

Staying on Track

June 1, 2021

The causes of suffering are of two kinds: those that go away when you look at them steadily, and those that don't. It's because of the first kind that some people think that that's the solution to every problem appearing in the mind. Just look at it steadily, be with it, and it'll dissolve away on its own. The problem is there's also the other kind of cause of suffering, which requires that you, as the Buddha says, exert a fabrication.

This is why it's good to know about those three kinds of fabrication that we talk about so much: bodily, verbal, mental. Bodily is the way you breathe; verbal is the way you talk to yourself. The Buddha analyzed that into directed thought and evaluation: You bring up a topic in your mind and then you comment on it, ask questions about it. Then there's mental fabrication: perceptions, the images you hold in mind, or individual words to identify things; and then feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

It's through these three kinds of fabrication that we shape our experience. When things go wrong in the mind, it's because we're fabricating things in ignorance. So, we want to bring some knowledge to these processes.

When things are not going well in the meditation, keep this framework in mind. Sometimes the problem is with the way you breathe, sometimes it's with the way you talk to yourself, the things you focus on, and the comments you make. Then there are the perceptions. These are brain messages where you identify, "This must be that, that must be this, this must mean that, that doesn't must mean this." People can drive themselves crazy primarily with a verbal and mental fabrication.

But even bodily fabrication: Some people when they meditate get strong feelings of energy suddenly surging through the body. Usually these are people who've had a lot of repressed energy. You sit down, meditate, and all of a sudden the lid goes off the pressure cooker and things explode. Or something comes up and you make up your mind, "Well, this must mean this, that must mean that."

You talk to yourself about what's going on and if you're not careful, you can create lots of really strange states of mind and come to some strange conclusions.

The Buddha recognized that meditation *can* dig up unskillful thoughts in the mind, unskillful states, but he had a solution for them. It comes down to how you breathe, how you talk to yourself, the perceptions and feelings you focus on.

The most famous case was that of some monks who were practicing body contemplation without any supervision. The Buddha had gone off on a personal retreat into the forest, and they got so disgusted with their bodies that they ended up committing suicide. The Buddha came out of retreat, noticed that there are a lot fewer monks around, so called the remaining monks together and told them, when anything unskillful comes up in the mind as you meditate, or if the meditation is aggravating unskillful thoughts, switch back to the breath.

Then he listed the sixteen steps of breath meditation, in which you don't just sit with whatever is coming up. You actively try to counteract it. If the mind is too energetic, you breathe in a way that calms it down. If it's getting too depressed, you breathe in a way that encourages it, enliven it, gladden it. If there's too much energy coursing through the body, you calm that down as well. If the breath is tight and unpleasant, figure out some way to breathe that would bring more pleasure. In other words, when something really unskillful comes up, use breath meditation as a way of dealing with these three forms of fabrication and finding the antidote.

The Buddha lists five different ways of dealing with unskillful thoughts, and they're basically different ways of engaging in fabrication. With each of them, he gives you an image, which is a perception to hold in mind about what you do to counteract unskillful things.

Sometimes you simply note that something unskillful has come up and you turn the mind to something that's more skillful. He says, that's like a carpenter driving a large peg out with a small peg.

Or you can reflect on the unskillful consequences of that particular kind of thinking until you develop a sense of shame around it, a sense of disgust, a sense of wanting to be rid of it, in the same way that someone who likes beauty looks in the mirror and sees, "Oh. Someone's hung a dead snake around my neck." Think of how that person would feel about that dead snake.

Or you can decide that you're simply not going to pay attention to that kind of thought. It can chatter away in one corner of the mind, but you're not going to go there. You're not going to get involved in the chatter.

The Buddha's image here is of someone who sees something he doesn't like, so he turns his eyes away.

Or you can notice how the unskillful thought requires energy, requires a kind of fabrication that's both verbal and bodily. There's a bodily side to every thought, a little pattern of tension, so you breathe through that, you relax that, in the same way that a person standing might say, "Why don't I sit down?" Or a person sitting down might say, "Why don't I lie down?"

If all else fails, you just put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, grit your teeth, and say, "I will not think that thought." You beat down the mind, the Buddha says, in the same way that two strong men might beat down a weaker man.

In other words, you don't just sit there with whatever's coming up and look at it. You have a policy for how not to get entangled, how not to get involved, and you those three kinds of fabrication.

There are other passages where the Buddha says that if you find thoughts of regret coming up, things you've done in the past that you feel really bad about, realize the best thing you can do is to resolve not to repeat the mistake and to engage in brahmavihara meditation. Think thoughts of goodwill for everybody, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity. Try to make your mind unlimited so that the pain of having made a mistake like that doesn't overwhelm you.

The important thing to realize is that whatever unskillful things come up in the mind, there's always a skillful antidote. In some cases, the Buddha just indicates in a general way what it might be. In other cases, he's more specific. But in either case, you can take his indications and work with them, realizing that if something unskillful comes into the mind, it's a type of karma. It may come from past karma, but you've got the possibility of making better choices, better karma, in the present moment.

This is *the* most important thing you've got to keep in mind. There are some forms of meditation that tell you have no choice. Whatever comes up, you just

have to accept it. But that gives you no motivation for looking for an antidote, and it leaves you, as the Buddha says, unprotected.

We have to remember that meditation is safe, but only when you do it right. If you go off the tracks, the Buddha doesn't guarantee your safety. He gives the image of some people taking a cart along a road. As long as they stay on the road, the cart isn't going to fall apart. But if they go off the road and start going up a mountain, the path up the mountain is uneven and they end up with a broken wheel, a broken axle.

In other words, if you let the mind wander away in line with whatever thoughts or interpretations come up, there's no guarantee. But if you have a good governor inside, then when you see the mind going off course, you can self-correct. That's when you're following the teachings, because the teachings give you all kinds of ways of correcting yourself. It's simply a matter of knowing them and using them.

There's a pun that Ajaan Fuang would use around the word *pen*, which in Thai means "to be" but also "to be capable" or "to have symptoms." Some symptoms might come up in the meditation and he would say don't be afraid of that. What you should be afraid of is not being capable of doing the meditation—in other words, that you don't really do it. When you do it, things may come up that will surprise you sometimes, they may create some difficulties, but every difficulty that comes up in the meditation can be cured.

So approach your meditation with a sense of heedfulness, because after all we do have a little bit of craziness in our makeup, in the way we talk to ourselves or the way we focus on certain images, certain ideas, certain interpretations. You have to be willing to place all of your ways of thinking and engaging in different kinds of fabrication under the Buddha's microscope. If he were here looking at the way you're breathing, the way you're talking to yourself, the perceptions and feelings you're focused on, what would he say?

When you come up with what seems like a good solution, give it a try, but then remember: You're giving it a try. Our problem is that we're all coming from ignorance, and the only way we're going to learn is to be willing to experiment and to learn how to recognize when an experiment is not going well. Over time, and with patience, you get a better and better sense of how you make it go right.

This is a meditation that digs down into the mind. Sometimes you'll dig up some things that you'd rather just leave untouched, but if you don't deal with them, they're just going to stay there, festering. The Buddha gives you the tools you need to deal with them. It's simply a matter of learning how to recognize the tools, master them, all the while having a good framework in the back of the mind. Part of that framework is an intellectual framework, a map of how the route and its potential pitfalls, but part of it is more a matter of the heart. It's a framework that comes from the practice of generosity and the practice of virtue.

These are qualities not only of the mind, but also of the heart. They keep you on course. This is why the Buddha taught meditation as part of a larger path, an eightfold path, not just a one- or two-fold path. Generosity is one of the prerequisites for the path. You're not going to get into jhana without generosity. And your concentration won't really be fruitful if it's not based in virtue.

So try to keep everything in context, both the analytical context of how the mind fabricates things, and the heart context of someone who's got a lot of goodwill. When you keep the whole context in mind, you realize what the Buddha said at one point is true. There's nothing lacking in the path; there's nothing in excess. There are no unnecessary folds in the path, and the path doesn't need any folds added to it. Eightfold is just right.