Peeling Away

June 24, 2024

As the Buddha pointed out, we shape our experience through three kinds of fabrication, bodily, verbal, mental. As you’re sitting here meditating, what you experience in terms of bodily fabrication is the breath coming in and going out. As for verbal fabrication, that’s directed thought and evaluation. You choose a topic to talk to yourself about, and then the comments you make. Mental fabrications, perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the mental labels you apply to things, identifying what they are, what they mean, what their value is. And feelings, of course, are feeling tones. Pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. As Lee pointed out, it’s the verbal fabrications that are the big troublemakers. You can talk yourself into all kinds of strange things. There are conversations outside. You listen to them and say, “I don’t want to get involved in that conversation.” And it’s easy to step out. With the conversations inside, we tend to give too much importance to them, not to realize that we can step out of them as well. It’s the only way you’re going to get the mind to settle down, is to put those conversations aside. See that they’re not worth getting involved in. One way of doing that is to see them as directed thoughts and evaluations. Analyze them. You come up with a topic, just label it. That’s a directed thought. You make a comment on it, that’s an evaluation. After a while, you can tell yourself, “It’s just a conversation happening in the mind.” And you don’t have to think of yourself as being involved. You’re not directing the thoughts, you’re not evaluating. These are just things that are happening. So when you can see these things as events like that, then they begin to lose some of their attraction. In fact, that’s what a lot of meditation is, is seeing events simply as events in the mind. Particularly the events that in dependent co-arising are listed prior to sensory contact. There’s not only the factor of fabrication, there’s also name and form. You have acts of attention, acts of intention. There’s contact among these different events in the mind. So that your intentions can be informed by your perceptions, or you can intend to attend to something. And if you can learn to see these things simply as events, it’s easier for the mind to pull out of them. Which is what you’re trying to do, is you’re trying to get it to settle down. So before you silence all these voices, learn how to be them, and be separate. Otherwise, as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down, it’s like a game of whack-a-mole. You can drive yourself crazy, whacking all the moles. You never get any peace. But tell yourself they can pop up and pop down as they want, but you don’t have to play. You can stay off to the side with the breath. Maintain the intention to stay with the breath. So there will be some of these mental events that you’re going to side with, but try to side with the ones that are on your side, the ones that will help you pull out of whatever suffering you’re creating yourself. So you intend to pay attention to the breath. Energy right there. Maintaining that intention as best you can. One way of doing that is to make the breath comfortable, so there’s feeling, there’s fabrication. Start talking to yourself about the breath. What kind of breathing would feel good right now? Which parts of the body need some breath energy right now, that are being starved or being squeezed off? Pay attention to that. So what you’re doing as you get the mind into concentration is, you’re using these factors of independent core arising for the purpose of concentration. And any factors that would lead someplace else, you can just say, “I am not responsible for those. I don’t have to pay any attention to those.” This is where it’s good to remember the Buddhist teachings on karma. They’re the results of past karma coming up right now. But you have the choice as to whether to go with them or not. That’s one of the lessons we learn through the practice of virtue. An impulse comes up, an intention comes up. You don’t have to act on it. If you had to act on it, there’d be no purpose in having precepts, no purpose in even thinking about virtue. We’d all be machines. Pushed around by forces over which we have no control. So the fact that the Buddha is having you hold by the precepts means that you do have a choice, and you want to learn how to exercise that choice well. The same when you’re meditating. Things are coming up in the mind, and you have the choice of whether to go with them or not. And your old habits may pull you in the direction away from concentration. But remind yourself, you do have the choice to go with your old habits or not. It may be something that goes against the grain, but you follow the grain for how many lifetimes now? There may be a time to go against it some. The same with discernment, the things that you hold on to, things you cling to. The Buddha says those are suffering. Again, he’s implying that you have the choice not to cling. These impulses come up to hold on to form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness, or whatever stories you may make out of these things. But the fact that we have a path of practice that’s going to pull us out of our old habits implies that you don’t have to go with those old narratives. They may have a lot of hooks, they may have a lot of appeal, but at the same time you can see they have their drawbacks. If you’re trying to get the mind really quiet, they get in the way. So you keep reminding yourself you have the choice. You have, and that’s what intention is all about, you’re choosing to direct your attention someplace, in this case the breath, and you’re choosing to say no to everything else. That’s why we have that formula for right mindfulness. Keeping focused on the body in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In this case, with reference to the world, anything that’s not related to being right here, right now. So this is a lesson that carries all the way through. You have the power of choice. You make choices that are for your own happiness, and as you get deeper and deeper into the meditation, more solidly into the concentration, you start peeling things away. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha advocates going through many different levels of concentration, because in each case you’re peeling away something as you go from one level to a deeper level to a deeper level. Things you’re doing, as you get the mind to settle down, sometimes you don’t even realize you’re doing it. But there may be glimpses as that whatever you’re doing comes and goes, comes and goes. There’ll be gaps, and you begin to see, oh, this is an inconstancy, even in the stillness. So if you can identify what’s inconstancy, and just stop doing it, the mind goes deeper. And it’s in this way you see levels of intention and other mental factors you didn’t see before. They were just part of the background noise. A lot of times people say, well, I’m just with whatever comes up, and I have no intentions at all. The intention to be with whatever comes up, that’s an intention. The intention not to react, that’s an intention. The intention to be quiet is an intention. Sometimes they’re so steady and so small, you don’t notice them. But the fact that you’re engaged at all in the six senses means there has to be an element of intention. And you’ll see that as you get deeper and deeper. So learn to look at your own mind in those terms. Because as you’re trying to settle down, they can take the narratives that obsess you, and the conversations that obsess you, and allow you to step back from them, the same way that a movie critic would step back from a movie and analyze how it was done. And then you get into concentration, and it’s the same sort of thing. You get into the concentration first, and then you step back from it to see what’s going on. And you start peeling things away. So this principle of stepping back and analyzing things simply as events, that’s going to accomplish a lot of things in your meditation. And just in terms of just going around in the course of the day, there’s so many issues that get us worked up. But if you can step back from them and analyze, okay, what’s going on? How can I see this in personal terms? Pulls you out of a lot of problems. So make use of this principle as best you can.

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