

The Path is Fabricated

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One of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. This refers specifically to right effort: abandoning unskillful qualities; developing skillful ones in their place. This is what we're doing as we're on the path. And it actually applies to all the factors of the path. We're developing right view; developing right resolve. With right speech and right action, right livelihood, we're abandoning unskillful forms of speech, action, livelihood. With right mindfulness and right concentration, we're developing what's called the concentration aggregate of the path as we abandon the hindrances. All of these activities are a kind of fabrication.

The Buddha once made a distinction, saying that the highest Dhamma in terms of fabricated or unfabricated, taking both sides into consideration, is dispassion. The mind finally has a sense of disenchantment. It's had enough of a particular type of activity; enough of fabrication - so it lets it go, in whatever form. And that includes even the highest form of fabricated Dhamma, which is the path. But in the meantime, before we let go of the path, we have to develop it—to fabricate it well.

It's important to keep this in mind as we're working on concentration: being mindful, alert, ardent, and trying to stay with one object—directing our thoughts to the object; evaluating it, as we're doing with the breath right now. We keep reminding ourselves to stay with the breath. That's mindfulness. We're holding the perception of breath in mind. And then we evaluate the breath, to see how comfortable it is, how it feels in the different parts of the body, whether this kind of breathing is something the mind can find easy to stay with, and trying to adjust it to make it just right.

Then we try to learn how to apply that perception of breath to the whole body, so that when you notice your arm, you're noticing it as an aspect of breath energy. When you notice your head, your nose, your back—any part of the body: Think of it as breath. You're trying to enlarge the mind and give it a single preoccupation, applying this single perception of breath to the body as a whole, so that wherever there's a sense of pleasure or fullness, you try to maximize it and allow it to spread, so that it, too, fills the body as a whole.

The Buddha compares this to being a bathman, which in those days was a person who, instead of using soap, would take a powder and mix it with water to make a dough, which you would then rub over your body. The bathman would have to knead the water through the dough, in the same way that you knead water into dough when you're making bread, trying to make sure that the whole ball of dough is moist and saturated and yet doesn't drip. In other words, the water is worked through just right. And in the same way, as you're settling in, you try to take this ease and rapture and work it through the body, so that the body feels just right, giving the mind a really comfortable place to stay, a place where it can stay solidly, without any sense of hunger, any sense of lack.

All of this is something you do. The mindfulness is something you do. The concentration is something you do. And as you work through the deeper stages of concentration, again, it's an action. A fabrication. You've got verbal fabrication. In moving from the first jhana to the second jhana, you drop that. But you still have bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breathing. You still have mental fabrication, feeling and perception—the perception is the perception of breath that holds everything together—until you reach the fourth jhana, where there's just mental fabrication, the feeling and perception. The in-and-out breathing has stopped, leaving just a feeling of equanimity, what the Buddha calls “purity of equanimity and mindfulness.” This, too, is something you do. There's an element of intention here to keep this going.

We tend to forget this when the concentration is going well. Sometimes we hear that equanimity is a non-fabricated state, or mindfulness is a non-fabricated state. But that's not true. They're simply lacking verbal fabrication. The fourth jhana still has other fabrication going on in addition to the feeling of equanimity: particularly the perception. You need the perception in order to be mindful—to keep the breath in mind, keep the body in mind, keep your concentration in mind, keep in mind the fact that you're trying to delight in abandoning and delight in developing. It's very light, delicate, in the background, but it's there.

And it's important that we realize this. The path has to be fabricated. And even the more subtle types of fabrication on the path do count as fabrication. The sense of the observer watching all this: That's a fabrication. Before you can really let go of fabrication, you have to learn how to do it in very subtle ways, so that you can catch the subtleties of fabrication. Otherwise, you let go of a blatant fabrication and think, "Well, that's it. Work is done." But it's not. The subtle fabrications are still there, simply that you don't notice them.

Simple equanimity and simple mindfulness can't do all the work for you. Discernment has to come in as well. Some of the discernment is developed simply in getting the mind to settle down and reach very subtle states of concentration so that you can see things more clearly. As you clear away grosser levels of fabrication, you're left with the more subtle ones. And with time, you learn how to sense those as well, to see that they, too, have their ups and downs. And they have to be maintained.

Anything that has to be maintained is a fabrication. It's in seeing this and learning to ask these questions and notice these things: This is the role that fabrication—in the questions of discernment—plays in taking you beyond fabrication. It's something we're working on. It's delicate work, refined work, very pleasant work. But it requires that you be very mindful and very quick in noticing the movements of the mind.

Upasika Kee has a nice comment on this. She says that whenever an insight comes into the mind, you have watch to see what arises next—and what arises next and next, because often, as soon as an insight comes in, another defilement like pride or delusion comes in and takes it over. If you don't catch that, you're missing a lot. That closes off the path. There's something deeper, more profound that you're going to miss. So it's not just a matter of sitting here being passive and receptive and non-reactive.

We have a cultural bias here in the West. It goes back to the Romantics: the belief that you went out in nature, and tried to let nature inspire you. That's how you soaked up spiritual truths. You made yourself totally receptive—open, spacious, non-reactive, non-judging, non-verbal. As one thinker said, he went out in nature and allowed himself to become a giant eyeball, transparent in all directions, soaking up all the of inter-connectedness. That idea is stuck in our society, so that now, when Buddhism comes to the West, we read the different definitions of mindfulness, and the spacious and receptive ones are the ones that seems to strike a chord. We think that's it. Some people say that a moment of mindfulness is a moment of awakening and leave everything right there. Well, it's a fabrication.

There are plenty of passages in the Canon where the Buddha does *not* describe mindfulness as being just open and receptive, non-reactive. For example, he says that when you detect unskillful qualities in the mind, you have to get rid of them with the same sense of urgency, relentlessness, and mindfulness that you'd use in putting out a fire on your head.

He also compares mindfulness to walking between a crowd on one side and a beauty queen dancing and singing on the other side, while you're carrying a bowl of oil on your head. And there's a man walking behind you with a raised sword. Wherever you spill even a drop of oil, he's going to cut off your head. And so, as the Buddha said, you would not allow yourself to be distracted either way, either to the crowd or to the beauty queen. You have to be focused very intently on that bowl of oil. That, the Buddha said, is a symbol for mindfulness—in this case, mindfulness of the body.

So there's a lot in the Canon to show that mindfulness is not necessarily an open, receptive mind state. Sometimes you are mindful to be open and receptive, but other times, you're mindful to be very focused and doing your best to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing.

We have to be careful not to let our cultural biases get in the way, so that we can really see what the Buddha was talking about and can take the best advantage of what he has to say—to really stay with the path; to understand the path, to become more and more sensitive to these subtle layers of fabrication in the mind. Essentially, we're learning how to fabricate skillfully until we get to the point where the skill takes us beyond fabrication. That's where freedom is found. And that's *how* freedom is found. This is why the Buddha calls this a path. It leads you someplace. It doesn't cause the goal, but it leads toward the goal. And it's up to us to do the activity that gets there.