Meditation as Fabrication

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We’re here tonight because we realize that there’s suffering in our lives and that we can do something about it. That’s one of the messages of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. Not simply that there is suffering, but there’s a way to put an end to it based on our own actions. We’ve read about the Buddha’s teachings. We’ve come to realize that simply reading about the teachings is not enough. You also have to learn how to read your own mind. You start reading your own mind by reading your breath. When the mind is focused on the breath, everything you really need to know about is right here. The Buddha said we suffer because of ignorance, and it’s because of ignorance that the mind fabricates in different ways. There are basically three kinds of fabrication. One is the breath coming in and out right now. It’s called bodily fabrication. It’s called that because there’s an element of intention in the way you breathe. It’s one of the few functions of the body that can happen automatically. It also can be affected by your intentions. Then there’s verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation. For instance, you direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate the breath. How does it feel? Where do you feel it? When it comes in, does it come in comfortably? Does it come in in a way that’s tolerable? Tight? Constricted? Forced? If the breath feels uncomfortable, you can change. Try different ways of breathing, different ways of conceiving of the breath. All that comes under evaluation. Verbal fabrication. Then there’s mental fabrication, your perceptions—in this case, your perception of the breath—and then the feelings that arise—feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, whether strong or weak. These things are called mental fabrications because they have an impact on the mind. They shape the way you experience things. There you are. All three kinds of fabrication are right here. In meditation, we learn how to read them, because if we can learn how to read them, we learn how to do these things with knowledge and awareness. That cuts through the ignorance that causes stress, that causes suffering, simply with the breath. The way you breathe has a huge impact on how you feel. If you let the breath come in and go out on its own without paying much attention to it, that means the breath is happening in ignorance. That’s a factor that contributes to suffering, contributes to stress. So simply paying attention to the breath is a beginning step in learning how to undercut the causes that lead from ignorance all the way to suffering and stress, especially when you learn how to breathe with sensitivity. Focusing on the breath doesn’t simply mean you let it come in and go out any old way, because it doesn’t come in and out any old way. There’s an element of intention there. Often it goes underground. You’re not conscious of it. So what you want to do when you meditate is bring it up into the light of consciousness. What way would you like to breathe right now? This turns the meditation from a chore into something where you get to explore, to learn, and also give yourself a really comfortable place to stay. This is extremely important to enable you to stay with the meditation. John Fuang once said that meditation doesn’t have a sense of rapture and ease. It dries up pretty quickly, just like a motor. If you don’t lubricate it, just keep it running and running and running, it’s going to seize up after a while. So you work on making the breath more and more comfortable. This not only makes it more pleasurable to stay here with the meditation, but also makes you more and more sensitive. The more you work in this area, the more you detect subtle types of discomfort, subtle types of disease that you might have missed before. So the breath here isn’t a distraction from the mind. It actually trains the mind to be more sensitive to this area, after all, the area of the body. The Buddha said that it’s through the body that you end up touching the Deathless. It doesn’t mean that the body is Deathless, but it means that the more you’re sensitive to this part of your awareness, the more you’re sensitive to the area where the Deathless will appear. So try to bring your attention to all these aspects. Don’t let yourself forget the breath. This is called directed thought. Keep focusing on the breath. If you find the mind wandering off, bring it right back. Remind yourself, “Hey, you’re supposed to stay here with the breathing. You’re wandering off to different things.” Ask yourself, “These different things you’re wandering off to, how many of them are genuinely new?” A lot of the thoughts that come playing through your mind are like the American movie channel. It’s the same old movies over and over and over again. But when you meditate, you’re here to learn something new. As the Buddha calls it, to know what you haven’t known before, to realize what you haven’t realized before, to attain what you haven’t attained before. You’re not going to attain that by allowing the mind to wander off as it likes. There’s work to be done here. So each time that you realize that you’ve gone wandering off, just remind yourself, “Come on back,” and then evaluate the breath. Is there a way you could make it more comfortable? When you breathe in, how far do you breathe in before it starts getting uncomfortable? Well, stop there. It’s the same when you breathe out. At what point when you start breathing out are you squeezing the energy in the body too much? Well, stop there. Breathe back in. Try to breathe with a sense of fullness in the body all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. Anything that constricts that sense of fullness, you let go. You stop right there. Once there’s a sense of ease, think of it spreading throughout the body, whatever the breath energy channels in the body are, wherever they may go. Just allow this sense of fullness to spread in every direction. Because what you want when you get the mind into concentration is full body awareness, all the images the Buddha uses in the Canon. A sense of fullness and ease. In the beginning, you work the fullness and ease of the body the same way that you might knead moisture through a ball of dough. Then, when everything is nice and moist, you settle in. You don’t have to do any more kneading. There’s a sense of the awareness becoming one with the breath. At that point, the breath can begin calming down. It’s important that you attain that awareness, or you establish the sense of full body awareness, as the breath calms down. Because otherwise, when the breath gets really, really subtle, it’s easy to get lost, lose your focus. So as the breath calms down, just remind yourself of the whole body. Be with the whole body breathing in and the whole body breathing out. Think of the breath not so much as air coming in and out of the lungs, but just the air and the energy flow in the body. Allow that to bathe the whole body all around you. You’re sitting in the middle of this process of the breath bathing every cell in the body. In this way, you’re creating a feeling based on a skillful perception. You’re clear about these processes—bodily fabrication, the breath; verbal fabrication, the mental fabrication, the feelings and perceptions. They’re all working together. The more aware you are of them, the more sensitive you are to them, the less the mind is going to suffer. It’s important that you get in touch with these functions of the mind, because all of our emotions are created out of these things. As you get more skilled in dealing with these different types of fabrication, then when an emotion comes in and takes over the mind, you can start deconstructing the emotion. Say jealousy arises, or anger arises, or fear arises. Try to look at it in terms of these three types of factors. How are you breathing right now? When jealousy comes in, how does it feel? Just in the way you breathe. You don’t have to breathe that way. It’s going to be uncomfortable. It’s going to be tight, unpleasant. It’s going to aggravate the jealousy, but you can unaggravate it. After all, your breath really knows nothing of the jealousy. So you can turn around and use the breath to calm the body, soothe the body. That helps to keep the jealousy from taking hold and establishing itself. Then you can look at it in terms of your direct thought and evaluation. When you think about the issue of jealousy, exactly how are you focusing on the issue? How do you evaluate the situation? Do you feel that someone else’s happiness diminishes you? Does it really? Try to think of it in terms of the teachings on karma. Just so happens that that person’s good karma is giving good results right now. There’s no guarantee that they will continue giving good results. When you look at someone, you can’t see their whole karmic background. All you see are the few seeds that are bearing fruit right now. They may stop bearing fruit at any time. How would you feel? You sit there wishing that someone suddenly suffers a bad stroke of fortune, and then they do. You’d feel really small and petty. So evaluate that. Is that what you want to do? You can also think of the fact that someday your good karmic seeds are going to sprout. But if you have the karma of being jealous of other people’s good fortune, you’re going to run into people who are jealous of yours. Do you want that? Try to look for other ways of perceiving the situation, other ways of thinking about the situation. It’s a lot easier when the breath energy in the body feels good. You’re not feeling so oppressed by the emotion. You can start taking the emotion apart. In this way, the skills you learn as you sit here breathing are not just for sitting with your eyes closed and focusing on the breath. They help get you in touch with the basic building blocks of the emotions that come into the mind. When you’re in touch with those, when you’re more skilled with those, then you can see that if there’s an unskillful emotion, you can deconstruct it, construct a new one in its place. We tend to believe that our emotions are our true feelings, our true nature. This gives us insight into who we truly are. But that’s not the case. Your emotions are as constructed and fabricated and false as everything else, which means you’ve got to look at them as a process of cause and effect. Where do these emotions lead? What kind of actions are you going to do if you allow the emotion to stay in the mind? If you see that it’s unskillful, it’s not in your interest to keep it going. It’s not in your interest to keep raising and feeding these little emotions. Learn how to cut them up, take them apart, and put them together in another way. Replace them with skillful emotions. Getting in touch with the breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings, and perceptions, gives you a handle on these things. You have the raw materials of your emotions, and then you can put them together in any way that’s skillful. You learn how to use these things with more awareness, so that the emotion you realize is not just a given in the mind. It’s something that’s been fabricated. As you get more sensitive to the breath, you can sense this process more and more quickly. You can nip a lot of these things in the bud. Sensitizing yourself to the breath is not just a concentration game that you then drop to go on to bigger and better things. It’s getting you sensitive to the raw materials, the basic building blocks that you’re going to need all the way through the practice. So we’ve got an hour here. But there’s nothing else asked of us aside from being really sensitive to the breath, really sensitive to the mental processes that surround the breath. Focus on the breath, evaluate it, and try to make the breathing as pleasant a process as possible, as pleasant an experience, both of body and mind, as possible. Then you find the feeling of the breath that gives not only pleasure here in the present moment, but it gives you the skills that you need for more and more penetrating insight as your sensitivity grows.

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