going out. You can focus on the sensation of breathing in any part of the body where it’s easy to follow. It might be the tip of the nose. It might be the rise and fall of the chest. The expansion and contraction of the abdomen. Any place where the sensations in the body tell you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” That’s getting the mind into position. Now the next step is getting it to stay in position, and that’s going to take some work, because the mind has a tendency to wander. It’s like a hobo hopping trains. It goes from one train to another train to another train to another train. And who knows where you’re going to end up. Very rarely can you train a hobo. So to fight that tendency, keep it with the breath. Try to make the breath as comfortable as you can. Try to notice, “When does the in-breath get too long? Or when is it too short? How about the out-breath? When is that too long? When is it too short?” How do you know? Well, you watch for a while, and you experiment. You might think, “How about long breathing for a while and see how that feels?” And then shorter breathing and see how that feels. Then adjust it until you get it just right. Not too long, not too short, not too deep, not too shallow, not too heavy, not too light. Find the rhythm and texture of breathing that feels best right now. What you’re exploring here is the basic energy that keeps the body alive. So it only stands to reason. If you want the body to be helpful, if you want the body to be healthy, if you want the mind to be comfortable, it makes sense that the breath should be comfortable as well. If the breath feels tight and constricted, it’s not going to be good for the body, and the mind certainly isn’t going to want to stay. It’s going to want to wander off some more. What you’re trying to do is find a way of making the present moment a comfortable place to be, a pleasant place to be. At the same time, you give the mind something to do. You’re not just chaining it down to the breath. You’re exploring it to see how it feels. This makes it easier to stay. If the mind wanders off, and you expect that it will wander off, if it wanders off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, you bring it back again. You’re training it in the same way that you would train a puppy. It’s going to take a while, because puppies don’t have that many deceptive tendencies. They’re pretty easy to read, pretty easy to train. The human mind, though, has lots of tricks, so it’s going to take a while to get around its various tricks for wandering off. You’re thinking about something else, coming back for a little bit, just to please you for a little bit, and then it goes off again someplace else. You missed it again, so you keep bringing it back. Try to make the breath, again, as comfortable as possible. See what ways you can change the breathing to make it more interesting. Even though you’re focusing on the breath, you’re actually training the mind, training it to be more mindful. In other words, more able to keep one topic in mind continually, and more alert, noticing what you’re doing, the results of what you’re doing. What makes all the difference is ardency, which is the attempt to do this skillfully, in a way that actually gets results. That requires patience and it requires determination. It also requires the desire to do it. You have to see that this is something important. As the Buddha once said, the sign of a wise person is that you know that the mind needs to be trained. If you’re going to find any happiness in life, the mind needs to have some training. Otherwise, even if you get all kinds of material wealth, friends, family, and other things outside that are really nice, but if your mind isn’t trained, you can destroy all that external happiness. You can find ways of making yourself miserable, no matter how well off you are outside. By the same token, there are lots of people who are very poor, don’t have much, but they really are happy inside. Again, it’s because the mind has been trained. So remind yourself, this is what’s going to make all the difference between happiness and misery in your life. Whether your mind is trained or not. So if you find yourself wondering, remind yourself, this is important work that you’re doing here. It’s getting your mind under control. Another quality that’s required to make this a skill is persistence. You stick with it again and again and again. It’s the continuity of your effort that’s going to make the difference. You could focus on the breath for a few seconds and then wander off to something else, and then focus on it for a few more seconds and wander off, and it won’t make much difference. It’s sticking with the breath as long as you can, no matter how compelling your thoughts may be. You’re going to stay with the breath. Remind yourself, even though there’s a thought going through the mind, it doesn’t destroy your breath. The breath is still here. So the thought hasn’t pushed you off the breath. You’ve gone running after the thought. So as soon as you catch yourself doing this, go back to the breath. It’s always there. It’s much more forgiving than most friends would be. If you had a friend and you were running away from the friend two or three times, the friend eventually wouldn’t have no more interest in you. But the breath is always there. So you come back to it, come back to it again and again and again. Try to stay with it continually. And you begin to notice the steps in which the mind develops a stirring of a thought. In the beginning, it’s just a slight stirring. It’s hard to say whether it’s physical or mental. It stirs a little bit. And then you look into it and say, “What is this?” And it seems to resemble something. And you slap a label on it and say, “Oh, this is a thought about x.” And the next question is, “Do you want to go with a thought about x?” For most of us, we haven’t even posed the question. We’re already running. At least we’re not aware that we posed the question. It’s there. The mind acts very quickly. If you’re not still enough, you can’t see these steps. But if you’re persistent, you begin to notice the point where the mind is beginning to lean in the direction of going someplace else, even before it’s left the breath. It’s like an inchworm at the edge of a leaf. It extends its body out a little bit to see where the next leaf is. When it finds a bump, it’s there. It’s gone. So the more carefully you watch the mind, the more you begin to see these steps and you begin to have some more control over them. You don’t have to go running with a thought. This requires a third quality, which is intentness, that you really focus on what you’re doing. Simply staying with the breath, going through the motions, is not going to cut the cake. You’ve got to give it your full attention. After all, these are the motions of the mind that determine not only what you’re going to think, but also what you’re going to say, what you’re going to do. If you can’t watch the motions of your mind and see what they’re doing, they’re going to fool you into doing and saying all kinds of things you’re later going to regret. So you have to watch them carefully. The fourth quality is your ability to analyze what’s going on. When you see that you are in a thought or a particular thought is really insistent, look at it the same way you’d look at a movie that you don’t like. You’re stuck there in the movie theater. So one way of getting through it is to analyze, “Well, how did the director do this? How did the actors do this? Why is this a bad film? Where did they make their mistakes?” Or if you’re watching a horror movie and it’s getting too much, remind yourself, “Those actors are not really dying. They’re pretending. Can you catch them as they’re pretending?” Analyze what the mind does as it goes with a thought or as it’s entangled in a thought. So you begin to see that these thoughts are just like little shadows. In the same way that a movie is just images thrown up on a screen. It’s our minds that stitch those images into a consistent story, make something out of them, so that you forget it’s just light on the screen. You begin to identify with the characters. You begin to sympathize with them, as if there really were human beings up there that you were watching. It’s just film imagery. There are all kinds of deceptions that they create to make it feel realistic, to feel compelling, that you want to go in. But if you can step back and look at their tricks, you don’t get sucked in. That’s what this means. If you’re not going to train the mind, you have to train the mind not to identify with its thinking. Give it a place, like the breath, where it can establish itself as its main focal point. From that focal point, you can watch the movements of the mind. So you can choose which movements you want to go to and which ones you don’t want to go with. That puts you more in control. So when anger comes up, you don’t have to go running with the anger. When greed comes up, when lust comes up, when fear comes up, when pride comes up, you don’t have to go running with these things, because you know where they’re going to take you. They’re going to take you to places where you’re going to do and say things, and then you’re later going to regret it. It’s like running around with bad friends. They take you down and they get you to go steal from a store, and then they run off, and then you’re left with the stolen goods in your hands. So please catch you. Where are your friends? They’ve gone. It’s the same with these thoughts. When they lead you to do or say something and then you’ve said or done it, you’re the one who has to face the consequences. The thoughts aren’t there anymore. So if you want to find any genuine happiness in life, you’ve got to get the mind trained. Put it in a position where it can stand back from its thoughts and learn all the tricks of the trade. It’s like learning film theory. You step back from a film and analyze it so you don’t get sucked into the story. This is thought theory, fabrication theory, the way the mind fabricates things. When you’ve mastered that, you’ve mastered the ways of the mind. When you’ve mastered the ways of the mind, you’re really in charge. It says, “After all, the biggest danger in life is a mind that’s out of control.” And who does it harm? Well, the first person it harms is that particular person, whose ever mind it is. If your mind is out of control, it’s like giving your car over to a crazy person, giving them the keys and saying, “Go wherever you want.” Well, the crazy person is going to drive it, who knows where, run into people, crash the car, because you have no control. But if you learn how to bring control over the mind so it can gauge its thoughts and choose, clearly, where it wants to go and where it doesn’t want to go, you’re driving the car yourself, and you can take it where you want to go, safely. So bring these qualities to the breath. First, that is mindfulness. Then alertness. Ardency in the practice. And then there’s the desire to do it well. Persistence. Intentness. Learning how to analyze things. Analyze the motions of your own mind. These are the qualities that bring success in the training of the mind. So, get the body in position, get the mind in position, and then go. Use these qualities to keep it in position so you can get the most use out of it. That’ll change the whole balance of power inside.

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