

The Buddha's Standards or Yours?

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When the Buddha talks about the three kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—he does it in two contexts. One is in the context of describing how different actions lead to different levels of rebirth: in other words, fabrication on a macro level. He says that if you fabricate an injurious bodily, verbal, or mental fabrication, then whether you're alert to it or not—in other words, alert to the intention behind it, alert to what you're doing—the fact that there is an intention in there someplace means that you go to an injurious place. On the other hand, if you fabricate these things in a non-injurious way, again, whether you're alert or not to what you're doing, you go to a non-injurious place. So the way we fabricate things, the way we act, the intentions we act on have huge consequences in the future.

The other context he talks about is in the context of meditation. And here he defines fabrication not as actions in general, but very specific ones. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation—the way the mind talks to itself. Mental fabrication consists of perceptions and feelings—feelings here not so much as emotions, but rather as feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

Now, the way these things are defined, you can see that they don't happen only when you're meditating. It's not that you're going to do jhana and suddenly say, "Well, I'm going to do some directed thought and some evaluation." The mind's doing these things all the time. And then, of course, you're breathing all the time, and the mind's dealing with feelings and perceptions all the time. But the Buddha's highlighting the fact that when you're meditating, you get to see these things really clearly, especially if the breath is the topic of your meditation.

You're directing your thoughts to the breath. You're evaluating the breath, "Does it feel good right now? What would feel better? Longer? Shorter? Faster? Slower? Deeper? More shallow? Heavier? Lighter?" Then you try out different ways of breathing. This is a way we act in lots of different circumstances, not only when we meditate. It's simply a matter of learning how to do it with more skill and more sensitivity. As for feelings and perceptions, the feeling of pleasure that you're trying to create with the breath and the perceptions you have around the feelings, the perceptions you have around the breath, are all going to have an impact on shaping your mind.

So what you've got here is a microcosm. These are the forces that are going to shape the rest of your life, and your future lifetimes as long as you're continuing to wander on. They're right here.

I read a scholar talking about how these two ways of explaining the three kinds of fabrication were totally unrelated, which is missing the point. How are you going to learn about the big processes unless you look at where they come from? They come from the mind. That verse at the beginning of the Dhammapada, "The mind is the forerunner of all things": Most people treat it as a nice sentiment. But they don't realize the implications.

The way you shape your experience is going to determine your happiness. It's going to determine your suffering. And what do you shape it with? Bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication. These things are done in response to events from outside and, more importantly, they go also out proactively, looking for things, shaping things. Even before you've seen sights, before you've heard sounds, your mind is already inclined to shape them in a certain way.

We see this most clearly in people with very strong doctrinaire political views. Person X says something. The people who hate Person X already are going to find something wrong with it, regardless of what X says. If Y says something and they like Y, then no matter how stupid Y can be, they still like him. It's because of the way they're already fabricating things before anything happens. Of course, this doesn't only happen in politics.

We have certain attitudes about our feelings, our emotions, and so when a particular emotion comes up, we ride with it, even though it may be very detrimental. This is why we create suffering, because the mind is already biased. A particular impulse comes up, and for some impulses, the way is wide open in the mind. For other impulses, there are a lot of checks and obstacles. Sometimes they have very little to do with whether the impulse is skillful or not skillful. A lot of it has to do with things we like and don't like.

But then our likes are very arbitrary. Seeing them as fabricated is going to be a huge step in making it a lot easier to practice. You may hold onto a particular like, and you don't like it when people don't react well to your like. It takes a while to realize, "Well, maybe I shouldn't like this. Or maybe I shouldn't hold onto that particular preference in this particular circumstance."

This is probably one of the reasons why the Buddha focuses on suffering, because it's only when you see yourself creating suffering that you're willing to change your ways. Otherwise, you just keep banging your head and complaining about the wall being in the way, without thinking, "Maybe I should stop moving my head in that particular direction." But it's when you can see that you're

creating the suffering or at least willing to give that option a try, that's when you can be taught. That's why the Buddha teaches right there, at the point where you're most susceptible to maybe wanting to listen.

I was reading a book on the noble eightfold path a while back where the author was saying that even the Buddha engaged in unskillful speech. Well, it turned out what this author meant by "unskillful speech" was saying things that people don't like. Now, there's nothing necessarily harmful about saying things that people don't like. The Buddha said, though, that you have to watch for the right time and the right place. But the idea that people's likes should be the determining factor is creating a tyranny of emotions. Just because one person doesn't like what the Buddha is saying doesn't mean that what the Buddha said was not skillful. What made it skillful was that it was, one, true; two, beneficial; and three, he would choose the right time and the right place to be pleasing or displeasing. That's a much higher standard, and it's a much more livable standard. Because if we take our likes and dislikes as the measurement of the world, we'll never come to any peace.

You have to step back from them and ask yourself, "These things that I like" Do they really lead to happiness? The things I don't like: Do they really lead to suffering?" Ajaan Suwat would often point out one very obvious example: We don't like suffering. We treat it as an enemy. But he said we should learn how to treat it as a friend—not the kind of friend where you can let down your guard, but the kind of friend you want to spend some time with, to get to know this person. We take craving as our friend, and yet we should see it as our enemy. It's under the force of craving that we do all kinds of harmful things, and then we don't even admit that there was any harm done—or if we admit that there was harm done, we didn't mean to, or we weren't responsible, or the person who was harmed doesn't matter: all kinds of ways the mind can justify harmful behavior to itself because it likes it.

So we have to learn how to step back from our likes and dislikes, step back from our cravings and the emotions that cover up the cravings. We have to really look at them and say, "Maybe it's time to try measuring ourselves against the Buddha's standard rather than measuring him against ours."

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the stages in going from looking for a teacher to finally gaining awakening. First, you try to find the right person. Then you learn how to listen to what that person has to say, thinking it through. And then there comes the stage which the Buddha calls measuring or putting in the balance. And basically what that means is putting your habits and likes and dislikes in the balance against the Buddha's standards. You're willing to

use his standards to measure your likes and dislikes. That's when he says you can begin to generate a desire to practice. And you find that you benefit a lot more from the Dhamma when you do.

We chant, "*Svakkhato bhagavata dhammo*," every night and every morning, "The Blessed One's Dhamma is well taught." This is what it means. It's worthy of taking as a standard, even in areas where you don't like it. Because otherwise, we keep on fabricating in lots of unskillful ways and we bring our preconceived notions and our prejudices and our biases and our likes and dislikes to everything that happens, everything that comes to us, and everything we go out looking for. And everything gets skewed as a result. We look at a line and it doesn't look straight. Well, maybe it's because the glasses we're wearing have a curve, turning everything that's straight into something that's curved. Maybe it's time we took off those glasses and gave the Buddha the benefit of the doubt.

After all, people for many, many centuries have been finding that "Yes, the Buddha's Dhamma is well taught." Nobody chants about our likes and dislikes being well formulated. We're the only ones who think that way. It's one of the reasons why we suffer.

So it's good to step back, look at this process of fabrication, look at the way you breathe, look at the way you talk to yourself, look to the feelings—in other words, feeling tones you hold onto—look at the perceptions you hold onto. Remember these simple things that are happening right here, right now. You're engaging in them right here, right now, and they can have huge consequences. The heedful response, and the response that has goodwill for yourself and those around you, is to decide that you want to do these things skillfully, taking the Buddha's standards for what counts as skillful as your measurement. At the very least, give it a try.