Fabrications of Exertion (1) (outdoors)

October 4, 2017

When the Buddha explained the basis of success, he said that they had to be practiced together with what he called the fabrications of exertion. It’s a strange phrase that needs to be explained. Fabrication means basically the process of shaping your experience. It has an element of intention, so it’s a type of karma. Because, as the Buddha said, all karma is basically intention. It’s important that you understand that when the Buddha talked about karma, it’s not just past karma and not just bad karma. Karma can be good or bad, past or present. In fact, it’s our present karma that’s actually the most important. This is where the fabrications come in. Past karma is basically what gives the raw material for the present moment your range of options, some good, some bad. The Buddha said it’s like a field planted with many different kinds of seeds. Some of the seeds are ready to sprout if they get a little water. Some of them are going to sprout no matter what you do. And some of them are not yet ready to sprout no matter how much water they get. So there are some options in the present moment, but there are some limitations. Sometimes the only seeds that are ready to sprout are bad ones. Sometimes you have a mix, and that’s more often that you do have a mix. So it really matters how you water them. It’s the process of fabrication in the present moment. If you make another comparison, it’s like the food you have in the kitchen. Your past karma has put the food in the refrigerator. You look in there and sometimes they’re good things, sometimes they’re only bad things. If you’re a good cook, you can take even bad things and make something good out of them. There was a student who was a cook in Singapore. He worked at the British Club. One night they had a fixed-price meal, and one of the dishes in the fixed-price meal was asparagus soup. It turned out they had more people than they expected, and they ran out of asparagus soup. So what to do? He chased all the other cooks out of the kitchen, went into the garbage, and found the old asparagus scraps that they had thrown away, put those in a blender, and made a nice, soft bechamel as a base for the soup. And as everyone said afterwards, that was the best asparagus soup that night, even though it was made out of garbage. So the same principle applies to our mind in the present moment. The past may be sending us a lot of bad karma, but if we’re good cooks, we can make it into something good. For instance, you’re sitting here in the body right now. Some spots in the body are potentials for pleasure, and some are potentials for pain. So to begin with, you focus on the potentials for pleasure. You work with the breath energies, because the breath is one of the types of sankara the Buddha’s talking about. There are three types altogether. The in-and-out breath is bodily fabrication. Then there’s verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself about things in full sentences. And then there’s mental fabrication, which are perceptions and feelings. The perceptions here are the important ones. They can be individual words in your mind. You look at a tree, and you think “tree.” You look at the sky, and you think “sky.” You hear the sound of the leaf, and you think “leaf.” Those are perceptions. They can be pictures in the mind, or words, or just little feelings in the body that you’ve given a meaning to. If you take those words and you turn them into sentences, that turns them into verbal fabrication. So you use all of these things to deal with the breath. Take that potential for pleasure in that one part of the body. Say it’s in the chest. Breathe in ways that feel good. Ask questions about how you might change the breath. And then look at the perception. The perception is especially powerful. What picture do you have in your mind of how the breath runs in the body? Do you think of the breath coming in and out just through the nose? In that case, sometimes it can be difficult to breathe. You can change the perception. Your body is like a big sponge. You breathe in, the breath comes in and out through all the pores of the skin. If you hold that image in mind, the way you breathe will change. Or you can think of the breath starting in the body instead of thinking that the breath has to be pulled in from outside. The breath is something that grows from within you. It’s what pulls the air in. But the real breath comes from inside. That will change the way you breathe as well. You can create a much more comfortable breath simply by changing the perception you have of the process. The same applies to different sensations in the body. If there’s a hard sensation in the back, if you tell yourself simply that it’s the bone, there’s nothing you can do with it. But if you tell yourself, “Well, maybe it’s just a tight muscle,” you can lucentize tight muscles with good breath. Think of the breath going through the blood vessels, the breath going through the nerves, through that muscle, and relaxing it. In this case, the perception creates opportunities. Try to use the perception to give you the most opportunities. That way your experience of the present moment will be much better. And then you can use the same type of analysis of fabrications, say, with pains in the body. First, ask yourself, “How are you breathing around the pain?” Then ask yourself, “What are you telling yourself about the pain?” You do this when the mind is well-centered and is ready to look into the pain. It’s not afraid to look into the pain, because after all, that’s our duty with regard to pain, is to comprehend it, not to push it away, not to run away from it. If we want to get past it, we have to comprehend it. And comprehending it means understanding how we fabricate around it. So ask yourself how you breathe through the pain. Can you breathe through the pain? Does it make better? Or is the pain like a wall? If it feels like a wall, change the perception. And ask yourself about other perceptions. Does the pain seem to be like one big, solid mass? Is the pain the same thing, say, if it’s in your knee, is the pain the same thing as your knee? Tell yourself it’s not. It’s not a solid mass. It’s little dots of pain sensations arising and passing away very fast. Because that’s the way it really is. And when it’s little dots like that arising and passing away, you can think, instead of when they arise, they’re not coming at you, they’re going away from you. Because as soon as they arise, they go. As soon as they arise, they go. It’s like sitting in the back of a car, facing the back, as the car goes along the road. Anything that comes into your range of sight on the side of the road is going away, going away, going away. In this way, you’ve changed the fabrications, and particularly this one, the fabrication of perception, and it will have an impact on your mind. And you see that a lot of the suffering that you’ve been suffering in the past was really unnecessary. You were just not a good cook. You didn’t have the skills you needed to take bad things and turn them into good. But if you develop these skills, you can use them with physical pains, you can use them with emotional issues as well. That’s what we’ll talk about tonight. But by working with these three fabrications around the breath, it gives you practice in these skills, what the Buddha calls the fabrications of exertion. So you can use them to greatly reduce the amount of suffering you have, the amount of pain you feel. Because the Buddha’s main emphasis is not on curing pains in the body, it’s making sure that we don’t cause suffering in the mind. And even though there may be potentials for pains in the body, if you’re skillful in how you fabricate around them, they won’t make inroads on the mind. And that’s one of the best skills of all.

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