The Buddha’s Fabrications (outdoors)

October 3, 2018

When you bring the mind to the breath, we have to use three qualities. Mindfulness, which is keeping something in mind. In this case, we’re keeping the breath in mind. Alertness, watching what we’re doing, as we’re doing it. Watching to see if the mind really is staying with the breath. And then ardency, the quality of Christ to do this well. You put your whole heart into it. If you’re alert to the fact that the mind is wandering away from the breath, you bring it right back. Wanders off again, you bring it back again. You don’t give up. While you’re with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels and how the mind is relating to the breath. And when you become sensitive to the mind, you become sensitive to another set of qualities the Buddha talks about, which he calls fabrication, sankhana. This doesn’t mean fabricating lies. It means simply the way we put our experience together. And that falls into three types, too. The first is bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. The way you experience your body. And then there’s verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. In technical terms, this is called direct-to-thought evaluation. You direct your mind to a topic, and then you comment on it. We’re doing that here, too, as well. You’re directing your mind to the breath, and you’re commenting how the breath feels. But you don’t just comment. You’re trying to figure out solutions. If it doesn’t feel right, if it’s not comfortable, what can you change? If it does feel comfortable, how do you maintain it? And when you have that sense of comfort, what do you do with it to get the most use out of it? The Buddha recommends spreading it through the whole body. You can think of it going down the spine. Once you’ve got a sense of comfort, say, in your chest, think of it going down through the stomach, out through the arms. Think of the breath coming in and out through the back of the neck, going down the spine, down the legs. Think of the breath energy moving in the head, coming in and out, not only through the eyes, but also through the ears and the nose. So a sense of well-being can develop the whole body. That’s a sign that you’re doing your verbal fabrication. And then there’s mental fabrication, the feelings, like feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. And perceptions, the labels you place on things, the images you have in the mind. These play a role here. Of course, with the feeling, you want a feeling of pleasure. With the perception, you’re thinking about different ways of perceiving the breath. How does it relate to the body? When you breathe in, where does it come in? When you breathe out, where does it go out? Once it’s in the body, how does it move through the body? You might ask yourself, does the breath come in from the outside, or does the breath energy actually start from inside the body and move out? And when it starts in the body, where does it start? There’s lots to experiment with here. As you experiment with these three kinds of fabrication, you find that you can develop a sense of well-being right here. Years back, we were sitting and meditating right here. And a woman brought a friend who had never meditated before, gave the meditation instructions. And we sat as a group. And it was a lovely day. Not too warm, not too cold. The wind wasn’t quite as strong as it was today. It was just right. And at the end of the session, the woman’s friend opened her eyes and said, “I’ve never suffered so much in my life.” Which is a sign that she didn’t know how to fabricate at the present moment. Because we’re doing that all the time. It’s not that we do it only when we’re meditating. In fact, in the Buddha’s analysis, we’re doing it all the time. And when we do it without realizing what we’re doing, we suffer. The way we breathe can make us suffer. The way we think can make us suffer. The image that’s holding our mind can make us suffer. But as he pointed out, if we bring knowledge to the same processes, we can make that a path to the end of suffering. And he gives recommendations on how to do that. In fact, a lot of his teaching is just that. Instructions on how to fabricate your present experience in a better way. He gives recommendations on how to breathe in a way that’s good for the body. Breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure, gives rise to rapture. Breathe in a way that steadies the mind when it needs to be steadied, flattens the mind when it needs energy, releases the mind when it’s feeling burdened with things. These are instructions on how to improve your bodily fabrication. He gives instructions also on how to change the way you think. In getting depressed about yourself, he gives you ways of encouraging yourself. In comparing yourself with other people, they seem to be doing better on the path than you are, you’re getting discouraged. But it says, remind yourself, they’re human beings, they can do it. You’re a human being, you can do it too. In other words, he gives you new ways to think, new ways to direct your thoughts, and new ways to evaluate. The same with mental fabrication. For example, the feeling, you think in ways that give rise to a feeling of pleasure, you breathe in ways that give rise to a feeling of pleasure. And you work on your perceptions. What are these images that you hold in mind about the world? What are the images you hold about yourself that are making you suffer? For instance, when you’re feeling overwhelmed by the world. Remind yourself that what you see and hear and smell, taste and touch, that’s the world. It’s also the results of your own past actions. It’s your old karma. And you have to remind yourself, you don’t want to be overcome by your own karma, because otherwise it just goes around and around in a big cycle. There’s the action, and then there’s the result. And then there’s a defilement that arises in the mind as a result, either craving for nice things that happen as a result of your past actions, or anger, or a sense of being oppressed by things you don’t like as a result of your past actions. And then based on that defilement, you act again, and then you create more bad karma for yourself. So you want to cut that cycle. And you cut that cycle by making your mind larger than the world. We talked last night about keep making your goodwill, thinking of your goodwill as being large like the River Ganges. A person comes along with a torch, and he can’t burn the river away, there’s just so much water. The same way the world can try to come and burn away your goodwill, but you decide your goodwill is bigger than that. You’ve given it a foundation in your concentration. And you also want to hold in mind that the… this large river is never going to be burned away. Beyond that, the Buddha also gives an example about how to think about your old karma. Your old bad karma, he says, is like a big lump of salt. If you take that lump of salt, and you put it in a small cup of water, you can’t drink the water. It’s too salty. But if you take that same lump of salt and put it in a large, clean river of water, you can still drink the water in the river, because there’s so much more of it. In the same way, if you make your goodwill expansive for all beings, if you learn to train your mind so it’s not easily overcome by pleasure or pain, you’ll find, like that big river, whatever bad karma you have, it’s just a lump of salt in the river. You don’t have to suffer from it. But this means that just because you’ve done bad things in the past doesn’t mean that you have to suffer from it. This is part of the Buddha’s teaching. This is part of the Buddha’s skill. We live in a world where there’s going to be good and bad. But we don’t have to suffer from that. We can try to help the world as best we can, given our strengths, given our abilities. But there comes a point when you realize that the world is just going to be the world. People are going to keep on doing what they want to do. You can’t control the world, but you can control your mind. And controlling your mind, you can free yourself. Even as you’re living in the world, you don’t have to suffer. The Buddha said there are four kinds of karma. Bright karma, dark karma, bright and dark, and then karma that’s neither bright nor dark. Bright karma is things you do with good intentions that create good things in the world. Dark karma is the bad intentions. Mixed, white and dark is when you do something with mixed intentions. But the karma that’s neither bright nor dark, that’s the karma that leads you outside of the world, leads you above the world. That’s the karma we’re trying to do here. We do good, but we don’t hold on to the results of the good. We hold on to the principle that we’re going to keep on doing good. We’re going to train the mind so that it’s above the world. It doesn’t have to be coming back and falling into that old cycle. So if there’s something you can do to help the world, you have to do it. If it’s within your power. But first priority comes to looking after your mind, because after all, the mind is the source of your actions. And if the mind is not trained, you can’t really trust your own actions. You’ve got to start with the mind. And look at the way in which the mind is fabricating things. Because it’s the way you fabricate that’s going to make the difference between whether you suffer or not. When you bring knowledge to these fabrications, you don’t have to simply follow the Buddha’s recommendations for how to think. You begin to develop the ability to come up with good mental and bodily and verbal fabrications on your own. The Buddha gives us general ideas. And then based on those general ideas, we learn how to fabricate the way we think, the way we picture things to ourselves, even the way we breathe. In a way that keeps us from suffering. So try to become sensitive to how you fabricate things bodily, verbally, mentally. And try to do it with more skill. Take some of the Buddha’s advice, give it a try, see how it works for you. Make whatever adjustments you need. And that way, the Dharma becomes yours. It’s something that you can carry with you, not only as you sit here with your eyes closed, but as you go through the world. Because it’s as you’re going through the world that the Buddha’s teachings are meant to be applied. We live in this world of aging, illness and death, over and over again. But he’s teaching us how to experience the aging of the body, but without suffering. The illness in the body, but without the mind suffering. Even the death of the body, the mind doesn’t die. And you want to make sure that its goodness doesn’t die either. This is why we practice. So we can shape our behavior in a way that doesn’t lead to any harm, any suffering to anybody at all.

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