

# *How to Change*

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When the Buddha describes the steps in dependent co-arising, on the one hand he's describing how suffering happens, the psychology that goes into how we shape the present moment in a way that leads to suffering. But he's also describing the psychology of his listeners, the rhetorical situation he finds himself in as he tries to teach them how to train themselves. You get an idea of what he's trying to accomplish by seeing how he understands what his listeners are doing—and the primary thing they're doing is that they're fabricating their experience in ignorance.

You've got three kinds of fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. On the large scale, that refers to bodily karma, verbal karma, mental karma as it gives results in this lifetime and on into the next. But in the present moment, it gets boiled down to what *leads to* bodily, verbal, mental karma, and here he gives different definitions. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breathing. If you weren't breathing, you wouldn't be doing anything physically. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, how you talk to yourself: You direct your thought to a topic and you make comments about it. You may ask questions about it, and when you've thought in those ways, that's when you open your mouth to speak. Finally, mental fabrications are perceptions and feelings: the labels you put on things, the feeling tones you have. These are the building blocks for all mental karma.

So as the Buddha's teaching you, he's noticing that the way you talk to yourself, the way you breathe, the way you hold different feelings and perceptions in the mind is causing you to suffer, and he wants you to change. He's trying to teach you how to fabricate in a new way. That's why the primary meditation exercise he taught was breath meditation, telling you to tell yourself to breathe like this, to breathe like that. When you tell yourself these things, what's that? That's verbal fabrication.

You may say, "I've been breathing this old way, it's perfectly good." Well, it's good enough, but it's just good enough to keep you alive. You can breathe in a new way that does more than just keep you alive. It can help you develop qualities of mind that would be useful, at the very least so that you can fabricate with knowledge, and you can see all the various layers in the mind where it sides with the defilements, which are out to destroy your happiness.

He's also teaching new ways to talk to yourself. This is why we have all those suttas: You get the Buddha discussing the Dhamma with people, and often you see them display their defilements. The Buddha argues with them, cajoles them, brings them to their senses. He's showing you: This is how you can use your verbal fabrication, how to talk to yourself. He doesn't give in easily to the defilements of his listeners. In fact, he doesn't give in at all.

So, if you find yourself talking in ways that seem to side with your defilements—the traits of the mind that would pull you down—realize that you're engaged in an unskillful conversation inside, and the Buddha's giving you some tips: This is how you talk to yourself in new ways, more skillful ways. You may say, "Well, that's not the way I usually talk to myself." But again, do you want to keep on talking to yourself in the old way, or do you want to try something new?

Think of the *ajans* in Thailand. One of the big issues that they would focus on would be a tendency of a lot of people to say, "Well, I don't have the *vasana*, I don't have the character traits, I don't have the *pāramī*, I don't have the perfections from the past in order to practice."

We here in the West don't tend to think in those terms, but we think the same kind of thought in other terms. We tend to think about our childhood issues, psychological scars from the past. We say, "This is going to make it impossible for me to practice."

The *ajans* would always tell their listeners, "It's not the scars, it's not the past that's getting in the way. It's your attitude right now—what you're telling yourself. You're placing limitations on yourself, and you don't have to."

This is where it's good to look at the issue of allure and drawbacks. What's the allure of your old way of talking? For one, it lets you off the hook. "The fact that I can't practice is not my fault." You can pin it on something in the past, but there are better ways of thinking, because that way of thinking has no future.

You can think in ways that have a future. It may not be the sort of things you're used to saying to yourself, and part of you may say, "Well, I don't believe this because it seems so artificial." But it's artificial simply because you're not accustomed to it. Your unskillful ways are equally artificial. It's just that they've been around for such a long time that you're used to them, like an old shoe. Your foot has gotten used to the shoe even though the shoe may be bad for it. The Buddha's saying, "Here, here's a shoe that will help you walk straight, help you walk in a healthy way, help your posture. Try it on."

At first it feels weird, but then you realize after a while that if you train yourself in the new way, it does have its benefits. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to change your habits, he

wouldn't have taught. If it weren't good for you to develop skillful habits, he wouldn't have taught that, either. So he has faith in you. The question is, when are you going to pick up some of that faith and apply it to yourself?

You hear it again and again: "I can't do this. It's not working." Well, if it's not working right now that's because you haven't got the hang of it yet. The past doesn't necessarily have to predict the future. After all, we do have this ability to change, and this area of change is a good thing.

So look at the way the Buddha talks to defilements. That's what a lot of his companions in conversation in the suttas are: They're representing a defilement. If it's not delusional, sometimes it is anger, sometimes it's greed, sometimes it's unskillful desires of other kinds. You see: This is how the Buddha handles these people, this is how he handles these defilements, and it gives some idea of how you can apply that same thinking yourself.

This is one of the reasons why we also read the teachings of the ajaans. They've had to argue with their own defilements. You read Ajaan Fuang, and he gives you a lot of quick karate chops to use with your defilements, karate chops he had used with his own. So it's good to adopt them, to see if they work for you. If they don't work for you, you have every right to think, "Well, what *would* work?" But these examples are showing that it can be done, and it's important that you have trust in them, in the principle that this can be done. You don't have any problems in your mind that have never been solved before.

You read all the Therīgāthās, Theragāthās, and you've got people who were desperate, people who were suicidal, people who were proud, people who didn't believe in themselves: all kinds of issues. And you see how they were able to overcome those issues.

So a lot of it has to do with having trust in learning how to talk to yourself in new ways.

The same with mental fabrication: All those analogies that the Buddha uses throughout the texts to describe things are teaching you new ways to perceive things.

The piece of cloth that's dirty in one spot, but clean in another: That's the perception for someone who's got some good habits and some bad habits— someone who's been good to you in some ways, and not good to you in other ways. The image there is telling you that you can take the clean part of the cloth and leave the dirty part behind.

The ajaans, too: Many of them are masters of the analogies, and we listen to them, we read them, because they're giving us new ways of applying perceptions to our problems. Here again you may say, "Well, that's not the way I do it." But okay, are you satisfied with the way you do

things? Are you happy with the way you do things? Where's your fighting spirit? Habits can be changed. Old habits can be dropped; new habits can be developed. It takes time, and it takes effort, but it's time and effort well spent.

Think of the image that Ajaan Mun gave in his last Dhamma talk: The soldier in your mind is the desire not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again. Your discernment is the soldier's weapon. Concentration, mindfulness: These are the food and other supporting factors for the soldier.

So learn to think of yourself in those terms. If you've been victimized in the past, you don't have to stay in the role of victim. You can show yourself and you can show others that you can raise above that. Think in those terms. Again that's a perception you can use, and based on the fact that you've been breathing in a new way, you have new feelings. After all, the Buddha doesn't say just to stick with whatever feeling comes up. You replace unskillful feelings with more skillful ones.

There's household grief and there's household joy, there's renunciate grief and renunciate joy, and you begin to realize these aren't things that simply arise willy-nilly. There are potentials for them to arise, but then what you do with those potentials is actually going to determine what feeling you're going to feel. The Buddha's telling you to replace one kind of feeling with another feeling; replace household grief with renunciate grief: the realization that there is a goal, other people have attained it, you haven't attained it. There's a grief that goes along with that, because you realize, gosh, it's a lot of work. But that's better than just going back and forth, back and forth between household grief and household joy, and household grief again. At least this new kind of grief has hope. It offers a way out, so that you can arrive at renunciate joy: the joy that comes with discerning the goal.

So again, feelings are things that you can create. You're already creating them, it's just that your habitual ways of creating them are causing suffering. But you can change.

So as you look at the Buddha's teachings, see that he's teaching in a way that's just right for people who are fabricating in unskillful ways, and they need directions in how to fabricate in new ways, with the realization that it is possible to change.

We're not stuck in our old ways unless we keep ourselves stuck. We have the choice. So the Buddha's giving you some instructions on how to fabricate your experience skillfully—and there's really nothing to keep you from trying those recommendations out.