Strong Through Commitment

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When the Buddha describes the steps that lead up to suffering, he starts with ignorance. A particular kind of ignorance. Not looking at things in terms of their formidable truths. In other words, you may know about the truths, but you actually don’t use them. You’re still ignorant. And then based on that ignorance, he says, the next step is that you engage in fabrication. Sankara is the Pali word. Put things together. So you put together the present moment. You’ve got some raw material coming in from the past. And you engage in this process of fabrication to put it into something that’s coherent, that you can actually use. The problem is, if you do this with ignorance, you put things together in a pretty bad way. So a lot of his teachings are specific instructions in how to fabricate more skillfully. It’s all pretty basic things. Bodily fabrication, the way you breathe. Verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. And then mental fabrication, the perceptions, the labels and images that give meaning to things. We say this is this and that’s that, like with a stoplight. You label the red as red. And the next part of you says, what does it mean? It means to stop. And the next question is, is it worth listening to? And the perception says, yes, listen to this. Pay attention. That’s also perception. We go through life applying perceptions to things. We have to remember that these perceptions are only partial. They’re true to some extent. They’re like a sketch of reality. We spend our lives dealing with sketches. And hopefully we find some ones that are true enough that they can serve our purposes. And you have to look back and ask yourself, what are your purposes? And if the Four Noble Truths are informing your purposes, you say, I want to understand my suffering. Why is it that there is this suffering going on? If I can find the cause, I want to abandon the cause. So those are standards for figuring out what perceptions are true and which ones are not true. And so, as I said, we tend to do this in ignorance. But he’s giving us some advice. He’s been telling us how to breathe. Breathe, he says, in a way that gives rise to rapture. Breathe in a way where you’re aware of the whole body. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure. Breathe in a way where you’re sensitive to these mental perceptions, these mental fabrications going on in the mind. Try to calm things down. Because when the mind is calm, then it gets strong. Strong enough to see what’s going on. To make changes if things are not skillful. Because when we look at some of the Buddhist instructions on how to talk to yourself, some of them seem pretty far away from the way we actually talk to ourselves now. It may seem foreign, or at least out of the realm of who I am, who you are. Like when he talks about monks talking to themselves, you go for alms and say you don’t get any food that day. And he says, tell yourself, not getting food is also good. Because then you’re lighter. You’re not spending all that energy on digesting the stuff that’s down in your stomach. The body’s lighter, it’s not weighed down. That kind of thinking doesn’t occur to most of us, but it’s an important part of the training. It’s one of the reasons why we read the suttas more than the Abhidhamma. Abhidhamma just lists concepts, but it doesn’t tell us what to do with them very much. It’s the suttas that put things together. Say this is how you breathe, this is how you talk to yourself. These are some useful perceptions to hold in mind. This is how we get the mind into concentration to begin with. You breathe in a way that’s comfortable, that feels soothing inside. It takes some time to allow the breath to be soothing. All too often we go through the meditation with little check boxes. Check off that box, check off this box, okay, mind settled down, okay, what’s next? And the what’s next is you stay. And that’s a skill we have to learn. In order to master that skill, we have to learn how to talk to ourselves. Because the mind does have this tendency, it does something and then it comments on what it just did, and then it just comments. It comments on the comments, and it comments on that. Like reflections in a hall of mirrors that go way back. So you have to tell yourself you’re going to commit yourself to being with the breath. And then it’s ready, comments on what it’s like to be with the breath. If they’re helpful, pay attention. If they’re not helpful, then you put them aside, let them go. Let them evaporate. Commit yourself to the sensation of the breathing. That’s the reflection right now. As you’re settling in, you don’t have to do much reflection. Just ask yourself, are you here? Does it feel good? Do you feel centered? Can you maintain this sensation you have here for a while? If it’s easy to maintain, okay, fine, stick with it. If it’s not, maybe you want to make some adjustments. That’s what we’re talking about right here. You’re holding in mind the perceptions that inform what you’re doing. Like, where does the breath come in? Where does it go out? You have a lot of range of choices. Because there’s one sense in which the breath does come in from the outside. There’s another sense in which the breath energy originates inside the body. You can focus on either one. They both have their advantages. When you think of the breath coming in from outside, you think of something airing out the body, something new, something fresh. When you think of it coming from within, you begin to realize that you’re not so totally dependent on things outside. The source of energy is inside. So choose whichever perception you find most helpful right now. As for the source inside, where does it originate? You might focus on one spot. Say you have a pain in the back. Don’t focus on the back. Focus on the front of your body. Then see maybe if the pain is actually caused by some weird breath movement in the front of the body. That happens, you know. Same with left and right. Sometimes if there’s a pain on the right side of the body, it’s because the breath energy is not flowing well on the left. So you can play around and talk to yourself about this. Give yourself something useful to talk about. Be very conscious and make the effort to keep the conversation on topic. That’s how you commit. And it’s in the committing that things begin to change inside. Because we have our normal conversations inside. And here the Buddha is introducing some new people into the conversation, who want to direct the conversation in a new way. And there’ll be parts of the mind that rebel. They like doing things their own way. Not because it’s especially productive or good, it’s just it’s the familiar way of doing things. And we are to change that attitude. After all, you can learn new things. Think about yourself going over many, many lifetimes. To what extent do you think that you’re the same person that you were, say, in a previous aeon? Who knows what, even if you were a person, a human being, you might have been on some other kind of being, either on a higher level or lower level. Your personality may have been very different. But over time it gradually moved in this direction. And you feel that this is the real you, the voices that you’re used to. But they are just as artificial as anything else. They’re fabrications, you know. You have to ask yourself, is engaging in this kind of internal conversation really useful? Does it help me? And if you find that it’s not helpful, you’re going to have to change. You’re going to need some strength inside to stick with the change. That’s just another reason why we get the mind in a concentration. Because you want to have a sense of well-being. Because you simply force new habits on the mind. Without a sense of well-being, the mind rebels. But if it comes from a sense of inner wealth, inner health, it’s more likely to stick, this new habit. Take some time to make yourself at home. Commit to being at home right here, by the way you breathe, by the way you talk to yourself, by the perceptions you hold in mind, by the feelings that you focus on. You’ve got a lot of choices here. As you’re doing this with knowledge rather than with ignorance, then this inner conversation has a chance to go in the direction that it didn’t go before, i.e., in line with the path. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha introduces the topic of not-self when he’s teaching Rahula how to meditate. Even before he mentions breath meditation, he talks about getting past your conceit of “I am.” Because so many of the parts of the mind that resist getting to settle down have a very strong sense of “me” in them. This is the problem with dealing with the committee of the mind. If you ask, “Which one in there is you?” and they say, “All of us are you. All of us are me.” It’s like that story that Ajaan Lee tells about Chola Bandhika. He was a monk who was not all that bright, but one day when he was embarrassed by his older brother, he went off and meditated and developed psychic powers. One of the powers he developed was that he could multiply himself many, many times. All the other monks had gone off for a meal. Chola Bandhika was left alone in the monastery. But then he filled the monastery with versions of himself. So someone was sent to invite him to join the meal as well. And there were monks filling the monastery. The servant would ask, “Where’s Chola Bandhika?” and Chola Bandhika would point over there. “No, he’s over there. No, he’s over there.” Every one of them claimed to be Chola Bandhika. Well, every voice in your mind claims to be you. One of the things we have to learn how to straighten out inside is that just because something inside claims to be you doesn’t mean that it really is. That’s what the Buddha taught not-self to rule very early on. It’s a useful concept to have when you’re arguing with your mind, or your mind is arguing with you. It’s kind of like a civil war inside. But if you realize, “This voice is unskillful. I don’t have to identify with it anymore. It may have been hanging around for a long, long time.” But that doesn’t mean anything. It’s just like an old habit. It doesn’t have any special claims. In comparison, it’s like you have a cave that’s full of darkness, and you bring a light into the cave. The darkness doesn’t have any right to say, “Well, I was here first.” So the light can’t come in. Wherever there’s light, it penetrates the darkness, chases the darkness away. So just because some of your voices inside are old friends, or let’s put it, old acquaintances, old versions of you, doesn’t mean that they should have any special rights. You have to ask yourself, “These voices, or what they’re telling me, does that have anything to do with my true well-being?” And if not, why listen? Why let them have power? They can whisper, and they can come and go really quick. Just like those subliminal messages on TV. But that doesn’t mean that they should have power. So you’re trying to give some more power to the skillful voices, again, by learning how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, what images to hold in mind. Listen to what the Buddha has to say. Throughout the suttas, there’s so many times he says, “This is how you should train yourself, to tell yourself this, to tell yourself that.” Hold these images in mind. This is why there are so many analogies and similes to get an image you can hold in mind. It’s all there to help you fabricate in knowledge. Because when you fabricate in knowledge, it doesn’t lead to suffering. It becomes part of the path to the end of suffering, which is what we’re here for. It’s just a question of really committing yourself and making it stick. There will be struggles. There will be parts of the mind that really like having power, and they don’t like to have their power challenged. But why should you give in to them? Can they offer you true happiness? The answer usually is no. So why hang around with them? Oh, they’re familiar. But if they’re familiar and yet they’re chewing on you, maybe it’s time to end the relationship, which is why the Buddha gives you new ways of talking, so you can have some new relationships in the mind, relationships that are much more healthful, healthy, skillful, based on your ability to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. So you can strengthen those skillful voices. Because whichever voice has control of the breath at any moment, that’s the one that’s in power. So give your skillful voices some control over the breath, some power over the breath. By looking into how this breath energy flows in the body and how it can be made to flow in the most productive and helpful way. That way you can change the balance of power inside. Give strength to the part of the mind that is willing to commit to the practice. When you’re thoroughly committed, when you’re really strong like this, then you can withstand not only the onslaughts of your own defilements, but also things outside with a lot more skill. That’s the skill that the Buddha is offering to us. So you can ask yourself, are you willing to commit to it? If you don’t commit, what do you have?

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