

The Return of Chickens from Hell

July 27, 2017

What have you got right here, right now? You've got a body sitting here breathing and you've got a mind that's thinking and aware. So let's see if we can put these things together. See what we can make out of them. You could spend the hour thinking about the day or last week or next week. Or you could spend the hour creating a state of concentration. You've got these potentials here, and they're coming in from the past. The potentials you've got in terms of the body and the mind have a lot to do with your past actions, but you have choices in the present moment as to what to do with them.

So try to bring the mind to the breath in a way that feels good. Notice where you feel the breathing and whether it's comfortable. If it's not comfortable, you can try changing it in different ways until you find something you like. Then try to stick with it. Try to maintain that sense of well-being all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and all through the periods in between.

And think about what you can do with that sense of well-being. One of the best things to do with it is to allow it to spread, so that the whole body is filled with well-being. That requires that the mind be very still but very alert and very aware, because otherwise our thoughts come in, they take over these potentials, and they turn them into something else.

So be very careful about what you choose to focus on and what you do with it, with the purpose of getting things to settle down. As the Buddha said, our minds are basically active. We have raw material coming in from the past, but we're not just passive observers of what's coming through. We take those different raw materials and turn them into various thoughts, ideas, plans, all kinds of things, what the Buddha calls "aggregates." Your sense of your body: You have some choice as to what you're going to focus on in the sense of your body. You notice there's a potential here for heaviness. There's a potential here for lightness, coolness, warmth. A potential for energy. You can focus on these things in different ways and make something different out of them.

There are also potentials for pleasures and pains right now. You could focus on a painful part of the body and make yourself really miserable for the hour, or you could focus on something pleasant—and depending on how unskillful you are, you can even make yourself miserable with that. But if you develop skill, sometimes you can take even unpleasant potentials from the past and use them skillfully as part of your meditation. You've got perceptions, the labels you put on things, and you've got the intentions that are fabricating these things, and then you've got consciousness, which is aware. Those five activities—form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness—are the aggregates.

And as the Buddha said, if we cling to them, we're going to suffer. Particularly if we cling to them with ignorance. If we cling to them with knowledge, there's still going to be some stress,

but we can turn them into a path. So the choice is ours. And the reason we have a choice is because, as I've said, they come in a potential form and we then actualize them. We have some freedom of choice in the present moment as to how we can actualize them. The more alert we are and the more aware we are of what's happening, the more we can actually shape things in a good direction. As we look carefully, we begin to see that when we cling to things, it's like the Buddha said: We're trying to feed off them. And although we primarily feed on the results of what we get from our fabrication of the present moment, we also feed off of the raw materials.

We feed off the process of turning them into something we like, and we feed off of the anticipation. Even before we get what we want, we have lots of anticipation about what we're going to get. You can compare this to fixing food. You hold onto the ingredients and you cling to the way you fix those ingredients. I remember when, in France, the discussion of ratatouille came up, and people got really passionate about what was or was not allowed in a ratatouille, depending on which part of southern France they came from. That's one way of clinging to the process of fabricating things.

Another way is simply enjoying your skills. When you're a good cook, the cooking in and of itself is fun. Also, there's the anticipation of what you're going to get, and the actual final taste. If the ingredients were all good, and our skills and our cooking were all good, and the final product was all good, there wouldn't be much of a problem. But sometimes we're really unskillful in how we fashion things, and we don't choose very wisely about what we're going to take as our raw ingredients.

To shift the analogy a little bit, it's like raising chickens. We raise the chickens; we feed the chickens because we want their eggs. That's the anticipation. But then we're not very discriminating. Anything that comes out of the chicken, we take. Chicken shit, chicken eggs, whatever: We take that as our raw material for fixing our food. Because we're focused so much on anticipating the food we want, we're not paying very careful attention as to what the raw material is and sometimes we're not paying careful attention to how we fashion things. So the food we end up with can make us sick.

And on top of that, as I've said before, these chickens are the chickens from hell. They come in at night and they peck at our eyes. They peck at our ears. They peck at our heart. In other words, these things that we think are going to give us pleasure can turn around and bite us. As the Buddha said, it's not simply that we feed off of the aggregates, but the aggregates chew us up as well.

So as we sit here and meditate, we're actually using aggregates but we're trying to be more careful about which raw ingredients we take and what we do with them. And we're trying to change our attitudes as to what we want out of these processes. For the most part, we just want whatever fun or entertainment or any kind of pleasure that we can conceive of. We'll take whatever strikes our fancy. But as you're focusing on concentration, you say, "I want to be really picky. I want to create a really still state of mind." Then use just the ingredients that go into that state.

As for other things, just leave them aside. Any thoughts of who did what to you, and whether it was right or wrong, or what other people think of you—whatever the thoughts that come into the mind that are not related to the breath right now, you just let them go. Those potentials are there, but you don't touch them. Focus on the potentials that are good as the mind does settle down and become still. When it's really solid, then you can turn around and look at these processes of aggregates. Look at the chickens you're feeding, look at the things coming out of the chickens for what they really are.

That way, you get more skillful not only in your concentration practice but also in how you deal with life. As the Buddha said, if you see that you're engaged in anything unskillful, there are five ways of investigating it to get beyond it. The first is to watch it arise so that you can see what arises along with it. What are the raw materials that we turn into, say, greed, aversion, or delusion? What are the raw materials that we're holding onto? And by looking at their arising, you catch sight of them before you've made much of them and you can begin to see that some things are actually eggs and some things are not eggs—they're chicken shit. Then you get a little bit more distance from them and can ask yourself, "Why would I want to make anything out of that? What would I expect out of that?"

It's because of our anticipation, as I said, that we're not noticing. So instead of focusing on the anticipation, focus simply on what's actually arising, what's causing it to arise.

The second step is when those things pass away, you want to see them as they pass away as well. Because even the food that comes from eggs doesn't last all that long. With unskillful things, as you see them pass away, you begin to realize that they're not as monolithic as you might have thought. Say that lust arises in the mind: It's not one continual state of lust. It comes and it goes, and it comes and it goes. The same with anger: These things come and they go. And yet we stitch them together in our imagination to make them more powerful than they actually are.

The anger comes, then it goes. It comes again, then you stitch it again, and say, "Oh my gosh, it's a lot of anger. It's lasted all this time." And then it goes. And then it comes back again and you stitch it together again and make it bigger and bigger. So you feel compelled to get it out of your system. The same with lust, the same with greed. But when you can see these things actually passing away, passing away, passing away, you begin to realize that they're not really building up in your system. They're just coming and going, coming and going, so there's no need to feel the pressure to give in.

So those are the first two steps: seeing things originating, seeing things passing away. Next step: seeing their allure. Anger comes. Why do you like it? Sometimes, simply by looking at it arise, you'll see the mind going for it because of an anticipation. But if you can separate the actual arising from the anticipation, you can ask yourself, "Why do I tell myself that story about the anger? Why do I tell myself that story about the lust?" Sometimes we hide the allure from ourselves. In other words, we hide the stories that we're creating for ourselves that make us go for these things. This is why detecting them requires good solid concentration and a lot of

alertness to catch exactly why it is, when something arises like that, that you choose to go with it rather than something else.

Then you want to see the drawbacks. In the case of the chickens, of course, you want to see the connection. You're feeding the chickens and then the more you feed them, the more energy they have to come around at night and peck at you. That way, you can compare the allure to the drawbacks: This is what you wanted to get out of them; this is what you're actually getting out of them. Is it worth it?

The purpose of all this is to give rise to a sense of dispassion. It's a word that nobody likes. It sounds kind of dull and grey. But what it is, is growing up. You're sobering up. You're seeing that what you've been feeding on is not real food; you've been feeding on chicken shit. You had made it fancy, so you thought it was something special.

Like those dishes they say the Japanese restaurateurs prepared for the Americans after World War II, where they put a little bit of shit in the dishes—just to get back—but they were able to disguise it with all their seasonings. A lot of things that you've been going for—in terms of anger and lust and greed and fear or whatever—are nothing more than well-seasoned chicken shit. When you can see the drawbacks, the damage that it does to you—it's not very good for your health, at the same time the chickens keep coming back and pecking at your mind—you realize: Maybe it's time you just stopped. You'd be better off stopping.

Now, the mind is willing to stop only if you've got something better to hold onto in the meantime, i.e., your state of concentration. Otherwise, you'd be afraid that you're going to starve. Once you've got the concentration as your food, though, then even though there is some stress in creating the concentration and keeping it going, it's good food. You've got the best possible chicken eggs there are. And they'll strengthen you to the point where you realize that you don't need to fabricate anything at all.

You realize that it'd actually be better for the mind to stop fabricating. You see that even the eggs have their drawbacks, because they can't feed you forever. You incline the mind to something better, and at that point, the mind can actually attain the deathless, a state that doesn't need to feed.

So this is why we're trying to create a state of concentration right now. It's a means, not an end. And it is fabricated, but it's a good fabrication. It's a path. It's a path that takes you someplace beyond it, where you can be done with the chickens altogether, because you don't have any need for them. That's why this is a good skill to master. And in the meantime, as long as you're going to be a cook of fabrications, this is the best dish you can make.