Things as They’ve Come to Be

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There’s a Pali phrase, yatha bhuttayadadasana. Sometimes it’s translated as “knowledge and vision of things as they are.” But there’s a passage in the Canon that shows that that’s not the right translation. It’s more “knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be.” In other words, you seek causality. What causes what? Realizing that the way you’re experiencing things right now comes from your own actions, either past actions that lead to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas that come unbidden in the present moment. But then there’s also your present actions, the way you fabricate these things into your present moment experience. When the Buddha gives meditation instructions, he points to these things. Fabrications of body, verbal fabrications, mental fabrications. Like right now, verbal fabrications are the way you breathe. How you’re breathing in, how you’re breathing out. He’s just trying to do that well. He gives instructions. It’s amazing how he covers everything in his teachings, even telling you how to breathe. Something most people would say, “I don’t need to be told how to breathe. I can breathe on my own already.” But the Buddha is saying, “Be conscious of how you breathe.” Notice that there are variations in the breath, and you can breathe in ways that give rise to pleasure, give rise to rapture, that can gladden the mind, steady the mind, release the mind. There’s a lot of potential just in the way you breathe. Then there’s verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. Again, something very ordinary. We all know how to talk to ourselves. But the question is, do we do it well? And the Buddha gives lots of instructions in this area too. There’s a whole book out there now, talking about the way the Buddha says, “Thus you should train yourself.” And he talks about the ways you talk to yourself, to train yourself in the practice. Right here as we’re meditating, verbal fabrication, what the Buddha calls “directed thought and evaluation,” is the way you talk to yourself about the breath. How is the breath going right now? Is it too long, too short, too fast, too slow? How is the mind in relationship to the breath? Is it ready to settle down? There are times, the Buddha says, when the mind settles down easily without having to think too much about anything. Other times, though, when he says there’s a fever in the body or a fever in the mind, you’ve got to come up with something else, some inspiring theme to talk yourself into being willing to settle down. So ask yourself, what would be inspiring right now? The Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, your own past generosity, your own past virtues. Or do you need something besides the carrot, do you need a stick? Think about death. You can come at any time and you can ask yourself, “Am I ready to go?” And almost universally the answer is, “Not yet.” Okay, what would stand in the way of you going well right now? Focus on doing that, dealing with that. See if that gets the mind to settle down. Then you can come back to the breath. Then there’s verbal fabrication, the images of the breath that you hold in mind right now. This evening there was a question, this discussion of breath originating in the body. Where do you feel that? The person was saying all she could feel was the air coming in from the outside. And the need to pull that air in. I said, “Well, what is it that pulls it in?” The air doesn’t come in on its own. It’s the energy in the body. That’s the breath the Buddha’s talking about. He’s not talking about a tactile sensation, the passage of the air over the nose or over the lip. He’s talking about one of the elements or properties of the body. Which is why the pleasure that comes from the breath doesn’t count as a sensory pleasure. It’s a pleasure of form. So what images do you hold of the breath right now? What images do you hold of the body? You can think of the body as being like a big sponge. When you breathe in, the breath can come in through all the holes in the sponge. Nothing getting in the way. Nothing blocking it. And all the breath energies work together. Ordinarily, as we go through the day, the breath energies in the different parts of the body are at cross-purposes. When we sit down and meditate, we can think of them all working in harmony, breathing in together, breathing out together, the whole body in, the whole body out. Everything connected. Again, there’s a real sense of well-being that can come from managing your breath element in the body through your perceptions. Then learn to appreciate the feeling of well-being that can come that way. So there you are, three kinds of fabrication related to the breath. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha talked about bodily fabrication and mental fabrication in his breath instructions. Because you’re conscious of the fact that you are shaping this. And there’s a skillful way to shape your experience. Otherwise you shape your breath and your inner conversation and the perceptions you hold into all kinds of weird emotions. And then you tell yourself, “This is how I really feel about this.” This emotion came totally unbidden. Well sometimes it’s just because you’re used to breathing in a certain way and it will have you talking to yourself in a certain way. You’re familiar with it. You’ve been through these emotions many, many times. But maybe it’s time to step back and get some knowledge and visions of things as they have become. Where do these emotions come from? They’re fabricated like everything else. This is one of the advantages of thinking of your present moment in these terms. Because you can get a handle on your mind states. And even deal with physical pains in the body, by the way you breathe, by the way you perceive things. You can change things around quite a bit. So you’re not just stuck with things as they are. You’re dealing with things as they have come to be and continue coming to be. There are other parts of the Canon where the Buddha talks about bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. Simply in terms of any bodily karma, any verbal karma, any mental karma. They will have an impact later in this life and on into future lifetimes. Which means that when we’re focusing on these immediate forms of bodily, verbal and mental fabrication right here, right now, we’re at the source of our karma. Independent co-arising, these things come even prior to intention. But they actually are a form of intention. When you do something with your body, you have to start with the breath. Otherwise your body can’t move. When you’re going to say something, you have to think first in your mind how to say it. You notice this especially when you’re learning a foreign language. You realize how much you have to learn how to construct sentences in your head before you can feel confident about saying them outside. And if you’re going to engage in any mental karma, it starts with feelings and perceptions. So you’re at the beginning point of all your karma right here, which is why the Buddha says you focus right effort right here. You can make changes. Look at what you’ve got right now and ask yourself, should this be developed or should this be abandoned? Is there something lacking? Is there something that I should make sure continues to lack? In other words, something that’s potentially unskillful, how do I make sure that it doesn’t come up? Something that’s potentially skillful, how do I give rise to it? That’s what you’re doing here. You’re not just watching the present moment as a passing show. You’re the director. You’re the actors. You’re the audience. You play all these roles in the present moment. So you want to learn how to do them all well. Because the audience is not there just to enjoy or not enjoy the show. You can give advice. Like that time we had a retreat down in Brazil. And poor Tansal sometimes would struggle to find the Portuguese word for something I’d said. People would shout it out from the audience. That’s the kind of audience you actually want in your own mind. One that makes comments. This is going well. This is not going well. You don’t want an audience that just accepts, accepts, accepts. You want an audience that’s critical, but critical in a helpful way. That can offer good suggestions for how this show can be improved. Watch things as they’ve come to be, not as they are. When you talk about things as they are, it sounds kind of static. It’s something you simply have to accept. When you think about things as they have come to be, then the next question is how do you want them to continue to come to be? Because this is an ongoing process. So you have a more dynamic view of how things are going in the present moment. In a strong sense that you can play a huge role in how they go. You’re not just stuck with things as they are. You get to choose what you want to have come into being, and what you want to choose to have disappear from your mind. That’s the skill we’re working on here. Sometimes it seems like an impossible skill. The mind seems to have a mind of its own. That’s when you have to learn some patience so you can watch it to figure out what’s actually going on. How do things come into being? When a bad mood comes in, where did that come from? It’s not the case that it just swooped down from the sky and landed on you. There are reasons why it’s there. But there are also reasons why it doesn’t have to stay. As for good things, once they’re there, you have to protect them. You can’t assume that well now the mind is in a good state, it’s just going to be in a good state forever and I don’t have to worry about it. You have to protect it. How do you protect a good state of mind without squeezing it too much or forcing it too much? That’s all part of the wisdom of seeing things as they have come to be.

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