

Fabricating with Awareness

August 10, 2012

When the Buddha explains the causes of suffering, he starts with ignorance, and from ignorance he goes on to fabrication. In other words, it's because we fabricate out of ignorance: That's why we suffer. And then everything else follows from that.

Now, the cure is to replace the ignorance with knowledge, knowledge in terms of the four noble truths: exactly what is suffering or stress, what its cause is, the fact that it can be put an end by eliminating the cause, and then the path to practice that can eliminate the cause. You know these things and you apply them to the fabrication of your experience: That's the path. Ultimately, when your knowledge is complete, the mind no longer fabricates. At least at the moment of awakening there's no fabrication at all.

But to get there, you have to fabricate with knowledge. That's how you develop your knowledge: You apply your knowledge to the way you fabricate the body for the breath, the way you fabricate speech through your mental chatter—which is basically directed thought and evaluation—and then the way you fabricate the mind through feelings and perceptions. You bring knowledge to these practices so that you get a sense of where they're causing suffering and where they're not, where they're engaged in craving and clinging, and where they're a part of the path. You test your knowledge through fabricating, you see the results, and then you make your knowledge more and more refined. This is how your knowledge becomes a skill.

It's interesting that the word the Buddha uses here, *avijja*, is the negative of *vijja*. *Vijja* can mean not only knowledge, but also the kind of skills that, say, a doctor or an animal trainer would have. And the Buddha often compares himself to a doctor and to a trainer. Basically, you want to become your own doctor, your own trainer.

So you look at how you fabricate and then you train that fabrication to be part of the path. As the Buddha says, there are two ways you can overcome the causes of suffering. In some cases, you just watch them and, as in Ajaan Lee's phrase, they get embarrassed and they go away. In other cases, you have to exert a fabrication. In other words, you learn how to use these processes of bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications with knowledge to counteract the greed, aversion, and delusion of the mind, its different kinds of craving and clinging.

So these are your tools, and it's good to know your tools so that you can have them at hand if something unskillful comes up in the mind. And sometimes watching it long enough, you finally get tired of it. Yet that can sometimes take years. But if you realize you have tools, you can speed up the process.

We begin with the breath, which, after all, is bodily fabrication. Bring knowledge to how you breathe. Bring awareness to the fact that some ways of breathing actually aggravate your cravings, clingings, and suffering, and others alleviate them. That's applying the framework of the four noble truths right there: seeing the effect that the breath has on your mind, seeing the effect that the breath has on your body, and then learning to adjust it. You have that within your power. And as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you get more and more sensitive to the very subtle levels of fabrication in the mind.

This is why Ajaan Lee has you focus on the breath energy in the different parts of the body. The Canon doesn't speak about breath energy very much. It simply notes the fact that there is a type of wind element or wind property that goes throughout all the organs of the body. It talks about the diseases that come when that wind element gets upset. They're primarily the stabbing pains you sometimes feel in different parts of the body: in the stomach, in the intestines, in the back, anywhere in the body. That's a sign that there's a lot of heavy breath energy and it's blocked, so there's a lot of pressure. And because it's right in the nerves, there's a very stabbing quality to the pain.

So instead of just noting that that's one of the ways the mind and the body can suffer from the breath, you figure out: "What can I do to make the breath energy positive instead of negative?" When you think of all the breath channels in the body opening up, opening up—including the nerves and the blood vessels all the way out to the tips of the fingers, the tips of the toes—that really helps in the process of getting the mind to settle down. Because when there's a sense of ease or rapture that arises as the mind gets more and more quiet, one of the things you'll have to do is to allow it to spread throughout the body. And the easiest way to get it to spread throughout the body is by opening up the breath channels.

When you have this tool in your arsenal, you find that it's very useful for dealing with unskillful thoughts that come up in the mind with a very strong sense of urgency, insisting that you want this right now. Part of the body or the mind feels starved for some kind of pleasure. Well, you can breathe in a way that gives you that pleasure right now, by opening up all of the breath channels in the body. And you may notice that some parts of the body, as you relax them and the breath goes through them, are especially helpful: Sometimes they'll be in the

hands or the feet, because these are places where tension builds up very quickly when there's greed, lust, or anger.

So this is one of the ways in which you can counteract the force of those defilements by fabricating bodily fabrication.

Then there's a verbal fabrication: the way you talk to yourself about that particular defilement. When a very strong defilement comes into the mind, it's like a bully in the classroom. No matter how reasonable you are with it, the bully just pushes everything away, refuses to talk, refuses to listen to your reasoning. And then you start giving in to the bully: That's where you go wrong. You have to realize that the bully doesn't have nearly as much power as he thinks he does. And if the bully is stubborn, you can be stubborn too.

Just keep thinking about other things: the opposite of whatever would aggravate that particular defilement. If it's lust, you start thinking about the unattractive side of the body and about all the unskillful things you do under the power of lust. Remind yourself there's nothing really gained by lustful thinking. In other words, you talk to yourself in a different way. You don't allow the conversation to be totally taken over by the bully. And you find that some of the bully's reasonings prove to be pretty hollow.

For instance, the bully might say, "You'll have to give into me at in five minutes anyhow, so you might as well give in now and get it over with." You don't have to agree with that. You say, "I'm not responsible for five minutes from now, but I *am* responsible for right now. And for right now I'm going to say 'no.'" In other words, think in ways that are even more stubborn than the bully. And as you do that, you'll find that a lot of the bully's reasons that used to be so convincing or so overwhelming prove pretty hollow. And as for your conviction that you had to give in to the desire or the anger, there's no "had to" there at all. There's just one part of the mind bullying another part of the mind.

So you reframe the issue, think in different terms, and at the very least you can withstand the power of that thought. And you begin to see that there are other sides to the equation. For instance, when lust comes up and the bully says, "Okay, the body needs this," remember that the body doesn't need anything. The body is perfectly willing to die. It'll die if you let it. It'll have hunger pains and a lot of other pains, but the body itself doesn't really care. It's the *mind* that cares, and it's the mind that wants these things. The body is just a tool in the mind.

So the problem is not the body, it's the lust in the mind. And why would it lust for these things? What does he gain? Is lust in and of itself a comfortable emotion? No, it's not. It just forces your nerves and puts pressure on your nerves, and then you look for some sort of release. But, again, if you can use your breath

to help your verbal fabrication here, you can release a lot of that pressure, and the whole thing seems pointless—all the demands that the bully made.

So this is one of the ways you can use verbal fabrication, together with bodily fabrication, to help see through the false reasoning of the defilements.

And finally, there's mental fabrication: your feelings and perceptions. Again, the breath is helpful here. You can create feelings of ease and well-being throughout the body, which will have a really healthy effect on the mind. You look at greed, aversion, and delusion, and you begin to realize that they're not worth the effort they require because there's already a sense of well-being. And the reason you give into these things is because they promise a greater sense of ease and well-being, a greater pleasure than what you have. But if you can create feelings of pleasure as you need them with the way you direct your thoughts to the breath and the way you evaluate the breath, then those other demands will weaken.

Then there are your perceptions: the mental images by which you label things. These are really important: the pictures we use as we think about the world, think about the body, think about the mind, think about greed, aversion, delusion, in the mind. What are the underlying images? Do you have an image of yourself as being constantly starved for well-being? That you're harried and harassed by your daily life? And you need some sort of fix? Can you change the perception? After all, here you are: You're a master of your breathing. You're in control.

When you get angry about somebody else's misbehavior, what's your perception of yourself at that moment? The judge who has the right to pass judgment on other people? Is that the situation you're really in? Because the Buddha said it's better to regard yourself as a person walking through a desert. You're tired, hot, trembling, exhausted, you need water. If you find a little bit of water anywhere, you should be willing to drink it. In other words, focus on the good points of other people. Even if you admit that they have their bad points, you don't let them spoil your mind. Because if you see other people as being totally bad, it's hard to treat them with justice, hard to treat them with fairness. You simply see yourself as the victim or as the judge. There's that perception in the back of the mind that colors everything you're going to do and say in that situation. If the perception will lead you to do something unskillful, change the perception.

Or if somebody insults you: Do you perceive that your honor has been besmirched, that you've got to fight back? The Buddha gives you another perception: Someone has offered to you bad food. If you don't take it, then it's theirs. You're not poisoned by it.

This is one of the reasons we read the texts: to acquire more skillful perceptions to apply to the different situations in life. There's that image of the person pinned down by bandits. They're going to saw off his arms and legs, and the Buddha says that even when you're in a situation like that, if you allow yourself to feel ill will for the bandits, you're not following the teaching. Learn how to spread goodwill even to those people: Practice that perception in your mind. When you've been able to practice that in your mind, then when you meet up with the little problems here and there in the world, it's a lot easier to feel goodwill for people in spite of the problems they cause. And remember what goodwill is. That's a good perception to remember, to hold in mind, too. It's not that you just want to say, "May you be happy whatever you're doing." It means, "May you understand the causes of true happiness, and may you act on them." That kind of goodwill you can wish for anybody.

So avail yourself of these tools, learn to use your bodily fabrications, your verbal fabrications, your mental fabrications with knowledge. After all, the mind is fabricating things anyhow. In fact, it's this process of fabrication that we bring to our experience of the world. We prime ourselves to see things in certain ways, or hear things in certain ways, or smell, taste them, experience their physical contact in certain ways, to think about them in certain ways, because of the way the mind is already started fabricating things, even prior to the sensory contact. And because that often happens with ignorance, we suffer even when those contacts are good. But if you understand this point—that if you bring knowledge to this process of fabrication, then you're bringing good fabrications, skillful fabrications to your awareness and to other things around you—that right there alleviates a lot of the suffering.

So you're using your wisdom, you're using your understanding not just to take note of things, but also to realize that you're already shaping them, so shape them in a good way. Shape them so that they can be a path rather than just one more instance of one more cycle through craving and suffering. You've got the choice, so always keep that in mind—and make the best use of it.