Setting the Conditions

May 29, 2010

There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha is talking about the aggregates, and he makes a fairly abstract statement. It’s one of those statements that sounds like things philosophers can argue about but don’t really have much impact on our lives. But that’s not the case. It has a huge impact. The statement is that, “The aggregate of fabrication is what fabricates all of the aggregates.” For the sake of experiencing form, you fabricate form. For the sake of feeling a feeling, you fabricate feeling. Now, it’s not fabricating out of thin air. You’ve got potentials. And your intentional element is what fabricates those potentials to the fore and makes them an actual experience. What this means is we have a huge role in shaping our lives, just shaping the basic experiences we have from moment to moment, both in terms of our past karma in creating these potentials and then present karma in turning them into actual aggregates, actual experiences. What we’re going to do as we’re practicing is take advantage of this fact. Because otherwise, our intentions tend to be kind of muddled, and oftentimes we don’t even realize that we have the power to change things, to shape things. So things go on automatic pilot or we let other people set the conditions. We’re talking today about the situation at work. You find yourself just responding to other people’s outrageous statements, outrageous actions. In other words, you’re letting them set the conditions for what you’re going to do and what you’re going to say. You’re abdicating responsibility. One of the purposes of training the mind is that you get more in control of this process of fabrication. You start setting the conditions. You think about what kind of life you would like to have. And then you start shaping things in that direction. This is why that basic skill we learn as we meditate is focusing on the breath. And all of a sudden we find ourselves wandering out, thinking about the Antarctic, or thinking about Africa, or thinking about this person or that person. And we have the choice. Do you want to stay traveling around the Antarctic or do you want to come back to your breath? And you want to exercise that choice to keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath, so you can strengthen your original intention. Improve your mindfulness, improve your alertness. And in doing so, when you know that you’re doing something that’s skillful—you have a skillful attitude, a skillful belief, a skillful intention—that you can protect it, you can maintain it. And you don’t let other situations, other things, come in and destroy that original intention. So even though it may seem frustrating, you’re sitting here with the breath and suddenly you’re off someplace else, shopping for something who knows where. So you come back, and you come back, and you go off, and you come back, and you go off, and you come back. And it’s easy to get frustrated and easy to give up and just go off and that’s it. But no, you just keep coming back, coming back. And you’re learning a new habit. You’re developing a good skill, this ability not to get waylaid by anything. So that once you set your mind on doing something skillful, you can maintain that original intention, both while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed and when you’re out dealing with other people. You want to set the agenda. You may not be able to set the agenda for them, but you can set the agenda for yourself—what you’re going to do, what you’re going to say. And as you strengthen your powers of mindfulness, you can hold your old impulses in check. Just because something seems impulsive, or it’s the way you’ve always done things, doesn’t mean that you have to continue doing things that way, that you have to give in to the impulse. If you want your words to be wise, you want your actions to be wise, you’ve got to set the agenda for yourself. You’re the one who’s setting the conditions. It’s not going to be easy, because sometimes people will create conditions that are really tempting to go back to your old ways, your old efforts at learning, trying to control them, or control the situation. And it’s not that you’re not trying to exert some sort of control, but your old ways may not have been all that skillful. Then you keep doing them over and over again. This is why the path is practiced in context. One of the conditions for practicing the path is having what the Buddhists call an admirable friend, someone who can act as a good example, an example of restraint, an example of wisdom, generosity, virtue, conviction, at the very least, in the principle of believing that your actions matter. And you can’t make an excuse, “Well, somebody else was acting in a very unskillful way, so therefore I had to act in an unskillful way in response.” That excuse doesn’t hold. No matter how unskillful other people are, you’re the one who’s responsible for your actions. You can’t be responsible for theirs. So you want to develop the mindset that you’re up to the challenge. You learn good examples from wise people and then you try to apply them. And you want to be able to develop your own wise examples, too. Sometimes this means thinking through the situation before it happens. Because a lot of these situations are not great surprises. It’s not like you walk into your work and someone says something outrageous and you say, “My gosh, how could that happen? It’s never happened before. It’s happened many times before.” Then you think about what you’ve done in the past that wasn’t skillful. Try to think about examples you’ve seen that were skillful, and then keep those in mind. This is called preventing or guarding against unskillful things from arising. It’s a part of right effort, what the Buddha calls exerting a fabrication. Because again, since you are fabricating your experience, you want to exert skillful fabrications. You can learn how to stay in a difficult situation, at the very least maintain a sense of ease and well-being in the breath. And you look at how you think about the situation and how you analyze the situation. Are you analyzing it in a helpful way or a harmful way? It’s the same with mental fabrication, the perceptions and feelings you bring to it. How do you perceive the situation? Do you perceive yourself as a victim, or can you perceive yourself as having a more active role in shaping things in a more skillful direction? And when you’re seeing that someone else is doing something unskillful, what’s the best thing to focus on? How do you feel about it, or what’s the best way to stop that unskillful action in an effective way? And what examples have you seen in the past of people who’ve learned how to stop it in an effective way? And that’s changing the perception right there. It puts you in a better position. But it’s not just changing the perception. You need the skills to develop the mindfulness and develop the alertness and develop the sense of restraint that’ll enable you to hold back from your old habits and keep in mind the new habits as you want to develop. This is why the techniques of meditation are so important. It’s not just a matter of sitting here and having a nice, relaxing hour. You’re trying to develop skillful habits of mind. So learning how to work with the breath, how to come back to the breath when you’ve slipped off, how to come back in a way that you feel like staying, and how to get more and more resistant to the breath every time you come back. Give yourself a nice, good, deep in-breath that sort of clears things out. And then for the next breath, say, “Why do I have to abandon nice breathing? I can just stick with nice breathing.” So as long as it feels good, you stick with it. If that kind of breathing doesn’t feel good anymore, you can change. What would feel good right now? Does the body need more intense breathing or more gentle breathing? Which part of the body is doing most of the breathing work? How about letting some of the other parts of the body take over for a while so they can have some breath participation as well? In other words, try to make the breathing as interesting as possible so the mind is less and less likely to want to wander off. As you get more involved in the breath, it gets harder and harder to be pulled away. But if you’re skimming over the surface of the breath, then it’s very easy just to skim right off. That’s when you put yourself in a better position. You’re beginning to set the conditions, and you get used to setting them in a wise and thoughtful way. So you don’t keep just giving in to your impulses. But you learn to reflect on things you’ve done in the past. Have they worked? If they haven’t worked, then why do you do them again? Or you feel like doing it, or you don’t know any other way of doing it. Well, stop and think for a while. What are some other ways you could speak? What are some other ways you could act? What are some other ways you could think? What other perceptions could you bring to the situation? Meditation is not just a matter of staying in the present moment. It also involves reflecting on what’s worked in the past. What hasn’t worked in the past? As Ajahn Fong used to say, you want to use your ingenuity. When you’ve exhausted your repertoire and nothing seems to be working, then you’ve got to think, “Well, maybe there’s some other way of doing this.” And then you experiment. And as you experiment in this way, you begin to see what the Buddha said is true. We really do shape our experience. It may not be total fabrication out of thin air, but we do have a role in focusing on one aspect of experience over another, cultivating some things and letting other things just slide by. So what you want to do is learn how to cultivate the things that are really useful. As things that are not useful, let them slide by. But all too often we find ourselves cultivating greed, aversion, and delusion. We don’t think of it as a cultivation process. It just seems natural. It just seems the way things are. But it is a kind of cultivation. One of the important aspects of acceptance that the Buddha teaches is accepting your role of responsibility, your power to shape things, your power of choice. That’s an important part of the meditation. An important insight is learning to see where you have that range of choice and how to make the most of it, starting simply with the fact that you’re sitting here breathing. You could make yourself miserable sitting here breathing, or you could make yourself blissful and rapturous. It’s the same breath with the same potentials, but it’s up to you what you make of it. And as you learn to get your intentions, your skillful intentions, more and more in charge, you find you’re setting the conditions not only for good meditation, but also beginning to set the conditions more and more for, at the very least, the way you act when you’re dealing with other people. And that’s important. Your actions are your treasures. So you might want to ask yourself if you were to open up your mind to open up your bag of treasures, what would you find? Little bits of old feathers, dead mice, bits and scraps of garbage. Is that what you want to find in your little pile of treasures? Or would you rather find gold and silver? Jewels? The choice is yours. And the meditation is a means for helping you to make more and more skillful choices. So you can find the gold and cultivate it. Make the most of it. That’s one of the most important messages in the Buddhist teachings, is that you have this power, this power of choice. And it’s up to you what you do with it.

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