

# *Strategic Thinking*

*November 5, 2007*

If you look carefully at the four noble truths, you begin to realize that the Buddha was a very strategic thinker. He takes elements out of the first two noble truths—suffering and the cause of suffering—and puts them to use in the path to the end of suffering. Remember that suffering, as he said, when you boil it down to its essence, is five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness as they're clung to. The cause of suffering is craving, specifically craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for not-becoming.

To abandon the cause of suffering and to understand suffering, you take some of those elements out of those two noble truths and you plug them into the fourth noble truth: the path to the end of suffering. In other words, you learn how to use the aggregates in a way that helps pry loose the clinging part, and you learn how to use craving for becoming in a way that eventually gets you beyond becoming.

For instance, when you practice concentration, you've got all five aggregates here. You've got form, which is the form of the body, the breath; and you've got feeling—feelings of pleasure and pain in the body, which you're trying through the breath to turn into more feelings of pleasure. There's also the perception of the breath, there are fabrications, in other words, directed thought and evaluation—verbal fabrication—and finally there's consciousness of all this.

So you've got the aggregates here, and you're going to cling to them for a while. It's not that you strip them free of clinging right away. You're going to want to hold on to the state of concentration that you develop out of learning how to deal with the aggregates skillfully. As for craving for becoming, the state of concentration is itself a state of becoming, something you bring into being and then try to maintain. There has to be craving to do this. The difference here is that you learn how to use these things in a skillful way. You try to engage with these processes with knowledge, and not through ignorance, and that makes all the difference.

Ajaan Fuang used to say there are three steps in meditation. First is learning how to do it. Second is learning how to maintain it. And third is learning how to put it to use. There's a certain amount of discernment involved in all three steps, but the putting to use is the one that requires a lot of skill.

For instance, in concentration, there are three kinds of fabrication involved. The in-and-out breath is called bodily fabrication. Your directed thoughts and

evaluation around the breath, when you keep reminding yourself to think about the breath and then make comments on the breath: That's called verbal fabrication, because that's how we create sentences in the mind. Finally, feelings of pleasure develop around that, and we maintain that perception of breath: Feelings and perceptions are mental fabrication. So you've got all forms of fabrication right here, where you can learn how to manipulate them skillfully. Once you learn how to manipulate them skillfully while sitting here on your meditation cushion, you begin to realize that you can manipulate them skillfully in other areas when you're off the cushion as well.

Say you're dealing with a difficult situation. It's good to be able to stay in touch with the breath. When anger arises, notice where in the body the breath energy starts getting strange or tense or tight. Can you breathe through the tension? Can you breathe through the tightness? Breathe in in such way that you stay relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, in the midst of whatever is happening. That makes it easier not to keep the anger bottled up, so that you're not carrying it around. And pressure doesn't build up inside that would make you feel like you're going to explode. As for directed thought and evaluation, look at the situation and what it is about the situation that makes you angry. How are you thinking about it, what are the terms that you bring to it?

Often the people we're most angry at are the ones we also feel the most affection for. So it's useful to remind yourself, why do you feel affection for that person? They must have some good to them. Why focus on their bad points all the time? Remind yourself, you've got to take the good with the bad when you're dealing with people. As Ajaan Suwat once said, it's like buying durian. Durian has very thick rind, and when they weigh the durian before selling it to you, they weigh the rind along with the durian fruit inside. You're not going to eat the rind, but you have to pay for the rind. That's the way they weigh durian all over Thailand. If you want fresh durian, there's no way you're going to buy just the flesh of the fruit. If you take it out of the rind, they would charge you a lot extra for the fruit, and the fruit itself is going to spoil early. So the rind does serve some purpose. But you've got to take the rind with the fruit.

It's the same with people. You've got to take the bad with the good. Remind yourself: This is the way people are all over the world. If you want to associate only with really good people, well, you were born into the wrong world. When you learn to think in this way, it helps to pry loose a lot of the clinging to the anger.

It's not that you drop verbal fabrication entirely. You just learn how to use it more skillfully. The same with your feelings and perceptions. The perception here is like the durian example. The Buddha teaches a lot in terms of similes, to provide

you with good perceptions for thinking about things. If you're angry at somebody and all you can think of is how much they've harmed you, he reminds you to remind yourself that you when you're going through this world, you're like a person in the desert who's hot, tired, and thirsty. You need water. If you think of other people's bad points all the time, it's like taking fire and sticking it in your mouth. What you need is the water. Think about their good things, even if there is only just a little bit of goodness.

He gives the example of walking along in the desert and coming across some cow footprints. You're thirsty and you need water. There are little puddles of water in the cow footprints, and you realize that if you try to use your hand to scoop the water out of the footprints, you would muddy the water and make it unfit to drink. So you have to get down and very carefully just slurp up the water. It may not look very dignified, but you're thirsty, you're hot, you're trembling. You need water.

In the same way, as we go through the world, we have to focus on other people's good points. If all you do is focus on their bad points, you start wondering, "Why should I be good? I live in this miserable world where there are nothing but greedy people fighting one another all the time." If that's all you see, then you start being greedy and fighting people all the time, too. Where does that leave you? Other people's goodness is nourishment; their bad points are fire and poison. So why try to feed on fire and poison? Try to feed on their good points. You need them. Think in terms of that simile, and it reshapes the perceptions with which you fashion your attitude toward the people around you. It makes it a lot easier to let go of your anger and to be forgiving.

Or you may find yourself in a situation where suddenly you're being asked to do a lot more than you'd like to do, or than you think you can handle. You can ask yourself: "This image I have of myself being able only to handle so much—is it accurate, or is it just part of a story that I've made up to place limitations on myself, limitations on expectations I have for myself, limitations on expectations I want other people to have about me? And to what extent is that story a useful story?"

Say you're a soldier and you decide that you want to take a certain hill. You think that when you take that hill, you're going to be able to rest. Well, you get up to the hill, and you find, ugh, it's even worse than you thought. There are a lot more soldiers on the other side, and they're attacking you just as you're feeling weakest. You can't tell them all, "In my image of this battle, taking the hill was going to be victory. So you guys have got to stop. Wait till tomorrow morning until I've rested and then we can have our battle." It doesn't work that way.

What you've got to do is frame a new story, in which you're able to handle the situation, that you're able to find unexpected resources inside yourself that you can draw on when you really need them.

What you're doing is taking these fabrications that you ordinarily cling to in a way that causes suffering, and you learn how to use them in a new way: a much more skillful way, a way that can help lead to the end of suffering—not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, where everything is very peaceful, but also in the rough-and-tumble of your everyday interactions with other people.

In other words, learn how to think strategically. Take these things that you've been using to cause suffering and use them in a different way. Desire has its good side; the aggregates have their uses. If you learn to think like this, your discernment develops in unexpected ways, ways that are helpful in all kinds of situations. As Ajaan Lee once said, if you have discernment, you can use anything to a good purpose. You've got this body, well, use your body for a good purpose. You've got feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. You can learn how to use them all for a good purpose.

In that way, everything becomes the path.