

## *Because the Mind Is Purposeful*

*September 13, 2023*

Meditation involves two things: One is getting the mind to be still, and the other is to gain some insight into the processes of the mind. We can do the two together. The Buddha talks about the process of what he calls *saṅkhāra*—which we translate as *fabrication*. As he points out, we fabricate all kinds of things. We fabricate our sense of the body, our feelings, our perceptions, and thought constructs. Even our consciousness has an element of intention.

Of course, we don't fabricate these things out of nothing. We start with raw material—the things coming in from our past karma. And then, *for the sake of* having an experience of the present moment, we put these things together. Notice that *for the sake of*: This fabrication, these processes of intention, aim at something.

They're motivated by desire, and although we may hear a lot of negative things about desire in meditation circles, the Buddha had some positive things to say about it as well. We can take this motive force inside the mind and use it to put together the path. All of the path, the Buddha said, is fabricated. Concentration is something that requires desire—the desire to get the mind to settle down. So you use these processes, you use this movement of the mind that's always *for the sake of something*, and you direct it to be for the sake of the path.

So observe yourself as you settle down with the breath. Focus on wanting to be with the breath. This is one of the proper uses of desire: We want the mind to settle down, but you don't focus directly on the mind, and you don't focus on thoughts of settling down. You focus on the breath because you know that if you can stay with the breath, it'll get you where you want to go. You focus on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

So pay full attention to the breath. If you find the mind slipping off, just keep coming back. Try to breathe in a way that feels good: relaxing when you're feeling tense, energizing when you're feeling tired.

Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's not just the air coming in and out through the nose. That's just the *result* of the breathing. The breathing is what's going on through the movement of the muscles, the impulses in the nerves and in the blood vessels. If you're really sensitive, you can sense these things anywhere in the body. But notice right now where they're most prominent and allow your attention to settle there.

And keep after this. Other thoughts will come in, and you have to tell yourself, "No, not right now. Got more important work right here." The mind has spent all this time thinking about random things and about other things that are not quite so random, but now you're going to devote its thinking and all of its processes to getting it to settle down. A large part of that is making the breath an attractive place to be so that when you wander off, the idea of

coming back is attractive—you *want* to come back. You wander off again—you want to come back again.

Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially gratifying. Think of the breath as being all around you, so that you're not just in one side of the body looking at the breath in another part of the body. You've got the breath all around you, surrounding you, bathing you.

As for any other thoughts, any other responsibilities you may have right now, you don't have to think about them. You'll come back to them some other time, but not right now. You want to honor your original intention, which is to get the mind still with the breath so that it can see itself clearly.

A lot of what it'll see is this process of fabrication. We're fabricating a state of concentration. That's the best way to get to know fabrication: by doing something skillful with it.

It's like learning about wood. You make different pieces of furniture out of the wood and you learn its characteristics: the different kinds of wood, how they respond to being planed, how they respond to being sawed. If you just sat and looked at the wood, you wouldn't learn much, but when you make things out of it, you learn a lot about its peculiarities, its qualities, what kind of wood is good for what kind of object.

The same with fabrication—this process of *for the sake of* something: You devote all your efforts for the sake of getting the mind to settle down in a state of being not just still, but also very clear, very alert.

The Buddha recommends three qualities to work with the breath. One is mindfulness: the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay here. If you've meditated before, you want to keep in mind what techniques have worked in the past, and what techniques have not worked in the past, so that if you find yourself slipping into something unskillful, you can do something about it.

This is where the other two qualities come in. Alertness: watching what you're doing. And ardency: wanting to do this well. The ardency is the discernment factor here. And here again, you're ardent with a purpose: trying to do this as skillfully as you can.

Ajaan Lee assigns discernment to ardency. Out of these three factors, ardency, he said, is what makes the others *right*. After all, you can be mindful about anything. You can keep anything in mind: last year's baseball scores; things at work; past desires that you could dig up again. Here you've got a whole hour: You could fill the hour with sensual fantasies if you wanted to, but you realize that that would be a waste. Why do you realize that would be a waste? Because of the ardency.

The same with alertness: You could listen to the sound of the crickets, you could listen to the sound of the planes, the sound of the dogs off in the distance, but what would that

accomplish? Nothing much. But if you're alert to what you're actually doing and the results you're getting, you're going to learn something.

Here again—the ardency. This is a wise use of your mindfulness, a wise use of your alertness. And here again you see the whole issue of doing something with a purpose. When you understand these processes of fabrication as you do them skillfully, that helps you understand them when you're doing them unskillfully.

When you're giving in to desires that actually would be harmful to you—either you would gain what you wanted, but it would involve harm or would disappoint you, or you wouldn't get what you want: That's one of the prime causes of aversion. It's because we're constantly doing something *for the sake of something* that aversion arises—because our purposes are thwarted.

You could think of all the things that are happening in the world right now, and there are a lot of areas in the world where you have no particular desire that things turn out one way or another, so you can read the news about those places and be pretty equanimous. But if the news goes against your desires, you're going to get averse.

It's amazing how many desires we have for things that have little bearing on what we can accomplish or what we can influence. We may want justice all over the world, and then when you see injustice anywhere, it can get you upset.

You may have had a bad experience in your life concerning a certain kind of relationship where one person abuses somebody else, so anytime you see abuse anywhere else, that can get you upset because you have this desire to see that abuse not happen. So, your desires can spread in quite large areas, and then you can be averse to quite a large number of things.

That's one way in which desire gives rise to aversion. There's another in which you realize that when you get averse to something and you act on that aversion, other people give in to you. So you've learned that aversion equals power. This is another way in which desire gives rise to aversion. You want something to be done and you feel, "I've got to be as averse as possible to get it done."

So, it's possible to look at all the unskillful qualities of the mind and see them as the result of this tendency that we have to be purposeful—to be doing things constantly for the sake of something further on.

Fear can also be explained this way. We're attached to certain things and we're afraid that something will come along and destroy what we have—or what we want to have. So if you want to understand your fears, look for your attachments. To understand your aversion, look for your desires, realizing that sometimes it's not simply a case of thwarted desire leading to aversion. There's also the possibility that you desire the aversion itself.

But when you see how to use the processes of fabrication to put together a good state of concentration, and you have a sense that you can direct this process of fabrication in different

directions, then when you start seeing the drawbacks of your desires or the drawbacks of your aversion, you know that you could fabricate things in a different way.

Here again, breath meditation is really helpful. The Buddha talks about three kinds of fabrication. There's bodily fabrication—which is the breath. Verbal fabrication—the way you talk to yourself; in technical terms it's directed thought and evaluation. And then mental fabrication—perceptions, the labels you put on things, and then feelings: feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

As you're working with the breath, getting the mind to settle down, you're getting hands-on experience with all three of these kinds of fabrication: the perceptions for instance, that you have of the breath as a whole-body process; the feelings of ease, refreshment you can create by the way you talk to yourself about how you breathe—evaluating how it's going and making changes as you see fit.

When you can create a state of concentration through these processes, you look at your other more unskillful way of engaging in these processes and you realize that you could change. You don't have to follow your old ways. You can question the desires, say, that give rise to aversion, and you can question the desires that give rise to fear.

A lot of these desires seem natural because they're habitual. You've given in to them many times before, but it's good to see that they're artificial. This is why we use the word *fabrication* to translate *saṅkhāra*—to get a sense of how things are put together in a certain way, but they don't have to be that way, especially if they're not skillful.

So it's in this way that getting the mind still can start leading to insight into these processes of fabrication. And that's precisely how insight is defined—learning how to view fabrications in a way that gives rise to dispassion for the whole process.

So instead of pretending that you're just observing things as they are, ignoring the fact that you're actually putting them together—which doesn't lead to much in terms of genuine insight—be clear about the fact that you're putting things together, and right now you want to put together a state of stillness, ease, refreshment.

The potentials are right here. Look carefully, experiment, and you'll find them. As you find them, you gain not only tranquility but also the beginnings of insight. They work in tandem in this way.