

Rooted in Desire

September 21, 2023

When you listen to a Dhamma talk, give only one percent of your attention to the talk, ninety-nine percent to the mind with the breath, right here, right now. Think about the time of the Buddha: People were listening to the talks he gave and they gained awakening. Not simply by listening to the talk—they were looking at their minds. When the Buddha referred to things in the mind, they would notice—“What is he saying, what is he telling us to do with those things, how is he telling us to look at them?” This is called having appropriate attention—taking the teachings and applying them to the question of, “What am I doing right now?” Particularly, “What am I doing that’s causing suffering?” and, “What can I do to put an end to suffering?”

As the Buddha would give further instructions, they would see things more clearly, more precisely. They’d see where they were creating suffering and there was no need to do it, so they’d let go. That’s how they gained awakening: by focusing on their minds. That’s the proper way to listen to a talk.

Otherwise, the talk is here as a fence. If what the talk is saying is not relevant to what you’re doing right now, you don’t have to pay any attention. But if you do start wandering away from the breath, the talk will be here to turn you back, to keep you pointed in the right direction.

After all, as the Buddha said, the reason we’re suffering is not because of things outside. It’s not because of the structure of society, or the system, or the weather, or whatever. It’s because if something the mind is doing right now, and it doesn’t *know* that it’s doing it.

That’s the meaning of those first factors in dependent co-arising. We hear the term dependent co-arising, and it sounds scary because it can be very complex. But it’s actually pointing at what you’re doing right now, and that the way you’re creating suffering is by fabricating your experience in ignorance.

We tend to be pretty blind to the extent to which we *are* fabricating our experience. If you look at the factors in dependent co-arising, many of them come prior to sensory contact. In other words, even before you see a form or hear a sound, the mind has already been active, and the way it’s been active—if it’s colored by ignorance—is going to prime you to suffer. No matter how good or bad those sights or sounds may be, you’re already primed.

So what are the things that we do before we see things and hear things? The Buddha lists three kinds of fabrication. There’s bodily fabrication: the way you breathe. Verbal fabrication: the way you talk to yourself—what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation—as you focus your thoughts on a topic and then make comments about it, ask questions, answer the questions. Then there’s mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the labels

you put on things, the images you use to identify what they are and what their meaning is. Then there are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

We fashion these things intentionally. You can stop and think about that: You don't usually think of your feelings as something you do intentionally, but there is an intentional aspect in which you pay attention to them—you're looking for something.

Now, of these fabrications, the one that's probably most basic is the feelings, and particularly feelings of pain. It's because of pain that we have desire, and our desires color everything else. They color our perceptions, they color the way we talk to ourselves, they color even the way we breathe, and from there they color the way we look at things and listen to things.

This is why the Buddha pointed at pain as the main problem that has to be solved. Once this problem is solved, then there are no other problems that weigh down the mind. People who are awakened may face difficulties in life, but their minds are not weighed down by them.

So you want to get sensitive to these fabrications, and particularly, sensitive to the amount of pain that you're contributing. Again, we don't think of ourselves as making the pain. We see ourselves more as the victims of the pain. But it's good to take on the working hypothesis that maybe you're doing more to create the pain than you thought.

But even though the pain may be the primary fabrication there, the best way to start tackling it is from the other end: You work with the breath. Focus on the way you're breathing right now. How does it feel? After all, the breath is something you know you can do something about. If the breath feels too long you can shorten it. If it feels too short, you can make it longer. Too heavy, you can make it lighter. Too fast, you can make it slower. This is something you can obviously deal with, you can obviously adjust. So play with it.

And have that attitude—that you *are* playing. We're here looking for happiness, and although we are serious about happiness, we don't want to be grim.

Ajaan Fuang would make this comment often: "Play with the breath." You may notice that sometimes you tell yourself to breathe in a longer way, and after a while it doesn't feel so good. Now, you don't get tied up in knots about how you made a mistake. Just let those long breaths go, and then try some shorter ones. It's no big deal.

But you will begin to notice that the way you breathe has an impact on the way you feel your body, so breathe in a way that feels good. Right here you can tackle one of the ways in which there's unnecessary pain right now. It's simply because you haven't been paying attention to how you breathe, i.e., bodily fabrication done in ignorance. So now you bring some knowledge to that.

And you bring some knowledge to the way you talk to yourself, because you're going to talk to yourself about the breath. You tell yourself: "Try this way of breathing. Try that way of breathing. How does it feel?" "It feels good. It doesn't feel good." This can be the conversation you have. It's very basic, but you want to start with the basics.

All of your physical actions come out of the breath. All of your verbal actions—the things you say—come out of way you talk to yourself. All of your mental actions come out of your perceptions and feelings. So you're right here at the source. You can learn to adjust your desires this time not with ignorance, but with knowledge. Because when the Buddha says that all phenomena are rooted in desire, it's not that they're all bad phenomena. The path to the end of suffering is also rooted in desire. So you want to do this well.

The only thing that's not rooted in desire is *nibbāna*, unbinding. But the path that gets you there *is* rooted in desire. As the Buddha said, it's fabricated. From what? From the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, perceptions and feelings. So, you're right here at the basics.

And as you get to know these basics in the meditation, you can apply that knowledge to other areas of your life as well: When an emotion comes on, sometimes you're conscious of the fact that you ignited the emotion; other times you're not. It just seems to come out of nowhere. But nothing comes out of nowhere. The things that seem to come out of nowhere are things coming out of areas where you're ignorant.

So, focus back here. When fear comes on, how are you breathing? How are you talking to yourself? What are the perceptions you hold in mind? When there's greed, when there's lust, when there's anger: How are you breathing? How are you talking to yourself? What are the perceptions and feelings you're focusing on? Can you change them?

Part of you will say, "Why should I change? I've got this emotion, which is how I really feel about these things." But emotions come and go. Often they seem familiar because they're old habits, or like old shoes that you've been wearing that may not fit very well, but you're used to them. Or like old pairs of glasses: Your eyesight has changed, but you're still wearing an old prescription. You may not see clearly, but that's the prescription you're used to. In cases like that, when you deal with things outside, it's easy to see you've got to get new things.

Well, learn how to have the same attitude toward your emotions: You need new emotions, emotions that are more in line with the path. After all, as you practice, it's not the case that you have nothing but equanimity. Concentration can give rise to pleasure, it can give rise to joy.

Even before you get to concentration, the Buddha says you want to *gladden* the mind. So you gladden it with things that are in line with the Dhamma. Gladden it with generosity; gladden it with virtue. Then you can get it glad with concentration and discernment.

The path creates a sense of well-being. It doesn't lead *only* to *nibbāna*. That's not the only pleasure it provides. It provides pleasure all along the way: When you're generous, there's a sense of self-worth, that you're not a slave to your emotions. It's not like that old Sprite commercial where they said, "Obey your thirst." You realize that you have some independence, you can say No to your thirst. Give that drink to somebody else.

The same with virtue: You have a sense of well-being, a sense of *honor*, that there are certain things in the world that you simply will not do for *any* amount of money. They offer you a million dollars to lie, and you say, “No, I’m not going to lie.” You’ve got a precept that’s worth more than a million.

There’s a pleasure that comes with concentration. There’s a pleasure that comes with discernment, as you’re trying to figure things out inside.

We use the mind usually to find pleasure of one sort or another. It’s like using a computer to stream movies and cat videos or to get on the social media. You use it for fun, but then you begin to realize that it’s sucking your brains out, so you have to learn how to get past it. And one way of learning how to get past it is figuring out, “How do these things work?” You try to explore how they’re put together, and you begin to see through the illusions they create—and they lose a lot of their appeal.

Now, some people get upset. They say, “The things I used to like in life no longer have any flavor for me.” But there should be a flavor in figuring out your own mind. Here it is, the mind that wants happiness, that wants pleasure, and what does it do? It creates suffering because it’s not paying attention to what it’s doing. It’s just following its desires in a blind way.

When you follow the path, you’re following your desires with clear eyes as you master these processes of how you put together a sense of who you are, the world you’re in, the things you want—until you understand them so thoroughly that you go beyond them. That’s something we should find fascinating.

But to get there, we have to develop a sense of well-being on the path. Learn how to put the path together through the way you breathe, through the way you talk to yourself, through the perceptions and feelings you focus on. You could look at the Buddha’s instructions basically as lessons in fabrication: how to act, how to speak, how to think, even how to breathe, taking these activities down to their very basics so that you can see them all the way through, and so that you finally can get to that realization that there’s something that’s *not* fabricated—and it satisfies all your desires.

We end desire not by denying it or by telling ourselves that we have to lower our expectations, but by actually finding something that satisfies desire so thoroughly that we have no more need for desire.

Now, that may sound alien, but as the Buddha says, it’s the best thing there is. So pay attention to what you’re doing. It makes the difference between the desires that lead to more suffering and the desires that lead to the end of suffering. The more knowledge you bring to these processes of fabrication and desire, the more they head in the right direction.