Fabricating the Path (outside)

October 7, 2015

When we meditate, the word meditation in Pali, bhavana, means to develop. What are we developing? We’re developing the qualities of the mind. It means we’re taking an active role in shaping our experience and trying to do it with understanding. This is what makes the difference, because we’re already shaping our experience. As the Buddha said, what we experience in the present moment partly comes from our past karma, the potentials that we have for what we might experience now. Another part comes from our present karma, our intentions and our other actions right in the present moment. You can’t do much about the past karma, but you can change your present karma. The Buddha’s word for this present karma is sankara, or fabrication. There are three kinds. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the in and out breath. Verbal fabrication, which is direct thought and evaluation. In other words, the way the mind speaks to itself. You direct your thoughts to a topic and then you comment on it, ask questions about it, and come to opinions. That’s verbal fabrication. And finally, mental fabrication, our feelings and perceptions. Right now we’re trying to take what we’ve got right here, these potentials sitting here under the trees, and turning them into a state of concentration, where you focus first on the breath. You try to fashion the breath so it’s a good place to stay. You can try experimenting with different lengths of breathing, or different rhythms of breathing. Or you can do long breathing, and if you find that as the breath is getting longer and longer there’s tension someplace, say in the chest, how about if you relax that tension? Can you still breathe long and yet not feel that tension? All of these are ways of fashioning your breath to make it a good place to stay. What do you use to fashion the breath? What’s the direct thought and evaluation? You keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. And then you make comments on it. Is it good? You ask questions. Is it good? And then you comment. It’s not quite good yet. What could make it better? How about if I breathe a little bit more into the left side of the body? How about if I breathe a little bit more into the right side of the body? More in the back, more in the front. How about more in the head? How about my arms and legs? You can ask these questions. And explore. And it’s through asking questions and trying to come up with answers that you get the breath more and more comfortable. That’s bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication. Then there’s mental fabrication, the feelings and perceptions. In other words, you hold certain perceptions in mind that allow the breath to move. If you think of the body just as a big solid lump, and the air just comes in and out through the nose, that’s just the breath. That would be one way of experiencing the breath. But it’s very limited. If you think of the breath as the energy flowing in and out of the body, all along the body, that will change your experience of the breath. It’ll change your ideas of what’s possible to do with the breath. And as you give rise to a feeling of pleasure, then the next question is, start analyzing that. What to do with the pleasure? Some people, when they gain a little bit of pleasure in the meditation, drop the breath and just go running for the pleasure. It’s like a person who gets a job and keeps working until he gets his first salary check. And then he quits the job and then goes off and spends the money. Of course, the money’s going to run out. So he has to come back and ask for the job again. And in this case, he does get the job. But if he keeps quitting every time he gets a check, he’s never going to get a raise. He’s never going to make any advances in his career. It’s the same with the pleasure in the meditation. If you just go for the pleasure and leave the breath, you have a little hit of pleasure every now and then. But otherwise, it doesn’t really develop. But if you learn how to take that pleasure and use it while you’re still with the breath, think of the pleasure going in where all the areas of the body where the breath can flow. So your experience of the body sitting here in the present moment gets more pleasant. It gets easier to stay here. And if you find the balance and the different elements in the body is out of whack, you can change that. If you’re too warm, too cold, well, if you’re too warm, think of a cooling breath. If you’re too cold, think of a warming breath. You have the right to take the potentials that can shape the present moment and shape them in a good direction. The important thing here is you’re shaping them with knowledge. Where does the knowledge come from? It comes from those three qualities we talked about the other day. Mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. You hear instructions, you read Dharma books, and then you try to remember what you’ve learned there, and then you put it into practice. And then you learn more from your own practice. What works for you, what doesn’t work for you. When a particular problem comes up, say there’s a pain in your stomach, focus on your back. The pain in the right shoulder, okay, focus on your left shoulder. These are things you can remember from earlier meditations, and you can use them to fashion the present moment in a skillful way. Sometimes you realize, okay, you’re coming up with a new problem this time, that your old methods don’t work. Okay, that’s when you use your ingenuity. You have to be alert to watch what you’re doing. All of this is motivated by that quality of ardency. You really put your whole heart into doing this well, because if you can shape your experience of the present moment in a good way, then it gives you a good foundation for acting and speaking and thinking in ways that are going to be skillful. At the same time, as you learn to master these three ways of fashioning your present moment, fashioning your experience of the present moment while you’re meditating, you can also use them in other situations. Because it’s the same mind and the same body, the same processes going along. For instance, if you’re at work and somebody does something to get you angry, you can stop and ask yourself, okay, this experience of anger here that I’m creating out of the present moment, as the Buddha said, it was just, you know, unpleasant sound made contact at the ear, but I’m certainly making more of it than that. What am I doing? Well, just first look at the breath. Yesterday there was a question about what to do when you’re angry. I forgot to mention one of the most important first steps is just look at the way you’re breathing first. You notice that when you’re angry, there’s a tightness in the chest, a tightness in the stomach, and the way you breathe can aggravate that. In other words, the anger has seized your breath. You want to seize it and return, take it back, lay claim to the breath, breathe in a way that’s calming, breathe in a way that’s soothing, and the edge of the anger will get taken away. So that desire just to lash out, to get the anger out of your system, gets weaker. Because the part that was in your system that was driving you crazy was actually the sense of tension in the body. We can breathe through that tension and that gives you a clearer head for looking at the situation and deciding what needs to be done. This is where you bring your direct to thought and evaluation. You start asking yourself questions. What would be the most effective thing to do right now? Not just what do I feel like doing, but what would be effective? Sometimes you realize you’re going to have to wait for a while. At least you’re not bottling things up, because for most of us those are the only two alternatives. Either you let things out or you bottle them up, and neither way is good. So the Buddha here is giving you a third alternative. You can breathe through the anger so you’re not holding any tension in the body, and then you can look more clearly at the situation. How are you perceiving the situation? What are you telling yourself about the situation? Maybe that’s a part of the problem. Can you bring other perceptions to it? This is one of the reasons why they say when you’re angry at somebody, try to think of that person’s goodness. That changes your perception of the situation. The person isn’t all bad. If you see the whole world as nothing but dogs, it’s going to be hard for you to behave like a human being with all these dogs. You’re going to start behaving like a dog as well. But if you remember, we’re all human beings, all with our strong points, our weak points. We all make mistakes. It’s a lot easier to be a little bit more forgiving and to be more willing to be more patient in solving a problem or in dealing with someone who’s difficult. This isn’t to say we pretend they’re not difficult. We know they’re difficult, but we have a better motivation for trying to deal with the difficulty in a skillful way. For times when you’re trying to spread thoughts of goodwill to somebody and it’s really hard, you have to stop and ask yourself, “Well, how do you spread thoughts of goodwill? How do you create a feeling of goodwill?” Go back to your breath. Adjust your breathing so it feels good inside. Then you do a little analysis with your verbal fabrication. Ask yourself, “What does it mean to have goodwill for someone?” You wish for them to be happy. How are people going to be happy? It’s not simply because you wish it. Your wish isn’t that whatever they do, may they be happy. You know that for them to be happy, they have to understand some of the causes of happiness and act on them. That’s something you can wish for anybody, no matter how cruel the person is, no matter how harmful the person has been. You can wish that. If this person really understood happiness, they wouldn’t act that way. When you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, you’re basically wishing for the whole world to understand how to find happiness in a harmless way. That’s something you can wish for anybody. You can wish for anybody without hypocrisy, without limit. Thinking that way makes it a lot easier to feel goodwill for other people. What all this comes down to is understanding that we play a role in shaping our experience. We want to do it with awareness, because if we do it with ignorance, it leads to suffering. It also means that when you find yourself suffering, don’t go looking so much outside looking. Look inside and think, what am I doing right now to shape this experience into an experience of suffering? Things outside may be genuinely bad, and they may require your attention, but the question of your suffering, that’s something that comes from within. That’s something that can be solved from within if you bring knowledge. Again, this is the knowledge that we keep in mind with our mindfulness. We try to apply it with our ardency, and then we’re alert to see whether it’s working or not, so that we can make our knowledge more and more skillful, more and more precise, more and more appropriate for whatever comes up. It’s in this way that we develop good qualities in the mind. We develop an ability to shape our experience in a good way. It’s like being a good cook. If you’re a really good cook, you can take almost any ingredient and make good food out of it. When I was in France, I commented on cheese. What is cheese? It’s moldy milk, but they can make it into good food. Every country has its own strange foods this way. In Thailand, it’s shrimp paste and fish sauce. What is fish sauce? It’s the liquid that comes out of rotting fish, but they can make good food out of it. America’s not all that good at making good food out of anything. But you get the point. It’s that if you’re a good cook, you can take an experience that’s not… take ingredients that are not all that good, but you can know how to make them into something good. Well, in the same way, you’re a cook of your experience in the present moment. The raw materials coming in from your past karma, you fashion it with your present karma. If you do that with knowledge and understanding, what it is you’re doing to the fashioning. Breathing, that’s part of the fashioning. The way you talk to yourself is part of the fashioning. The perceptions you hold in mind, the feelings that you create out of all this, all of these fashion your experience right now. You can fashion or fabricate it in a good direction. So it becomes part of the path. So pay some attention to how you’re fabricating your experience right now. Because you can use this knowledge in all kinds of situations. And the more skill you develop in this area, the closer you are to coming to the Buddha’s whole purpose in teaching, which was to help everyone understand how it is for suffering and how they can put an end to that suffering. It’s in this way that we pay the homage, the highest homage to him. As he said, practicing the Dharma in line with the Dharma is the true homage to the Buddha. At the same time, we’re paying homage to our own desire for a true happiness, a happiness that lasts, a happiness that causes no one any harm. In this way, everybody benefits.

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