

Inspirations and Fabrications

Fer de Deken

Translated by Nanette Idzerda

—*Dharmatoevlucht, Netherlands*—

In practicing the Dharma in daily life it is helpful to be able to distinguish the two fundamentally different ‘thought’ processes. One relies only on cognitive processes, the other on an intuitive process.

Fabrications

I wake up somewhat sweaty. It is three o’clock in the morning. The night nurse in the hospital wakes up my neighbor for an injection.

The day before yesterday—an acute admission—death was nearby once again. My medicine is working well. However, the side effect is that my immune system is being shut down, which means that I’m more susceptible to infections. My neighbor has a virus they aren’t able to control—maybe caught in Turkey. Everybody knows that one catches the most infections in hospital. Two years ago I was also administered such a cure and I caught pneumonia. The neighbor across the room on the other side has an infection in his leg; it won’t be long before I catch that bacterium too. Etc., etc.

The fear grows with every thought I fabricate. On a thin base of facts one thought after the other is piled up as truth which only feeds the fear. There seems to be no slowing down.

My throat tightens; an airway infection; or is fear grabbing me by the throat? I am thinking about ways to get out of here. I'll tell them I am ending the treatment and then I'll die from my disease. I feel imprisoned and powerless.

Then I decide to step out of my thinking mode and to go to my body. Breathing calm and deep, focusing on my muscles, from down all the way up until they are relaxed. Letting thoughts go and concentrating on the images that come up, letting them pass by as in a film (the preliminary stage of dreaming) and then I fall asleep within twenty minutes... (Zen training has its advantages.)

Inspiration

A group has come together for the first time. Many people don't know each other. What they have in common is Buddhism. There is a friendly, somewhat tense atmosphere. It is unusual to be together like this. They chat about this and that and laugh a little. I sit there relaxed and still, but fully attentive. I am in anticipation but don't know of what. Everyone sits down and the group falls silent. The group discussion is about to start. Someone musters up courage and asks a question about the best place to meditate. In a flash I see the possibilities for a larger participation of everyone in this discussion. I give a compliment and ask everybody what the best place is for them. This gives the discussion an all-round quality and everyone feels involved with the group and the subject.

Fabrications

In reality—the medicine is indeed shutting down my immune system—I heap up one angst-ridden thought on top of the

other. The viruses of one neighbor, the bacteria of the other, the thought that one catches most infections in hospitals. In a way these things are all true. Research has actually shown that one contracts the most infections here. But because these thoughts are being piled up in an isolated chamber with no link to the outside, it becomes an unreal, imagined fear. The line of thought is logical in itself, but the broken connection with the whole makes it unreal. The connection with the whole is the present moment, NOW. Only when I return to the present moment through my breathing am I able to get out of the chamber of cognitive thoughts and stop the fear.

Another example is from a job in the past: some employees were pulling a fast one on our boss by working too few hours. Because of the nature of the work he could not pin down what exactly was going on and decided to do something about it. Logical! So, he introduced time sheets. A list of fifty items was made up on which one should note down all one's activities. Logical isn't it? By making everyone record their time my boss could see by simply adding up if someone had worked 40 hours. But of course he could not have just the suspects do this, because then he would be accusing them. Logical! So, everybody had to do it. Logical isn't it? However, the fact that all 80 employees were recording their time took up so much administrative time that the total amount of time spent on this exercise was a multiple of the time the truants neglected their work. Because the connection with the whole was broken the measure became an incongruity. But they were all logical steps, weren't they?

Thinking has its own paths of logic. Because of its structure this leads to duality. This can lead to fear—building houses

and shopping lists in the mind—but without connection, seldom to wisdom.

Fabrications

Bert and Ernie of Sesame Street are sitting in the back of a car.

Ernie: Look, Bert, a black van.

Bert: Ernie that van is not black, it is white.

Ernie: No, Bert, it is black.

Bert: Ernie everybody sees that it is white!!!

Ernie: Well, Bert, today that van is for me black and tomorrow I call all black cars again white.

Bert: Ernie then everybody will be confused and then we will not know what it is.

Ernie: Bert, that does not matter, because the van does not really change when I call it another color.

Bert: Ohhhhhhm.

Language and cognitions are easy for communication, but you do not get knowledge or get a grip on reality by giving it a name.

Inspirations

With an inspiration there is always a connection—with yourself, with your own feelings, your body, with your inner world. But at the same time also with the outer world. With the other, with room for their own thoughts and feelings, with nature, the animals, the world. There is no separation between inside and outside. No duality. It is all there at the same time.

When I arrive at the internist's surgery he first checks the information in the computer and then goes on with collecting information by asking questions about all relevant things. He runs through a cognitive decision tree, searches and retrieves something else and then...for a moment there is total silence. The thinking has stopped and nothing seems to be happening. However, if you look carefully you can see he is in a relaxed, friendly, total concentration. All his attention is in this moment. A few seconds later he offers me his conclusion and his policy for the treatment. I have checked this with some acquainted specialists. You also see this with my internist. All information comes together at the same time. His attention is fully focused on it. In that focused attention all information is seemingly effortless being processed into a plan for treatment. That is why I will call this inspiration 'focused attention information processing' (FAIP)¹.

What intuition has in common with inspiration is that both are instinctive and have the same structure. They both have connection with the inner world and do not rely only on the cognitive side. Both stand, as it were, outside the thinking process.

The difference is that in the case of intuition the connection is only within us, and in the case of inspiration the connection is within us as well as with the other. And it is exactly that connection with the other or with our surroundings which provides better solutions.

Connection is the keyword for focused attention information processing. An example: my compost heap needs to be cleared away. First I must repair the wooden sieve. I fetch my screw-and-drill machine to put in new screws. I ignore the

inspiration to bring along a second battery. After ten minutes I have to go back and fetch it anyway. I press the coarse compost through the sieve with my bare hands. For a second I have the inspiration to use gloves. I repress this because I don't feel like walking to the shed and looking for them. I can do without the gloves. Three minutes later I cut my finger on a sharp object.

Is there a beardie² or a little angel who wants the best for me, warning me all the time? No. Alas, we have to do it ourselves. But it is true that if we fulfil the conditions of the FAIP—for instance inner silence, being connected, focused on what we do—all information we have is present in this moment. So, I know the battery is low and that I haven't used it in a long time. I know there is a big chance of something sharp being in the compost. All information, whether we are aware of it or not, is present. Processing the structure of information, however, is much more direct and quick as the speed of light, and goes around the slow ego. The ego says I don't feel like walking to the shed or carrying a lot and thus blocks the inspiration. First the inspiration comes and then the weighing by the ego.

To entrust oneself to the inspiration is often the biggest problem, for it feels as if we give away some of the control of ourselves and that is awkward and evokes fear. The anxiety aroused by the submission to the inspiration and by the loss of control we feel can be made bearable.

The best way to make this bearable is to practice compassion. The significance of compassion, empathy, metta (loving kindness) or love is not only the ethical fact that the general well-being is served—we live together in a far more pleasant way if we all apply that—but it is also protection against fear. After all, if we let go of the safe control of the ego and entrust

ourselves to the present moment, that generates anxiety. With inspirations we don't make plans as to what needs to be done, we don't have expectations as to how it will turn out. We let go of the seeming certainties the ego constructs. To step in and syncretise with the inspirations, without control before or after, evokes some fear, especially if we are somewhat control freaks. The only 'defence' is compassion for the other person, the other situation and yourself. That way we create safety for ourselves and this loss of control is bearable.

In addition, by practicing compassion, a change in you occurs. Being focused on yourself changes into focusing on the other. This is a condition to experience an inspiration, because after all it can only arise in connection with the other. To syncretise with the inspiration we must fully experience the other. So let go of that ego.

Dharma

This is a description of my own experience. I am now in a transitional stage where I can let go of the apparent certainties of the ego. I do this by seeing all the weaknesses of the ego in its fabrications. That makes letting go easier. To entrust ourselves to the inspirations is so close to what really matters. This is practicing the Dharma. Sometimes I manage better than other times. It reminds me of how it felt when I was a boy learning to swim in the harbour of Rotterdam. I was doing rather well, I was by myself and knew that the moment had come when I must really entrust myself to the water. I was swimming close to the edge knowing all the time I could still feel the sand of the safe bottom with my toe. Yearningly looking to the other side where the Rhine barges were moored, if only to be able to jump from

them. But every time I started out, my toe once again felt for that security. First I had to experience the safety of the water, to feel the compassion of the all-enclosing, to fully experience the forever present supporting power. Only then could that toe let go.

Notes

1. FAIP: This is my own term for focused attention information processing.
2. 'Beardie': A term for an angel or heavenly being. You cannot expect help from heaven.