

Fabricating against Defilement

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Last night I talked about three aspects to right effort: the right amount of effort in terms of what you're capable of at any particular time; the right attitude to the effort, the ability to generate the desire required for whatever the effort is; and the right type of effort, trying to abandon or to prevent unskillful mental qualities, to give rise to or to develop skillful ones.

There is a fourth, though, which is the right amount of effort required by the particular task. As the Buddha points out, there are some unskillful qualities arising in the mind that don't require any effort at all. You simply watch them and they go away. After all, everything that arises from conditions will have to pass away at some point. And some of these things when they go away, really do go away. That's the last you see of that particular problem. But others come back. And it's not enough to say, "Well, it went the first time, it'll go away the second time. That's the way things are." That's not the type of attitude the Buddha took. If they keep coming back it means you have to actually apply serious effort, what he calls "exerting a fabrication." It's a technical term. Fabrication is of three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Bodily fabrication is the breath. Exerting the breath against an unskillful mental state means checking to see how that mental state has had an effect on the body, and how it gains strength from the effect. For instance, sometimes anger arises in the mind and it gets into the way you breathe, into your heart rate, into the hormones. And because that's such an unpleasant physical feeling, or series of physical feelings, you're overwhelmed with the desire to get it out of your system. You think that by expressing the anger, saying something harsh or clever, whatever, will keep the feeling from staying bottled up in the body. But that doesn't work at all. It just creates new habits: that you have to give in to the anger every time it comes, otherwise it's going to, as they say in Thai, squeeze your nerves. So you give in and act on the anger and become a fool as a result.

The same with lust: If you feel you've got to get it out of your system by acting on it, it simply becomes another unskillful habit. The Buddha, however, offers another alternative: Use the breath to counteract that impulse, that belief. Find where the breath has been changed by that emotion, and consciously breathe in a different way. It doesn't necessarily make the emotion go away, but it does weaken it. It also gives you a place to stand. You can stand in a much more comfortable sense of the body and look at the anger, look at the lust for what it really is. But your ability to do this also depends on the verbal fabrication and the mental fabrication.

Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. Your anger may direct your thoughts at what a bad person that is, but you can consciously direct them in another direction, thinking for instance of the person's good points. Then you can evaluate the situation to see which way of thinking is better for you, better for the situation. In other words, you learn how to think in a different way, focus on different issues. And actually talk yourself out of the anger, talk yourself out of the lust.

This depends in turn on the mental fabrication, the feeling and the perception that go along with the original defilement. This means first actually perceiving it as a defilement. This is one of our big problems. As the Buddha said, the main problem with the hindrances, for instance, is you see things in line with them. When sensual desire arises, you think that the object of the desire really is something worth desiring. Ill will arises and that person really is despicable, really should suffer. Sleepiness arises and you think, well, it's a good time to sleep. Restlessness and anxiety arise, and you think that the issues they focus on really are things you have to worry about. Or doubt arises, and you think your doubts are justified. In other words, these things hoodwink you into seeing things in their terms. If something likable arises in the mind, all you can see is its attractive side. If something you don't like arises, all you can see is its unattractive side.

To pull yourself out from under the influence of these things, you have to recognize that they are defilements. Then you have to learn how to perceive the issue in a different way. Look for the stress. Look for the results of going after that attractive thing. And see that it doesn't lead anywhere. Many times it leads to actual negative results. You want to keep that in mind.

That's what we have mindfulness for. Remember, mindfulness isn't just being aware of the present moment. If you were solely aware of the present moment and nothing else, you would have no memory of what had worked and hadn't worked in the past, what was skillful, what wasn't skillful. You'd be totally at sea. Mindfulness actually means keeping things in mind, reminding yourself that when something looks attractive, it's not necessarily good for you, may not lead you to happiness. And remember your experience with those thoughts in the past: Where did they lead? If you give in to lust what happens? You get worn out, the level in the mind just falls and falls and falls. If you give in to anger, you're on fire all the time. Yet somehow we forget this. And the next time the impulse arises, we go with it again. It flashes a little gold our way, and we just run after it. It turns out, of course to be fool's gold, but we forget.

This is one of the reasons why we develop mindfulness—keeping the breath in mind, keeping the Four Noble Truths in mind. It means just this: remembering what led to suffering in the past is probably going to lead to suffering again, no matter how attractive it may seem right now. Other practices that did lead the mind to clarity in the past will probably do it again. So even though the practices may seem difficult, you learn to inspire a sense of desire in yourself to do them. This is what the right attitude toward to right effort is all about. As the Buddha said, one of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in abandoning, and to delight in developing. This means, of course, to delight in abandoning unskillful mental states, and to delight in developing skillful ones. Which is just the opposite of where most of us go. We delight in the unskillful things, we want to keep developing them. And we don't delight in developing the skillful ones.

Ajaan Suwat once had a comment. He said, "Look right there at the things you like, that's where you're going to find the cause for stress, the cause for suffering." So you've got to learn how to look past the appearances of things, and realize that this really does require work. When the Buddha talks about seeing things as they really are, it doesn't mean simply accepting that the way we are is the way we're going to have to stay forever. We should also see that we have the

potential to get rid of unskillful states. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to get rid of them, to totally be free of them, he wouldn't teach us to do it. But he did teach that. You can be free of these things.

There's some confusion around the phrase "knowledge and vision of things as they are." Actually the phrase is "knowledge and vision of things as they've come to be." It's a special kind of knowledge in which the results of past karma arise, but you don't create any new states of becoming out of them, and you don't try to destroy them, either. This knowledge comes at the very end of the path after you've gotten rid of greed, anger, and delusion, so that you can see these things as they actually arise. If greed, anger, and delusion are still arising, you can't see things as they've come to be, because you've already jumped in and have gotten involved in creating a state of becoming around them.

So as long as there are defilements in the mind, we have to admit that, yes, these are defilements. It's one of those words that we here in the West don't like. "There's nothing defiled about my mind," most people say. Of course that's the defilement of pride right there. So you have to admit, yes, these things do defile the mind, they make it darker, they make it more obscure, and some of them require real work before we can get rid of them. But once you get the hang of it, it's pleasant work as you're developing mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. These are good qualities to have in the mind. They do depend on desire but it's good desire. The Buddha didn't say that all desire was bad. After all, the ability to generate the desire to engage in skillful effort is an important part of right effort. It's a desire to be developed, to be praised, to be encouraged.

So although it is true that some defilements go away simply by watching them, that's only one of many approaches you'll need, only one of many aspects of right view. If you try to make it a blanket approach, you turn it into a wrong view, wrong effort, wrong all down the line. Right view sees that many different approaches are needed in the practice, to deal with the many tricks of the defilements. And right effort is willing to do whatever is needed for that particular case, that particular defilement, or that particular skillful quality in the mind.

You have to broaden your view. Don't hope that simply having a hammer in your toolbox is going to enable you to build a house. You need the hammer and the saw and the chisel and all the other tools, and the Buddha provides us with a full range. An important part of the skill, an important part of right view is learning how to master all the tools and how to read the situation so you can figure out what's needed. In that way when you have a well-rounded understanding of right view and right effort, it helps all the other elements of the path to become right as well.