Fabricating the Path

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He rarely accepted invitations to have a meal at someone’s house. And toward the end of his life, he’d accept only on one condition, that he didn’t have to chant. Instead, he said he’d be happy to answer questions about the Dhamma. One time I happened to go along with him on one of these meals. The sister of the woman who was the sponsor of the meal was the one who asked the questions. She started out by saying, “Meditation is a matter of just making your mind empty, right?” And Jon Fung said, “No, if you make your mind empty, it’s like leaving the door to your house open. Anything can come in. You have to give the mind something to think about. You have to give it work. Otherwise, the devil makes work for idle minds.” This is why the instructions for meditation say, “Do this, do this, do this.” We’re using the process of fabrication. There are some schools of thought that say, “Oh, fabrication is bad.” But the path itself is a fabrication. You have to put it together. There comes a point where you have to let it go. But before you let it go, you have to develop it so that it can do its work. Otherwise, there’s nothing to counteract the unskillful impulses of the mind. So as long as the mind is fabricating, give it something good to fabricate. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the breath. So breathe in a way that’s comfortable. There’s verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself, which in Pali terms is vichara vittaka. You direct your thoughts to something and then you make comments about it. You ask questions. So, comment to yourself on the breath. Keep your thoughts directed to the breath. And then there’s mental fabrication, which is your feelings and perceptions. Try to create a sense of well-being with the breath. Try to notice which perceptions of the breath help you to settle down. All this goes into making concentration. So there’s work to be done. And the duty of right mindfulness is to remember that. When the Buddha describes the first four steps of breath meditation under right mindfulness, they’re basically the steps for getting the mind in the right concentration. You’re aware of short breaths, long breaths. Then you try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, because that’s the mind-state you’re trying to develop in concentration. And then, as he says, you calm bodily fabrication, i.e., you let the breath grow calm. And as he says, when the breath is really calm, to the point where it stops, that’s when you’re in the fourth jhana. So this is something you work on, something you develop. Because the mind is capable of all kinds of things. One of the big misunderstandings is that people say, “The Buddha said the mind is basically good. Just leave it alone and its natural goodness will take care of everything.” Well, if you want to look at the mind’s natural state, look at a child. It’s not that children are bad because of social influences. They’ve got greed, aversion, and delusion, just like the rest of us. But the Buddha actually said two things. One is that the mind is very changeable. It can change so quickly, he said, that there’s no analogy for how quick it can change, can reverse itself. And secondly, he said the mind is capable of anything. He gave a couple of analogies. Back in those days they had what they called a “moving picture show,” where someone would set up a lantern and they’d have these cellophane-like panels on which paintings were drawn. And then they would cast the image of that cellophane-like material onto a wall, and then they’d have little shadow puppets that would act within the scene. And he said you can do all kinds of things, create all kinds of worlds with that. But, he said, all the worlds that you create in those different moving picture shows are all the products of the mind. And the mind is capable of a lot more than that. Another image he gave was of the animal kingdom. He said think of all the animals there are in the sea, all the animals there are in the air, all the animals there are on land, underground. Where do those animals come from? They come from the mind. Otherwise, each animal has a mind, and it’s the karma of each animal that makes it like that. And think of all the many species there are. He said the mind is more variegated even than that. It’s capable of more than that. So the mind is capable of anything and can change itself very quickly. You’ve got to develop strong mindfulness. You’ve got to develop strong concentration. You’ve got to fabricate the path. Because otherwise, the mind’s going to fabricate whatever. And when it’s fabricating in ignorance, the result is going to be suffering. But when you fabricate the path with knowledge, you’re using this potential of the mind to create suffering, and you’re turning it into something good. So meditation is not a matter of simply emptying the mind or being accepting of whatever comes up. Because all kinds of things can come up. And to prevent them from coming up, you’ve got to have some good things in the mind already. This is part of the strategy I was talking about last night. You know the mind is capable of thinking unskillful thoughts, so you give it skillful things to think about. Block those unskillful things from coming in. Take up the space that otherwise they would take up. As long as you’re thinking, learn how to think in a skillful way. Because it’s through the thinking that we get the mind to settle down. You evaluate the breath, you adjust the breath, and as it gets more and more comfortable, you get to the point where you don’t have to adjust it anymore. Meditation can be put aside. As the mind goes through the different stages of concentration, it gets more and more still. Ask questions about, “Where is there still some stress in the mind? What can I do to cause that stress? Can you see it come up and go down? When it goes up, what did you do? When it goes down, what did you do? If some action made it go up, can you stop doing that action? That’s usually a perception or sometimes a very minor thought construct. So you have to be quick, you have to be subtle in seeing these things. But the mind can see them only when it’s relatively still. But it’s in asking those questions that you move to deeper levels. So it takes thinking to stop thinking in a skillful way. Then it takes skillful fabrication to lead to a point where ultimately all fabrications can be put aside. So there’s work to be done. The direct thought and evaluation, that’s the work part of the meditation. It’s work in a good area. Work in creating something that really is going to help you, as opposed to a lot of the thoughts we have. It’s work in the rest of our lives. So don’t trust that the mind will just be good on its own. If you leave it alone, things will all sort out. There’s work to be done. There’s strategic thinking that has to be done. That’s the only way you can get to something that’s unfabricated. You can’t use the unfabricated to get there. The unfabricated isn’t something you can use in any way at all. You’ve got these fabrications of the mind. The Buddhist discovery is that they can be put to use, to a good use. So take his lessons to heart, because they make all the difference between whether your mind causes itself to suffer or it doesn’t. It’s your choice.

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