Fabricating Concentration

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The path is something that we put together. In the Buddhist term, it’s a fabrication, sankhana. And as with all fabrications, you don’t start with nothing. You’ve got raw material coming in from your past fabrications—good, bad, indifferent. And the skill of the path is learning how to make best use of whatever comes up. Realizing that some things you have to simply watch so you can comprehend them, other things you abandon, other things you develop. It’s almost like we’re cooking the path out of the vegetables and other things that we have growing in our field. You see this in the Buddha’s instructions on how to practice mindfulness. He has four categories, or four topics, that you can focus on. The first three have to do with what we’re doing as we’re trying to get the mind into concentration. Body, feeling, mind. Ideally, what we want is an awareness, the mind filling the body, and a sense of pleasure filling the body. All three of them snugly together. So you look at what you’ve got here right now. Is your awareness filling the body? Is there a sense of pleasure filling the body? If not, what needs to be done? This is where you bring in the fourth frame of reference, which is dhammas. These are different lists that you hold in mind, different qualities that you either want to develop or abandon, different potentials that you have to learn how to use in order to get the mind into that state of concentration. So you look at your problem. Is the problem with the body? Is the body an uncomfortable place to be? What can you do to make it feel better? Well, you work with the breath. Sometimes you work with the other elements as well. But the breath is the main controlling element. That’s the first one we work with because it’s the easiest to manipulate. You can make it longer, shorter, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. You can think of the breath coming in and out of the body in different ways. Remember, breath here is not the air. It’s the feeling of energy. You’re not trying to pump air into your nerves. You’re simply allowing the blood to flow freely and the energy to flow along the nerves easily. Relax your muscles. If there’s any tension or tightness in part of the body, that’s going to keep the energy from flowing well. So try to relax. Go through the body systematically. So when the Buddha says, “Be aware of the entire body as you breathe in and breathe out,” this is how you’re doing it. You’re doing this to check on how things are going and how things should be adjusted. And then you try to calm bodily fabrication. You calm the in-and-out breath. First you breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, gives rise to a sense of well-being. And then when that sense of ease and well-being have done their work, they’ve nourished your sense of the body, then you can allow things to calm down. Because then the mind is ready to settle in, as long as the body was the only problem. Then the range of the feeling of comfort was the only problem. However, the other problem, of course, is the mind. Sometimes the body’s going perfectly fine, but the mind is not willing to settle down. So you have to ask yourself, “What’s going on?” Here in particular, two of the frames of reference within the collection of Dhamma frames of reference are helpful. On the one hand, there are the seven factors for awakening, which are the qualities you want to develop. On the other, there are the five hindrances, which are qualities you want to abandon. And as the Buddha said, each of these comes from potentials, sometimes in the body, sometimes in the mind. If you pay appropriate attention to these potentials, then you can starve the hindrances and feed the factors for awakening. So if sensual desire is a problem, then the Buddha says, “There is in your mind the ability to see the things that you desire as unattractive.” It may not come to the mind first, because your first order of business usually is when you see something attractive, you say, “Oh, this is worth going for. This is worth desiring.” You give very little thought to the idea that it is a hindrance. But if you pay appropriate attention to it, you begin to realize that this is going to lead you to a place you don’t want to go. And when you want to get past the hindrance, that’s when you can use the tools. You think about how the object of your desire is not really worth it. You can think of all its unattractive features. You can think of the desire itself as not being something you want to go with. You’ve been a slave to sensual desire for who knows how long, and it’s made you do all kinds of stupid things. And do you want to keep following it? Do you want to keep going with it? This is called applying appropriate attention, seeing that the act of looking at the unattractive side of the body or the unattractive side of whatever it is that you’re feeling desire for is something you want to side with. Because all too often we side with the hindrances and we resist the teachings that go against them. But it’s when you switch sides and you realize, “Guy, you’re on the wrong side to begin with.” That’s when the tools can work a lot more effectively. The same with ill will. The people that you’d like to see suffer, and when we talk about having good will for them, we say, “Well, can’t we have them suffer a little bit more and then we’ll think about them finding true happiness?” But what in you wants to see them suffer? Is that an attribute of the mind that you would like to encourage? What if you say, “Well, your sense of justice is offended if they get away with murder or get away with whatever they’re doing.” But then you think about a sense of justice. Nobody in the world fights for injustice. Everybody has his or her idea of what justice is, and that’s why we fight. So maybe you say, “Maybe I can put that aside.” You think about the case of Angulimala. He’d murdered all those people and then became an arahant. And if you identify with Angulimala, you think that’s pretty good. He did a lot of bad things and he was still able to turn his mind around. But when you think about the other people, the people whose relatives had been killed, they weren’t very satisfied. Here he was getting away with murder. But in the Buddha’s case, the Buddha had compassion for him. He thought this person had potential. And even though he’d done a lot of bad things, he had the potential to gain awakening and not have to suffer from the consequences of those things. So the Buddha’s attitude was that he’s there to help alleviate suffering, whether it’s quote-unquote “deserved” or not. So see if you can try to take on his attitude. If it’s possible, you’d like to see them find true happiness. That means, of course, they will have to change their ways. But they also may get out of having to suffer for a lot of past karma. Learn to live with that idea. And then your mind gets lightened and you can do more good for the world. You want to rest already, so now you’ve got your excuse. Well, sometimes with sleepiness, it’s out of boredom. And the way to fight that off is to take more interest in what you’re actually doing. Try to be more meticulous in the way you pay attention to your meditation object. The other reason for sleepiness often can be that something is going to come up and you’re going to see something in the mind that you don’t want to see, or part of the mind knows is coming up. And it’s going to hide it from you by putting you to sleep. So you’ve got to fight it. Don’t see sleepiness as your friend. See it as something you want to overcome, if you can. The same holds true of the other hindrances. As long as you don’t see them as your friends, then you can work with them. And you begin to realize that there are other potentials within you. When the Buddha talks about the potentials, sometimes he’s very specific, sometimes he’s not. But you can find you have something in you that doesn’t have to fall in with the hindrances, and that doesn’t want to fall in with the hindrances. You’ve got to encourage that side of the mind. Then at the same time, you try to develop positive qualities, the factors for awakening. The Buddha divides them into three types. On the one hand, there’s mindfulness, which is always appropriate. In other words, keeping in mind what should be done, and the lessons you’ve learned from the past about when you have to be proactive, when you have to be able to stand back and just watch and see what the issue is in the mind. The basic issue is either there’s too much energy or too little. So if there’s too much, you focus on things that are calming, calm, concentrated. Equanimity. If there’s too little energy, you focus on things that are more energizing. The Buddha has analysis of qualities as something that’s interesting. We don’t usually think of analysis of qualities as something that’s going to wake us up or stir us up. But if you stop and think, and you look at what’s going on in the mind, and you’re in a drowsy, dull state, and part of the mind likes the drowsy, dull state, you can remind yourself, “Where does dullness leave? Where does the drowsiness leave?” It doesn’t lead to the place you want to go. That’s all you want to do, is just go to bed. But if you want to go to awakening, it’s something you’ve got to get past. So this encourages you to analyze it. You put an effort into raising the level of your energy, and there’s going to be a sense of rapture. This is what energizes you. So you look for that. So what are the potentials for these things? What is the potential that will allow you to analyze the state of your mind and give rise to the desire to want to overcome anything unskillful? So here the Buddha is laying things out. You’re trying to get mind, body, and feeling—feeling of pleasure—all together. That’s going to be the state of concentration. Use these other lists, these other lists of dhammas, to figure out how you adjust things so you get to that state, looking for the potentials that you have inside and learning how to treat them wisely. Because we all have good or bad potentials. Things are going to come popping up into the mind that could either be helpful or not helpful in meditation. If you learn how to use them properly, learn how to look at them as they are, then you can start exploring on your own what these potentials are. The Buddha gives a few ideas. But if you start reading the life stories of all the great Ajahns, you realize they had to do a lot of thinking and figuring things out on their own. They had to depend on themselves. And their ingenuity and resourcefulness. The potentials they had may be somewhat different from ours, but they all fall into the same types. It’s simply a matter of figuring out how your particular experience of desire or ill-will is best treated, and what kind of psychology you’ve built around these things so you can take it apart, and how your relationship to skillful states of mind can be improved. So if the mind is the problem of getting body, feeling, and mind together, you know what to do. Or if the body is the problem, you know what to do. Or if the feeling is the problem, you know what to do. As the Buddha said when he was looking for a student, he was looking for someone who was truthful and observant. This applies very much to your meditation. You want to be honest with yourself as to what’s actually happening, and observant as to what the different potentials are that you’ve got here. And then true again in carrying out the duties of the Four Noble Truths, the duties of appropriate attention. That’s how you take this process of fabrication, which, if it’s done with ignorance, creates a lot of suffering, and you turn it into a path, because you do it with knowledge. It relates to that point that when the Buddha described his own awakening, the qualities that he brought to it were all qualities that we all have in potential form. He simply showed, “This is how far those potentials can go.” So if you aim at awakening, you’re following in his footsteps. He had the potentials. He developed them. You’ve got the same potentials. You can develop them too.

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