Fabrications

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Try to notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. It might be in the chest, shoulders, abdomen. Wherever it’s most prominent, allow your awareness to settle there. Allow your attention to settle there and to stick with that spot. Sometimes it’s good to start with some long, deep, in-and-out breaths to emphasize the breathing, and then to allow the breathing to settle into a rhythm that feels most comfortable. Wherever the breathing process feels good, focus your attention there and allow it to continue feeling good. It might require that you adjust it every now and then, because the needs of the body may change. But think of yourself settling down there. Of course, when you settle down, you want to settle down on something that’s comfortable, something that’s interesting to stay with as well. After all, the breath energy is the energy of life. It’s what keeps everything functioning in the body. And it’s your intermediary. It’s how the mind knows that the body is here. It’s through the energy of the breath. So take some time to get acquainted with this really important part of your life, what keeps the body and the mind together. And work at staying here, staying here, staying here. Other thoughts may come up, but you don’t want to get involved with them right now. The only thoughts you want to get involved with are the thoughts that keep you with the breath. There’s a technical term for that. It’s called directed thought and evaluation. In other words, you’re directing your thoughts to the breathing, and then you evaluate, “Does it feel good?” If it does feel good, keep breathing that way. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change. And when you do have a sense of well-being with the breath, how can you take advantage of that well-being so that it’s not just in that one spot? Think of it permeating out to fill your entire nervous system, bathing the eyes, bathing all the nerve endings in the head, down the spine, and out to the skin. You’re going to be trying to develop all the body awareness here, and so this is one good way to do it. Give the breath soothing, massaging, stimulating the whole body. So keep thinking about those issues, because those are the issues that allow you to settle down, that adjust the sensation of the body, that turn this “how so the body” into a home. There’s an old saying, “It takes a heap of living to make a house a home.” Well, it takes a heap of directed thought and evaluation to make the breath a really comfortable place to stay. Because you need this place to stay, and you need to learn about all these processes as they’re happening. Because what you’ve got right here is something the Buddha calls fabrication, and there are three kinds. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the sense sensation of the breathing. There’s verbal fabrication, which is your directed thoughts and evaluation around the breathing. And then there are the perceptions and feelings. You’ve got the perception, the mental label that holds the breath in mind. It might be the word “breath,” or it might be an image of the breath, the signs with which the mind communicates with itself. And then there are the feelings. Of course, they’re not emotions, but they’re more feelings of pleasure or pain, ease or dis-ease, or more neutral feelings that are neither pleasure nor pain. Those are the things that shape our sense of the body. Those are the things that shape our thoughts and emotions in the mind. And settling down and using these things to settle down, you’re getting hands-on experience. So when an unskillful emotion begins to stir in the mind, if you’re really sensitive, you see that it has an impact on the breath. The breath will tighten up in one spot or another in the body. If you sense that, you can loosen up the tightness. That makes the unskillful emotion rudderless or makes it lose its foundation for a minute. And just that amount of time is enough to help you get a handle on it. Otherwise, it settles in like a seed and then suddenly takes root. And then it’s hard to pull it out because it’s taken over your body, taken over your mind. It’s changed the way you breathe. That’s why we feel our emotions so much in the body. It’s because the breath energy has gotten infected. So you try to disinfect it as quickly as you can. One of the important skills that you’re going to learn as you focus here is how to focus without tension. Focus with a sense of spaciousness. All too often when you focus on a part of the body, you tend to tense up that part of the body. What we’re doing here is trying to stay with the sensation and have a sense of spaciousness and openness around it. When you develop that skill, then you can focus on any knot of tension in the body, and your awareness will be a healing awareness to help loosen things up. What you’re doing is bringing awareness and knowledge to this process of fabrication so you can learn how to use it well. So when an unskillful thought comes up, you can ask yourself, “How are you breathing around it?” Change the way you’re breathing if it’s not skillful. What thoughts are you thinking about and how are you evaluating the issue? Can you change that? What are the perceptions you hold in mind? Do you perceive yourself as a victim? What would happen if you would consciously challenge that? So that the unskillful emotion doesn’t have any foundation in the body, in the way the mind is talking to itself, or in the underlying perceptions and feelings that go around it. These are the things you want to bring knowledge to. This ties into the teaching called Dependent Core Arising. It’s one of those teachings that’s so important. As soon as anyone hears about it, they tend to tense up. It’s like those old maps that have big blank spaces. They say, “Here be tigers.” But it has some very important, very essential things to know. It’s all about how the mind creates suffering, and it’s something everybody should know, so they can learn how to stop doing it. One of the most fundamental points that it makes is that you’re suffering doesn’t start with contact at the eyes or the ears or the nose, tongue, or the body. In other words, it doesn’t start with things outside. Suffering starts with what you bring to the contact. And one of the most basic things you bring to the contact is the way you tend to shape things. You shape your thoughts, shape your perceptions, shape your feelings, even the way you breathe. If you do this in ignorance, you’re going to suffer. If you do this with knowledge, you can turn all these different processes into the path to the end of suffering. One of the reasons we focus on the breath is because it is so intimately connected with the way we form emotions, and it becomes our first line of defense to defuse something unskillful, so that when we approach difficult situations in life, we’re not afraid to do it. We’re not already bringing all the paraphernalia to make it into suffering. We’re bringing the paraphernalia to loosen things up, loosen up the suffering, loosen up the stress that we ordinarily cause. This is why you want to get really good at learning how to settle in with the breath and to take advantage of the sense of well-being that the breath can provide. Learn to use your breath and to use your thoughts for the purpose of stilling the mind, for the purpose of releasing it from suffering, instead of the ordinary way we use our thoughts, which is to just pile on more suffering for ourselves, even though we don’t want it. But because we’re acting in ignorance, we tend to create precisely the things we don’t want. So bring some awareness to your breathings. Bring some awareness to the way you’re thinking about the breath. Bring some awareness to the perceptions you have for the breath. Ask the questions that cut through ignorance, i.e., “Where is the stress here? Which of these things is contributing to the stress? What can I do to alleviate that stress?” It’s all right here. It’s all immediately present to your awareness, just as we tend to look through these things, trying to figure out what lies behind the present awareness, where the things are immediately present. We always tend to think there’s some hidden thing in there or some hidden thing out there that’s creating the trouble. Actually, all the trouble is on the surface. It’s as if there were a two-dimensional pattern here and we want to read it as three-dimensional. We make a lot of our problems seem a lot deeper and more deeply entrenched than they actually are. So look at what’s going on right here, right now, and deal with it in terms of what’s going on right here, right now, with that question, “Where is the stress? What’s causing it? What can I do to put an end to it?” That question, or those parts of questions, are what turn these processes of fabrication from a cause of stress into a cause for the path that leads to the end of stress and suffering. The problem is right here. The cure is right here as well, if you learn how to read it.

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