



THE MIRROR
OF INSIGHT

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THE BUDDHA AS STRATEGIST

by

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A meditator in Singapore once wrote a letter to Ajaan Fuang, describing how he applied the Buddha's teachings to everyday life: Whatever his mind focused on, he would try to see it as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Ajaan Fuang had me write a letter in response, saying, "Do things ever say that they're inconstant, stressful, and not-self? They never say it, so don't go faulting them that way. Focus on what labels them, for that's where the fault lies." — "Awareness Itself"

This essay on the Buddha's strategies for gaining liberating insight falls into four parts. The first part calls into question an old interpretation of the Buddha as strategist: the theory, first fully formulated in the Commentary many centuries after the Buddha, that the Buddha taught two levels of truth, ultimate and conventional. The last three parts offer an alternative interpretation that seems more in line with the portrait of the Buddha as meditator and teacher as presented in the oldest extant record of his teachings: the Pali suttas, or discourses. The first part is by far the most technical section of the essay. Because of that, and because its purpose is simply to clear the ground for the remaining parts, if you are unfamiliar with the two-truth theory, you may want to skip it entirely and go straight to part 2. Then, if you are interested, you may return to part 1 at a later time. But if you're already familiar with the two-truth theory, I ask that you put up with the technicalities so that you can read the remaining parts with fresh eyes.

1 | TWO TRUTHS?

Buddhist traditions have long agreed that the Buddha was a strategist in the way he taught, particularly when it came to teaching the insights that lead to awakening. Various ways of analyzing the Buddha's strategies have been devised over the centuries, one of the most prominent—both in Theravada and Mahayana traditions—being the theory that the Buddha taught two levels of truth: conventional truth and ultimate truth. In the Theravada version of this theory, conventional truths are expressed in personal terms, of individuals existing and acting in worlds. Ultimate truths are expressed in impersonal terms, of mental and physical qualities interacting, with no reference to whose qualities they are or where they are. Conventional truths adopt the language and—in the words of one scholar—the “naïve understanding” of everyday discourse. Ultimate truths adopt a language that accords with events of the world as they actually are, in and of themselves, and as they appear in liberating insight.

An example of a teaching on the level of conventional truth would be:

“These four types of persons are to be found existing in the world. Which four? The person who goes with the flow, the person who goes against the flow, the person who stands fast, and the one who has crossed over, gone beyond, who stands on firm ground: a brahman.” — [AN 4:5](#)

An example of a teaching on the level of ultimate truth would be:

“From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.
From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.
From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.”
— [SN 12:2](#)

The Buddha used both levels of truth in instructing his disciples. For instance, when teaching the precepts or the practice of universal goodwill, he spoke in terms of conventional truths. When teaching insight, he—for the most part—spoke in terms of ultimate truths.

Now, if these two levels of truth were simply alternative manners of speaking, there would be no conflict between them. Theirs would be like the relationship between geology and sub-atomic physics. Geology speaks in terms of sedimentary and metamorphic rocks. Sub-atomic physics makes no mention of either kind of rock, but this doesn't mean that it denies their reality, simply that it frames its issues in other terms.

However, proponents of the two-truth theory don't regard ultimate truths simply as a manner of speaking. For them, ultimate truths are *the* description of the true nature of things. And instead of simply not bothering to speak of individuals or beings, ultimate truths actually deny their existence.

Even though it is said by the Rightly Awakened One, "One person," etc., on the level of ultimate meaning [*paramatthato*] there is no person. — *Commentary to AN 2:24*

Yet even though conventional truths and ultimate truths are based on mutually contradictory assumptions, the two-truth theory insists that they are both true.

Even when they give a conventional talk, they [the Buddhas] say what is true, what is factual, and not a falsehood. Even when they give an ultimate-meaning talk, they say what is true, what is factual, and not a falsehood. — *Commentary to DN 9*

The Commentary to DN 9, speaking on the level of conventional truth, adds that the Buddha, on occasion, had to talk in conventional terms because of the differing capacities of his listeners. In its words,

Whenever it is possible, through a conventional teaching—saying "being," "person," "deva," "brahmā," etc.—[for the listener] to know, to penetrate, to lead himself [out of saṃsāra], to grasp the victory of arahantship, the Blessed One talks of "being," "person," "deva," "brahmā," etc. Whenever it is possible, through an ultimate-meaning teaching, for another who has heard, "inconstant" or "stressful" to know, to penetrate, to lead himself [out of saṃsāra], to

grasp the victory of arahantship, the Blessed One talks to that other person of “inconstant,” “stressful,” etc.

For this reason, for beings who are able to awaken through a conventional talk, he does not give an ultimate-meaning talk first. When they have awakened, he gives an ultimate-meaning talk afterwards. For beings who are able to awaken through an ultimate-meaning talk, he does not give a conventional talk first. When they have awakened, he gives a conventional talk afterwards.

Ordinarily, when giving an ultimate-meaning talk first, the teaching gives a harsh impression, therefore the Buddhas, having first given a conventional talk, give an ultimate-meaning talk afterwards. —*Commentary to DN 9*

In other words, some people would find the ultimate reality that there are no beings too harsh to accept. That’s why the Buddha, when leading them to arahantship, had to clothe his words in conventional ways of speaking. Only after their awakening were listeners of this sort ready for the ultimate truth that beings don’t exist.

However, the Commentary never explains how two mutually contradictory descriptions of the world can both be true at the same time, or how a convention that contradicts the ultimate nature of reality can be regarded as true.

Here it’s important to note that the theory of two levels of truth does *not* appear in the Pali suttas, or discourses, our most reliable records of the Buddha’s own words. It’s a later addition to the tradition. This point has to be emphasized, because the theory has become so basic to Buddhist philosophy over the centuries that even well-informed scholars and insight teachers believe that it came from the Buddha himself.

However, the fact that the theory is actually a later construct is shown by the fact that many of the terms used to explain the theory—*paramattha-sacca* (ultimate-meaning truth), *sammuti-sacca* (conventional truth), *vohāra-sacca* (manner-of-speaking truth), *nisatta* (devoid of a being), *nipuggala* (devoid of a person)—don’t occur in the suttas.

Now, *paramattha*, the word that the Abhidhamma and Commentaries use to mean “ultimate meaning,” does appear in the suttas at least five times—or, if we count a contested reading in [AN 10:29](#), six. The word is a compound of *param*, “highest, foremost,” and *attha*, which can mean “meaning,” “purpose,” “benefit,” or “goal.” In all six sutta references, however, *paramattha* appears to mean not a level of description, but the highest goal of the practice. In five of the instances, this interpretation is unequivocal—in other words, the context shows that this has to be the meaning of the term there. These five instances include all three attributed to the Buddha himself:

“Now, of those who proclaim ultimate-goal-purity [*paramattha-visuddhim*], these are supreme: those who, with the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, enter & remain in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and who, having directly known & realized this, teach their Dhamma. And there are beings who teach in this way. Yet even in the beings who teach in this way there is still aberration, there is change. Seeing this, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with that. Being disenchanted with that, he becomes dispassionate toward what is supreme, and even more so toward what is inferior.” — [AN 10:29](#), [*The Thai version of this passage, instead of paramattha-visuddhim, reads parama-yakkha-visuddhim: ultimate purity of a spirit.*]

With persistence aroused
for the ultimate goal’s attainment [*paramattha-pattiyā*],
with mind unsmear, not lazy in action,
firm in effort, with steadfastness & strength arisen,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros. — [Sn 1:3](#)

Knowing the world,
seeing the ultimate goal [*paramattha-dassim*],
crossing the ocean, the flood,
—Such—

his chains broken,
unattached,
without effluent:

The enlightened call him a sage. — [Sn 1:12](#)

Of the instances attributed to the Buddha’s disciples, there are two in which *paramattha* unequivocally means “highest goal.”

Ven. Telukāni:

Who has gone to the beyond in the world?
Who has attained a footing in the deathless?
Whose teaching do I accept
giving knowledge of the ultimate goal [*paramattha-*
vijānananāṅ]? — [Thag 16:3](#)

Sister Candā:

She, Paṭācārā, from sympathy,
let me go forth;
then, exhorting me,
urged me on to the ultimate goal [*paramatthe niyojayi*]. — [Thig 5:12](#)

There’s only one passage in the suttas where the meaning of *paramattha* is equivocal—it could mean either “ultimate goal” or “ultimate meaning.”

Ven. Vadḍha:

With what a vast goad
my mother poked me—
because of her sympathy—
verses connected to the ultimate goal
[or: verses connected to ultimate meaning] [*paramattha-saṅhitā*
gāthā]. — [Thig 9](#)

Now, because this verse isn’t attributed to the Buddha, we can’t say that *paramattha* meant “ultimate meaning” for him. And because the sense of

the term here is equivocal, it can't be taken as proof that *paramattha* definitely meant “ultimate meaning” in the suttas.

So the evidence strongly suggests that the word *paramattha* in the suttas is a name for the truth of the experience of nibbāna, and not an ultimate level of description about the world—and that the two-truth theory as a whole is a later addition to the tradition. This fact does not necessarily mean that it's an inappropriate interpretation of the suttas—it could be making explicit something only implicit in the Buddha's approach—but it so happens that when we examine some of the Buddha's statements in the suttas about truth and teachings, the two-truth theory actually conflicts with them. This is what makes it an inappropriate interpretation of the Buddha's strategy in teaching.

For instance, in [DN 16](#), the Buddha states that genuine Dhamma is to be recognized by the fact that it's internally consistent. A statement that assumes the existence of beings is not consistent with one that denies their existence. In fact, they are diametrically opposed.

In [Sn 4:12](#), when asked why different teachers don't teach the same thing, the Buddha replies,

“The truth is one,
there is no second
about which a person who knows it
would argue with one who knows.”

When he is further asked if teachers have actually learned various divergent truths, he replies that their differences come, not from divergent truths, but from divergent perceptions about the one truth.

“Apart from their perception
there are no many various constant truths
in the world.” — [Sn 4:12](#)

To say that the Buddha would adopt a strategy in which he spoke of beings and selves as existing even when he knew that, on the ultimate level, they didn't exist, is to say that he would deal in useful fictions: statements that were beneficial for his listeners even though he knew they

weren't true. This idea, however, conflicts with the Buddha's own explicit standards for deciding what he would and would not say: Only if something was true, beneficial, and timely would he say it. When, in [MN 58](#), he set out the various types of speech—true or not true, beneficial or not beneficial, timely or not timely—and then made a table of the various combinations of types, the possibility that a false statement could be beneficial didn't even make it on the table. This means that, as far as he was concerned, such statements didn't even exist.

The question is, why would the later tradition impose the two-truth theory on teachings where it doesn't fit? The answer seems to lie in the fact that the later tradition interpreted the Buddha's teaching on not-self (*anattā*) as implying that there is no self. From there, it was a short step to saying that there are no beings. As this interpretation was being adopted, the question naturally arose: In the many passages where the Buddha talks about the self—such as taking the self as one's own mainstay ([Dhp 160](#)) or as one's governing principle ([AN 3:40](#))—was he lying? The two-truth theory was apparently invented to clear the Buddha's name.

Now, if the Buddha had taught that there is no self, there might have been a need to invent this theory. But he never did. He explicitly noted to his followers that the act of paying attention to questions such as “Do I exist?” “Do I not exist?” “What am I?” leads to such views as “I have a self,” and “I have no self,” both of which are a “thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views” that stand in the way of release from *dukkha*: suffering and stress ([MN 2](#)).

Instead of affirming or denying the existence of a self, the Buddha described how the assumption of a self came about as a product of “I-making” and “my-making.” He did this to show how these activities lead to suffering, and how they can be abandoned through dispassion, leading to release. The not-self teaching was part of his strategy for bringing that dispassion about ([MN 109](#); [AN 6:104](#)). [*For more on these points, see “The Not-self Strategy” and “The Limits of Description.”*]

Similarly, the Buddha never said that beings don't exist. When asked to define what a being is, he didn't say that, on the ultimate level, there are no beings. Instead, he gave a straightforward answer:

“Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form... feeling... perception... fabrications...consciousness: When one is caught up [*satta*] there, tied up [*visatta*] there, one is said to be ‘a being [*satta*].’” — [SN 23:2](#)

In other words, the Buddha defined beings as processes, rather than as metaphysical entities (*sant satta*). And even though they’re processes, they count as existing, just as the five aggregates from which they’re composed exist. This is a point worth emphasizing, because sometimes it’s believed that the word “exist” in Pali applies only to permanent existence. Actually, though, there are many instances in the Canon where temporary things and processes are said to exist. The most relevant example is this:

“Form that’s inconstant, stressful, subject to change is agreed upon by the wise as existing in the world, and I too say, ‘It exists.’

“Feeling... Perception... Fabrications... Consciousness that’s inconstant, stressful, subject to change is agreed upon by the wise as existing in the world, and I too say, ‘It exists.’” — [SN 22:94](#)

The Buddha also noted that process-beings are what take rebirth ([SN 1:55](#)) and he noted how, when a being has set one body aside and has yet to be born in another one, it’s sustained by craving ([SN 44:9](#)). And he noted that all beings have one thing in common: They depend on nutriment, which is the same as saying that they all suffer ([Khp 4](#); [SN 1:55](#)).

But as he further pointed out, it’s not necessary to keep on identifying as a being. If you can develop dispassion for all acts of craving for the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, then you’re freed from being a being ([SN 23:2](#)). [*See also the discussion of sant satta in Skill in Questions, Appendix Four.*]

The Buddha illustrated the acts of creating a process-being—and ending the process—with the simile of boys and girls playing with little houses made of mud: As long as they feel passion for their houses, they continue building them. But when they tire of them, they destroy them:

“Just as when boys or girls are playing with little mud houses: As long as they are not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for those little mud houses, that’s how long they have fun with those mud houses, enjoy them, treasure them, feel possessive of them. But when they become free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for those little mud houses, then they smash them, scatter them, demolish them with their hands or feet and make them unfit for play.

“In the same way, Rādhā, you too should smash, scatter, & demolish form, and make it unfit for play. Practice for the ending of craving for form. [And similarly with the other aggregates.]” —

[SN 23:2](#)

This last image relates to the Buddha’s description of what he himself was able to accomplish in his awakening: finding the house builder, demolishing the house, and preventing the house builder from ever building a house again:

Through the round of many births I roamed
without reward,
without rest,
seeking the house-builder.
Painful is birth again
& again.

House-builder, you’re seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole dismantled,
immersed in dismantling, the mind
has attained the end of craving. — [Dhp 153–154](#).

The Buddha further discovered that those who attain the end of craving, ceasing the process of creating a being, don’t go out of existence. Instead, they’re now so immeasurable that even in this lifetime they cannot be measured or defined ([SN 22:36](#); [SN 22:85](#)). They continue

using the conventions of “I” and “me,” but only as modes of expression, free from the conceit, “I am.” ([SN 1:25](#); [MN 22](#)). After their death, labels of existing, not existing, both, or neither—or even reappearing, not reappearing, both, or neither—don’t apply ([SN 44:1](#); [MN 72](#)).

In other words, the Buddha never taught that beings have never existed. Beings have existed and continue to exist wherever there is craving for the aggregates. That’s what defines them. When that craving is abandoned, they no longer count as beings. They are no longer defined, so any attempt to describe them in terms of existence, non-existence, etc., is invalid.

Still, the Commentary cites the following verses by Sister Vajirā, reported in [SN 5:10](#), as evidence from the suttas that beings, even prior to awakening, exist only on the level of convention, but not on the level of ultimate truth.

Sister Vajirā:

“What? Do you assume a ‘being,’ Māra?

Do you take a position?

This is purely a pile of fabrications.

Here no being

can be pinned down.

Just as when, with an assemblage of parts,

there’s the word,

chariot,

even so when aggregates are present,

there’s the convention of

a being.

For only

stress is what comes to be;

stress, what remains & falls away.

Nothing but stress comes to be.

Nothing ceases but stress.” — [SN 5:10](#)

However, we have to interpret Sister Vajirā’s words in light of what the Buddha says in [SN 23:2](#). When we do, we find that they don’t support the

Commentary's interpretation. When she speaks of a pure pile of fabrications, she's talking of fabrications—which include the five aggregates—devoid of passion and craving. This doesn't mean that they never were gathered together to create a being, simply that because she is now free of passion and craving, she is no longer creating a being out of them. Also, we have to note that while the mere presence of the aggregates can act as a *necessary* condition for the convention of a being, the acts of getting tied up and caught up in the aggregates are required as a *sufficient* condition for a being to be. After all, arahants can be in the presence of aggregates without forming a being out of them, but every time an ordinary person gets caught up in any of the aggregates, that constitutes a being.

Here it's useful to compare the imagery in Sister Vajirā's verses with the imagery in [SN 23:2](#). The image of the assembly of the chariot parallels the image of the boys and girls building their mud houses: The act of putting the chariot together is like making the houses, and in both cases, the images symbolize acts of passion and craving. To disassemble the chariot is like destroying the mud houses, symbolizing the ending of passion. It's not that there never was a chariot or a mud house, simply that when passion is ended, these things disband and no new ones are created.

So, given that the two-truth theory of the Dhamma is inconsistent with the suttas' statements about truth and the Dhamma, and that the problem it seems to have been intended to solve was, in fact, not even present in the Buddha's teachings as recorded in the suttas, there seems no reason to continue to adopt it.

Despite all this evidence calling the two-truth theory into question, there are two further passages in the suttas that the Commentary cites as evidence that the Buddha, even though he never articulated a theory of two truths, had that theory in mind when he taught the Dhamma recorded in the suttas. But here again, when the passages are examined, they don't really support that interpretation at all.

The first is [DN 9](#), where the Buddha, in conversation with a member of another sect, adopts the sect's terminology to describe the "appropriation of a self," only to go on to say that he teaches the Dhamma

for the abandoning of every appropriation of a self. At the end of the discussion, he tells his listener,

“Citta, these are the world’s designations, the world’s expressions, the world’s ways of speaking, the world’s descriptions, with which the Tathāgata expresses himself but without grasping to them.” — [DN 9](#).

The Commentary seizes on this statement as an example of the Buddha admitting that he sometimes speaks on the level of conventional truth, in which beings exist, even though on the ultimate level of truth no beings exist. This, however, is to take the statement out of context. The Buddha is simply signaling that, for the sake of the discussion, he has been using his listener’s terminology to get the listener to develop dispassion for any clingings inspired by that terminology, nothing more.

The second passage is [AN 2:24](#), in which the Buddha makes a distinction between two types of discourses: those whose meaning needs to be inferred (literally, “drawn out,”) and those whose meaning has already been drawn out.

“Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? He who explains a discourse whose meaning needs to be inferred as one whose meaning has already been fully drawn out. And he who explains a discourse whose meaning has already been fully drawn out as one whose meaning needs to be inferred.” — [AN 2:24](#).

The Commentary states that the first category, discourses whose meaning has to be inferred, applies to discourses expressed on the level of conventional truth, in terms of persons. This type of discourse, it says, needs to have its meaning further explained in terms of ultimate truth, where persons don’t exist. The second category applies to discourses already expressed on the level of ultimate truth, with no mention of persons, but in terms of “inconstant, stressful, not-self.” Because these discourses are already expressed in ultimate terms, they should not be translated into personal terms.

Unfortunately, [AN 2:24](#) gives no examples for its two categories, but we can look elsewhere in the suttas for passages that draw out the meanings of other passages. These can be taken as examples of the first category, discourses whose meaning has to be inferred. The suttas also contain passages where the Buddha rebukes monks for drawing inappropriate conclusions from his teachings. These teachings can be taken as examples of the second category, discourses whose meaning has already been drawn out and should not be further inferred.

There are many examples of passages in the first category, but here it's enough to sample just a few of the most prominent ones to see that the Commentary's explanation of this category is mistaken: It's not always the case that a discourse whose meaning needs to be inferred is one expressed in personal terms that have to be drawn out into impersonal terms. In fact, there are even cases where the opposite pattern holds: A passage expressed in impersonal terms sometimes has to have its meaning drawn out into personal ones.

We can focus first on two sets of examples: passages from the Sutta Nipāta (Sn) that are explained in other suttas; and passages spoken by the Buddha that Ven. Mahā Kaccāna—the monk the Buddha extolled as foremost in explaining a brief passage in detail—is called on to explain. To save space, we will quote here only the examples that actually reverse the Commentary's pattern.

In the first set, [Sn 5:1](#) contains a passage expressed in personal terms, and [SN 22:3](#) explains it in personal terms. [Sn 5:2](#) contains a passage expressed in impersonal terms that [AN 6:61](#) explains in impersonal terms. [Sn 5:3](#) contains a passage expressed in personal terms that [AN 3:32](#) explains in personal terms, whereas [AN 4:41](#) explains it in impersonal terms. In a reversal of the Commentary's interpretation, [Sn 5:13](#) contains a passage expressed in impersonal terms that [AN 3:33](#) explains in personal terms:

The abandoning
both of sensual desires,
& of unhappiness,
the dispelling of sloth,

the warding off of anxieties,
equanimity-&-mindfulness purified,
with inspection of mental qualities
swift in the forefront:
That I call the gnosis of emancipation,
the breaking open
of ignorance. — [Sn 5:13](#)

Although this passage describes activities with no reference to people or beings doing them, when the Buddha draws out its meaning, he makes reference to a person doing the activities in question:

“When there is in a monk no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession with regard to this conscious body, no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession with regard to all external themes, and when he enters & remains in the awareness-release & discernment-release where there is no I-making or my-making conceit-obsession for one entering & remaining in it, he is called a monk who has cut craving, has ripped off the fetter, and—from rightly breaking through conceit—has put an end to suffering & stress.” — [AN 3:33](#)

When we look at Ven. Mahā Kaccāna’s explanations of the Buddha’s statements, we find that, overall, he tends to maintain the same level of discourse that the Buddha uses—in other words, passages expressed in personal terms are explained in personal terms (examples being [MN 18](#), MN 133, [MN 138](#), and the passage from [SN 4:25](#) explained in AN 10:26), while a passage expressed in impersonal terms is explained in impersonal terms (AN 10:172).

The most interesting of these examples, though, is [MN 138](#). Each of the Buddha’s statements that Mahā Kaccāna explains is originally expressed in personal terms, Mahā Kaccāna then reduces it to impersonal terms that he then turns around and explains in personal terms. For instance, where the Buddha says in personal terms, “He would from lack of clinging/sustenance be unagitated,” Mahā Kaccāna restates the statement in impersonal terms: “How is non-agitation caused by lack of

clinging/sustenance?” But then he draws out the meaning in personal terms:

“There is the case where an instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for people of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma—doesn’t assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. His form changes & is unstable, but his consciousness doesn’t—because of the change & instability of form—alter in accordance with the change in form. His mind is not consumed with any agitation born from an alteration in accordance with the change in form or coming from the co-arising of (unskillful mental) qualities. And because his awareness is not consumed, he feels neither fearful, threatened, nor solicitous. [Similarly with the other aggregates.] — [MN 138](#)

So in this way, Mahā Kaccāna, within his own explanation, reverses the Commentary’s pattern.

Perhaps the most dramatic reversal of the Commentary’s pattern, though, is in [SN 35:95](#). There the Buddha affirms that the famous instruction to Bāhiya ([Ud 1:10](#))—“In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen”—should be understood in these personal terms:

Not impassioned with forms
—seeing a form with mindfulness firm—
dispassioned in mind,
one knows
and doesn’t remain fastened on it.
While one is seeing a form
—and even experiencing feeling—
it falls away and doesn’t accumulate.
Thus
 one fares mindfully.
Thus
 not amassing stress,

one is said to be
in the presence of unbinding. — [SN 35:95](#)

So the Commentary’s explanation of the first category of discourse—that discourses whose meaning needs to be inferred can be equated with teachings expressed in conventional truths—is not borne out by the evidence in the Canon. And what’s especially notable is that in these, and in all other cases of this sort, the explanations giving the meaning to be inferred never say that self, beings, or persons do not exist.

As for the second category—discourses whose meaning should not be drawn out any further—two examples stand out: In [MN 136](#), a monk is asked, in personal terms, what one experiences after having performed an intentional action, and he responds that one experiences stress. The Buddha later rebukes him, but another monk comes to the first monk’s defense: Perhaps he was thinking of the impersonal teaching, “Whatever is felt comes under stress.” The Buddha rebukes this second monk, too, saying that when asked about the results of action, one is being asked about the three kinds of feeling—pleasant, painful, and neither—and so should respond as follows:

“Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as pleasure, one experiences pleasure. Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as pain, one experiences pain. Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as neither-pleasure-nor-pain, one experiences neither-pleasure-nor-pain.” — [MN 136](#)

Taking the second monk’s words as an explanation of the first monk’s words, it would count as a passage expressed in personal terms whose meaning is wrongly drawn out in impersonal terms. This means that the Buddha’s warning about wrongly drawing out the meaning of a discourse does not apply only to attempts to translate impersonal language into personal language. Other considerations—such as whether a teaching is appropriate to a particular context or purpose (*attha*)—can also play a determining role. Statements have to be judged not only as descriptive,

but also as performative: what they induce the listener to do. If a person is told that all action leads to stress, that person will feel no reason to put forth the effort to act skillfully rather than unskillfully. This would get in the way of his making progress on the path.

In the second example, drawn from [MN 109](#), a monk—listening to the Buddha teaching that the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness are not-self—draws out what he thinks is a logical implication of the teaching:

“So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?”

In other words, the monk reasons that because the aggregates are all not-self, there must be no self, so no actions will be able to touch—i.e., give karmic results to—what is not-self. This line of reasoning would give license to all kinds of unskillful behavior, which is why the Buddha, on reading the monk’s mind, says that he is senseless, immersed in ignorance, and overcome with craving. The Buddha’s original words would thus count as a passage expressed in impersonal terms whose meaning the monk has wrongly drawn out in impersonal terms.

What’s ironic here is that the Buddha decries as senseless a line of reasoning that is similar to what appears to be the assumption motivating the two-truth theory: drawing out the meaning of the not-self teaching to come to the conclusion that there is no self.

The Buddha then goes on to show the proper use of the teaching on not-self, questioning the other monks present at the discourse about their assumption of self around the aggregates until they develop dispassion and gain release.

So, taken together, these passages from [MN 136](#) and [MN 109](#) show that the Commentary’s equation of discourses whose meaning is already drawn out with discourses expressed in ultimate truths is not borne out by the evidence in the suttas.

[MN 109](#) also shows one of the dangers of the two-truth theory: It’s all too easy to jump from the idea that, on the ultimate level, there is no

being and no self, to the conclusion that there is no one to be harmed by unskillful actions, and no one to be held responsible for them. This conclusion is similar to a sectarian view that the Buddha, in [DN 1](#), described as particularly evil: There is no one acting or acted on when a knife goes between the atoms in a person's neck, and there is no one to experience the results of such an action.

There is also a more subtle danger inherent in the idea of an ultimate level of truth in descriptions of reality: Such a description, if you believe that it expresses the ultimate nature of things, is hard to let go. And if you can't let go of it, you can't see its limitations and what lies beyond it. Yet it is precisely the ability to see the limitations of linguistic description that can bring the mind to release.

“Having directly known the extent of designation and the extent of the objects of designation, the extent of expression and the extent of the objects of expression, the extent of description and the extent of the objects of description, the extent of discernment and the extent of the objects of discernment, the extent to which the cycle revolves: Having directly known that, the monk is released.” — [DN 15](#)

So:

- because the two-truth theory is a later addition to the Buddhist tradition that is at odds with the teachings about truth in the suttas,
- because it solves a problem that doesn't exist in the suttas,
- because the sutta passages cited by the Commentary as proof that the Buddha had this theory in mind even though he didn't articulate it don't actually support the theory, and
- because the theory can have pernicious practical consequences,

there seems no reason to continue to regard it as a legitimate explanation of the Buddha's approach as a strategist. Instead, it's better to view the Buddha's teachings expressed in impersonal terms simply as a

manner of speaking—a type of convention—and not as carrying a metaphysical assumption that beings don't exist and never have. In other words, they are like the physicist's description of the sub-atomic particles in a piece of rock: Even though they make no mention of the type of rock, that's no reason to infer from them that different types of rock don't exist.

This, however, still leaves unanswered the question of how best to characterize the nature of the Buddha's strategy as a teacher, and why he found it necessary to adopt different conventions for different purposes, expressing himself sometimes in personal and sometimes in impersonal terms. For the answers to these questions, we have to look again at the suttas, conducting an inquiry into the Buddha's approach both to gaining insight in his own practice and to teaching his listeners to gain insight in theirs. This inquiry is the purpose of the remaining sections in this essay. We will find that the Buddha's strategies arose in response not only to the variety of people he taught, but also to strategic dilemmas posed by the problem he was trying to solve: The path to the end of suffering presented him with at least two major dilemmas, and it was in resolving those dilemmas strategically that he learned how to help others resolve them as well.

Because these dilemmas are inherent in the practice, this means that if we want to gain the most from his teachings, we will have to approach them strategically, too.

And reflectively: The Buddha found the path to the end of suffering by reflecting on his own actions and their results. To follow him, we have to use his teachings to reflect carefully on ours.

This reflective principle is so basic to the practice that when the Buddha introduced his son, Rāhula—who at the time was very young—to the path of practice as a whole, he illustrated it with the simile of a mirror: Just as a mirror is for reflection, you should repeatedly reflect on your own actions—your intentions, the acts arising from your intentions, and the results coming from those actions—in thought, word, and deed. Act only on intentions that you anticipate will avoid harm, and learn from your mistakes: the intentions and actions that actually did cause harm. This attitude of reflection is appropriate not only for small children. It's

central to all levels of the path up to and through the insights leading to release.

2 | TWO DILEMMAS

On the night of his awakening, as he searched for a way to gain release from suffering and stress, the Buddha found himself confronted with two dilemmas.

The first had to do with the possibility of a path to the end of suffering. If there was a dimension free of suffering and stress, it had to be unconditioned—or in his terms, unfabricated (*asaṅkhata*). In other words, it couldn't be something put together from other conditions. That was because anything put together would have to come from changeable causes, so it would have to be changeable too, and anything changeable has to entail stress. The question, then, was how any human activity, which is put together from intentions, could possibly bring something unfabricated about.

The second dilemma had to do with the causes of suffering. As he came to see, suffering is caused by any form of craving that leads to becoming—the act of taking on an identity as a being within a world of experience. However, he also discovered that the types of craving leading to becoming include not only craving for becoming, but also craving for non-becoming: the desire to see any existing becoming destroyed. This meant that two paths of action were closed to him: He couldn't act on the desire to fabricate a state of becoming free from suffering, and he couldn't act on the desire to destroy any states of becoming he had already fabricated.

The Buddha's solution to both dilemmas was strategic. His way out of the first dilemma was to realize that although fabricated actions couldn't bring about the unfabricated, it was possible to fabricate a path of action that led to the threshold of the unfabricated. From there, he could abandon the path and arrive at his goal. He later compared this process to building a raft to cross a river and then abandoning the raft on reaching the far shore ([MN 22](#); [SN 35:197](#)).

His way out of the second dilemma was part of that path. He kept watching the raw material from which the mind fabricates states of

becoming, and viewed them “as they had come to be” ([Iti 49](#)) in a way that would develop dispassion for them before the mind had a chance to fabricate anything further out of them. In this way, no new states of becoming would be fabricated, and any existing states of becoming would naturally disband when their causes ceased. This approach, in turn, required that he not look at experience in terms of the basic concepts of becoming—“self-identity,” “being,” or “world”—but simply in terms of the raw materials—the fabrications—from which ideas of “self,” “being,” or “world” could be constructed. At the same time, he would have to fabricate perceptions to help develop dispassion for all fabrications.

By combining these two approaches, the Buddha found a way to the unfabricated that involved fabrications in three ways: He had to *use* fabrications to develop a skillful way to *view* fabrications with dispassion, allowing him to *abandon* all fabrications. This was the heart of his skill as a strategist.

This means that when we read his teachings—which are fabrications that he left behind—and we want to get the most out of them, we have to read them strategically, too. We can’t regard them simply as a worldview that we’re deciding whether or not to adopt, for that would lead to more becoming. At the same time, we can’t regard them as lying outside the realm of fabrication, for that would lead us to mistaking them for the goal. Instead, because they are fabrications, and because all fabrications are *for the sake of* something, we have to ask what the teachings are *for*: the goal, or *attha*, at which they aim; how they are meant to perform in leading to that goal; and how they’re best to be used to actually attain that goal.

The Buddha made this point clear in formulating the overarching framework of his teachings: the four noble truths—the truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. In each case, he didn’t simply set out the truth. He also associated each truth with a specific duty: Suffering was to be comprehended to the point of dispassion, its cause was to be abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed, all *for the sake of* bringing that cessation about and arriving at the unfabricated.

If we compare these four duties with the way the Buddha used fabrications in his own path of practice, we can see that the duties for the first, second, and fourth truths correspond roughly to the three ways the Buddha dealt with fabrications: viewing, abandoning, and using. This means that to understand which fabrication is to be used in which way, we have to see which noble truth it falls under.

But the Buddha's strategy shows that we can't stop there. Given that all fabrications ultimately have to be abandoned, we also have to figure out how far to use and regard fabrications before we let them all go. A first step in understanding the role of fabrication in the practice is to understand the various frameworks under which the Buddha discussed fabrications. That allows us to identify which fabrications should be treated with which of the duties associated with the four noble truths. As it turns out, it will also show how some fabrications can fall under different noble truths at different stages in the path. From there we can more readily gain a sense of when a particular fabrication, even when it's used on the path, has to be further developed, and when and how it should be skillfully abandoned in a way that arrives at the threshold of the goal at which all the teachings are aimed.

3 | THE VARIETIES OF FABRICATED EXPERIENCE

The term “fabrication” (*saṅkhāra*) refers both to intentional actions—mental or physical—as well as to the mental or physical conditions they shape. You can recognize something as fabricated when you can discern three characteristics in its behavior: its arising, its passing away, and its alteration while staying. Anything where the three opposite characteristics can be discerned—no arising, no passing away, and no alteration while staying—counts as unfabricated ([AN 3:47-48](#)).

This right here is one of the Buddha’s most radical premises. If every change you experience comes from fabrication, then you’re fabricating your experience in ways you don’t even realize. *All* that’s experienced in dependence on the six senses—the five physical senses plus the mind as the sixth—counts as fabrication: intentional actions and their results. This gives some idea of how subtle the goal will be, for it will have to lie totally outside of the six senses. It also indicates how important it is, in the course of the path, to become sensitive to the intentional actions that constitute fabrication. Otherwise, it’s easy to fall into the pitfall of not detecting your intentions, and so to mistake something fabricated for something that’s not.

The Buddha mentions fabrication in many different contexts, but two main frameworks dominate his analyses: one in terms of the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness; and the other in terms of bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication. Both frameworks deal first with the truths of suffering and its causes, but they also play a role in developing concentration, the heart of the path to the end of suffering. Here again, the Buddha shows his skill as a strategist. If you fabricate your experience under the influence of ignorance, your fabrications will have to lead to suffering. But if you fabricate with knowledge, they can form a path to suffering’s end. And the best way to bring knowledge to the processes of fabrication is to shape them deliberately into a state of mind that is still enough and sensitive enough to allow you to detect even extremely refined and subtle fabrications.

That's what the practice of concentration is for. From there, fabrications can be used to develop the insight that leads to dispassion even for concentration—and ultimately, even for the fabrications of insight itself. That's when the mind is truly freed.

THE FIVE AGGREGATES. The analysis into five aggregates comes primarily in the context of the first noble truth, where the Buddha's short analysis of suffering is the five clinging-aggregates: the act of clinging to any of the five aggregates or any combination of the five. This context can be broken down into two main sub-contexts: discussions of how the mind interprets and elaborates on sensory experience in general, and discussions of how the mind creates one of the primary elements of becoming: its sense of self-identity.

The five aggregates can be defined as follows:

- *form*: any physical phenomenon (although the Buddha's focus here is less on the physical object in itself, and more on the *experience* of the object);
- *feeling*: feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain;
- *perception*: the act of recognizing, mentally labeling, and identifying physical or mental phenomena;
- *fabrication*: the intentional shaping of physical or mental phenomena;
- *consciousness*: awareness at the six senses.

There's something of an anomaly here in that the term "fabrication" covers all five aggregates and yet is listed as one of the five. The following passage helps to explain why. Its terminology is a little strange, but one point is clear: The mental act of fabrication shapes the actual experience of all physical and mental phenomena in the aggregates *for a purpose*.

"And why do you call them 'fabrications'? Because they fabricate fabricated things, thus they are called 'fabrications.' What do they fabricate as a fabricated thing? For the sake of form-ness, they fabricate form as a fabricated thing. For the sake of feeling-ness,

they fabricate feeling as a fabricated thing. For the sake of perception-hood... For the sake of fabrication-hood... For the sake of consciousness-hood, they fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing. Because they fabricate fabricated things, they are called fabrications.” — [SN 22:79](#).

This passage suggests that the act of fabrication is presented with potentials for any of the aggregates made available by past actions, and it acts *for the sake of* turning those potentials into the actual experience of those aggregates in the present. “Fabrication” as a name for one of the aggregates refers specifically to this mental process. As a term for all five aggregates, “fabrication” covers both the processes of fabrication and the fabricated aggregates—physical and mental—that result.

The purposeful role of fabrication is also clear in another passage that defines it in relation to the six sense media. This passage occurs in the larger context of a discussion defining all five aggregates:

“And what are fabrications? These six classes of intention—intention with regard to forms, intention with regard to sounds, intention with regard to smells, intention with regard to tastes, intention with regard to tactile sensations, intention with regard to ideas: These are called fabrications.” — [SN 22:56](#)

So, putting these two definitions together, we can say that fabrication—as the fourth aggregate—provides the intentional, purposeful element in all the aggregates.

Here it’s important to note that aggregates are not just products of past activities. They themselves are also on-going activities in the present moment. [SN 22:79](#) makes this point by defining the aggregates with verbs: Feelings are called feelings because they feel, perceptions are called perceptions because they perceive, and so on. Even form deforms.

In the course of acting in these ways, all five aggregates make use of other fabrications to create and condition still other fabrications, and they themselves then get used by other fabrications for a similar purpose, in an on-going causal process. For instance, in the standard description of dependent co-arising ([SN 12:2](#)), fabrications and intentions—the fourth

aggregate—arise prior to the experience of sensory contact. In another description of the same principle, they arise in dependence on sensory contact ([MN 28](#)). In this way, they both interpret and elaborate on sensory contacts already present to awareness, as well as playing a role in shaping the next experience of sensory contacts.

A similar reciprocal relationship holds between aggregates and self-identity. On the one hand, self-identity can be built in any of four ways around any of the five aggregates:

Visākha: “But, lady, how does self-identification view come about?”

Sister Dhammadinnā: “There is the case, friend Visākha, where an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

“He assumes feeling to be the self....

“He assumes perception to be the self....

“He assumes fabrications to be the self....

“He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. This is how self-identification view comes about.” — [MN 44](#).

Then, once any of these self-identity views are created around the aggregates, those views turn around and shape further aggregates. They do this by coloring the way in which sensory contact is received; from that reception, even more fabrications are brought into being.

“Thus, both this assumption & the understanding, ‘I am,’ occur to him [an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person]. And so it is with reference to the understanding ‘I am’ that there is the appearance of the five faculties—eye, ear, nose, tongue, & body [the senses of vision, hearing, smell, taste, & touch].

“Now, there is the intellect, there are ideas, there is the property of ignorance. To an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person, touched by experience born of the contact of ignorance, there occur (the thoughts): ‘I am,’ ‘I am thus,’ ‘I shall be,’ ‘I shall not be,’ ‘I shall be possessed of form,’ ‘I shall be formless,’ ‘I shall be percipient [conscious],’ ‘I shall be non-percipient,’ or ‘I shall be neither percipient nor non-percipient.’” — [SN 22:47](#).

As this last passage shows, once there is a sense of self based on ignorance, it colors all sensory experience with questions about your current and future states of becoming. Thinking in these terms is how craving for becoming and non-becoming come about.

The way out of this dilemma is first to learn how to master the processes of fabrication with knowledge. In this way, fabrications are brought out of the first noble truth into the fourth, as part of the path to the end of suffering.

And here again, the analysis of fabrications under the framework of the aggregates plays a role. As [AN 9:36](#) points out, once you have mastered any of the four jhānas—the stages of right concentration in the path to the end of suffering—you should learn to see that each jhāna is composed of the five aggregates. For example, if the breath is your object of meditation, then the breath itself counts as form, the feelings of pleasure induced by being steadily alert to the breath count as feeling, the perceptions that anchor the mind on the breath count as perception, the intention to keep the breath in mind counts as fabrication, and awareness of all these processes counts as consciousness.

By deliberately fashioning these fabrications into the non-sensual bliss of jhāna, you’re in a position not only to see how jhāna is clearly a fabricated state but also to pass judgment on your attachments to sensual pleasures: Non-sensual bliss is much more reliable and blameless than sensual pleasures can ever be. This ability to see the *fact* of fabrication along with the *value* of alternative fabrications prepares the mind for the activities of insight, a topic we will explore further below.

But first we have to see how the Buddha’s alternative framework for analyzing fabrications—into bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications—also

functions both to explain suffering and to act as part of the path to its end.

THE THREE FABRICATIONS. This is a framework that the Buddha mentions briefly in the context of dependent co-arising ([SN 12:2](#)), where bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication are said to be conditioned by ignorance and, in turn, act as a condition for consciousness. What is meant by these three terms, though, is not defined in that context. There are, however, two other contexts where the Buddha does explain them in detail.

The first context is a description of the ways in which three types of kamma—bodily, verbal, and mental—play a role in shaping future lifetimes. In this description, these types of fabrication are analyzed in terms of the levels of skill with which they are fabricated, and the corresponding levels of the cosmos to which they lead.

“And what is kamma that is dark with dark result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates an injurious bodily fabrication, fabricates an injurious verbal fabrication, fabricates an injurious mental fabrication. Having fabricated an injurious bodily fabrication, having fabricated an injurious verbal fabrication, having fabricated an injurious mental fabrication, he rearises in an injurious world. On rearing in an injurious world, he is there touched by injurious contacts. Touched by injurious contacts, he experiences feelings that are exclusively painful, like those of the beings in hell. This is called kamma that is dark with dark result.

“And what is kamma that is bright with bright result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates a non-injurious bodily fabrication... a non-injurious verbal fabrication... a non-injurious mental fabrication.... He rearises in a non-injurious world.... There he is touched by non-injurious contacts.... He experiences feelings that are exclusively pleasant, like those of the Beautiful Black Devas. This is called kamma that is bright with bright result.

“And what is kamma that is dark & bright with dark & bright result? There is the case where a certain person fabricates a bodily fabrication that is injurious & non-injurious... a verbal fabrication

that is injurious & non-injurious... a mental fabrication that is injurious & non-injurious.... He rearises in an injurious & non-injurious world.... There he is touched by injurious & non-injurious contacts.... He experiences injurious & non-injurious feelings, pleasure mingled with pain, like those of human beings, some devas, and some beings in the lower realms. This is called kamma that is dark & bright with dark & bright result.” — [AN 4:237](#)

An alternative way of rating these sorts of fabrication classifies them as to whether they lead to pleasure, pain, or to the imperturbable levels of concentration—the fourth jhāna and the formless dimensions of the infinitude of space or of consciousness—which can lead to rebirth on imperturbable levels of becoming.

“If a person immersed in ignorance fabricates a meritorious fabrication, his/her consciousness goes on to merit. If he/she fabricates a demeritorious fabrication, his/her consciousness goes on to demerit. If he/she fabricates an imperturbable fabrication, his/her consciousness goes on to the imperturbable.” — [SN 12:51](#)

Because future lives will entail birth, illness, and death—and in most cases, aging as well—these discussions of the three fabrications place them firmly under the first and second noble truths, suffering and its origination.

The second context in which the Buddha gives detailed explanation for bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication is in describing the factors that go into the levels of right concentration, i.e., part of the fourth noble truth, the path to the cessation of suffering.

However, the definition of these three types of fabrication doesn't limit their application to the practice of concentration.

Visākha: “Now, lady, what are fabrications?”

Sister Dhammadinnā: “These three fabrications, friend Visākha: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, & mental fabrications.”

Visākha: “But what are bodily fabrications? What are verbal fabrications? What are mental fabrications?”

Sister Dhammadinnā: “In-&-out breaths are bodily fabrications. Directed thought & evaluation are verbal fabrications. Perceptions & feelings are mental fabrications.”

Visākha: “But why are in-&-out breaths bodily fabrications? Why are directed thought & evaluation verbal fabrications? Why are perceptions & feelings mental fabrications?”

Sister Dhammadinnā: “In-&-out breaths are bodily; these are things tied up with the body. That’s why in-&-out breaths are bodily fabrications. Having first directed one’s thoughts and made an evaluation, one then breaks out into speech. That’s why directed thought & evaluation are verbal fabrications. Perceptions & feelings are mental; these are things tied up with the mind. That’s why perceptions & feelings are mental fabrications.” — [*MN 44*](#).

These definitions of the three fabrications apply to the experience of the body in all activities, as well as to the shaping of verbal and mental activity in general. After all, all bodily action has to start with the breath; all verbal action has to start with directed thought and evaluation; all mental action has to start with perception and feeling. This means that these definitions of the three fabrications can be applied to all activity and mental states. For instance, they are especially useful for understanding how to dismantle the component factors of unskillful emotions and creating more skillful emotions in their place.

As with the five aggregates, the best way to comprehend the fact and value of these three types of fabrications is to employ them in the practice of right concentration. Here they are analyzed not so much in terms of how they shape a single level of concentration, but in terms of how they separate out when moving from one level of concentration to the next higher one—much as metals in a sample of ore will separate out when their melting points are reached as the ore is subjected to higher and higher temperatures.

Visākha: “But when a monk is attaining the cessation of perception & feeling, which things cease first: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, or mental fabrications?”

Sister Dhammadinnā: “When a monk is attaining the cessation of perception & feeling, friend Visākha, verbal fabrications cease first, then bodily fabrications, then mental fabrications.” — [MN 44](#).

The following passage describes in more detail this progressive cessation of fabrications:

“And I have also taught the step-by-step cessation of fabrications. When one has attained the first jhāna, speech has ceased. When one has attained the second jhāna, directed thought & evaluation [*verbal fabrications*] have ceased. When one has attained the third jhāna, rapture has ceased. When one has attained the fourth jhāna, in-and-out breathing [*bodily fabrication*] has ceased. When one has attained the dimension of the infinitude of space, the perception of forms has ceased. When one has attained the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space has ceased. When one has attained the dimension of nothingness, the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness has ceased. When one has attained the dimension of neither-perception nor non-perception, the perception of the dimension of nothingness has ceased. When one has attained the cessation of perception & feeling, perception & feeling [*mental fabrications*] have ceased. When a monk’s effluents have ended, passion has ceased, aversion has ceased, delusion has ceased.” — [SN 36:11](#)

It has been argued that these two contexts for understanding the three types of fabrication—kamma and rebirth on the one hand, and the practice of concentration on the other—are totally unrelated, but it’s hard to see what is gained by placing walls between them. Instead, it’s much more useful to explore their relationships. That will allow the insights gained into fabrication in the present moment in the course of meditation to provide further understanding of how kamma acts on larger scales of time. Here it bears repeating: All bodily action has to start with the breath; all verbal action has to start with directed thought and evaluation; all mental action has to start with perception and feeling. Gaining

sensitivity to the *fact* and *value* of these fabrications in the present moment—which the practice of concentration allows for—is precisely what allows the meditator to develop dispassion for even the most skillful levels of fabrication that lead to further becoming. It's in this way that developing the fourth noble truth gives insight into the fabrications that normally would fall under the first truth and the second.

4 | THE MIRROR OF INSIGHT

The mental quality that accurately sees the fact of fabrication and judges its true value is called insight. The Pali term, *vipassanā*, literally means “clear-seeing.” The suttas often pair it with tranquility, or *samatha*, stating that these two qualities ideally function together. The function of tranquility is to put an end to passion; the function of insight, to put an end to ignorance ([AN 2:29](#)). [MN 6](#) states that both qualities are prerequisites for progress in all aspects and levels of the path, starting with such basic endeavors as being pleasing to one’s fellow monks, through the *jhānas* and psychic powers, all the way to full awakening.

With regard to attaining the highest goal, [AN 4:170](#) notes that insight can develop before, after, or in tandem with tranquility. Nowhere do the suttas state that insight can lead to awakening on its own.

To develop insight, [AN 4:94](#) recommends visiting someone skilled in insight and asking, “How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be investigated? How should they be seen with insight?” A way of understanding these terms in line with other passages in the suttas would be to say that *regarding* here has to do with noting the various ways of analyzing fabrications as to type, such as dividing them into the five aggregates or the three fabrications. *Investigating* refers to trying to understand their workings both in the course of ordinary sense experience and in the practice of meditation. *Seeing* refers to judging their value to the point of developing dispassion for them and letting them go for the sake of release.

We’ve already discussed some of the ways in which the texts recommend regarding fabrications in the preceding section. Here we can look in more detail at how they recommend investigating and seeing them in meditation.

INVESTIGATING. The Buddha’s instructions in mindfulness of breathing, the meditation method he taught most often and in the greatest detail, provide an example for how insight and tranquility can be

developed in tandem. These instructions come in sixteen steps, divided into four sets, called tetrads because they have four steps each. The Buddha apparently did not mean for these steps to be followed in strict numerical order. Rather, the tetrads—or at least, the first three of them—can be developed simultaneously, because each emphasizes an aspect of breath mindfulness that’s present from the very beginning of the practice of focusing on the breath: the breath, feelings, and mind states.

“[1] Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ [2] Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ [3] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ [4] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’

“[5] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.’ [6] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.’ [7] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.’ [8] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.’

“[9] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.’ [10] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in gladdening the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out gladdening the mind.’ [11] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in steadying the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out steadying the mind.’ [12] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in releasing the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out releasing the mind.’” — [*MN 118*](#)

Notice that the tetrads dealing with the breath and feelings explicitly mention being sensitive to bodily fabrication and mental fabrication. Investigating this sensitivity allows you to develop insight into how

fabrication goes into shaping concentration. This emphasizes the *fact* of fabrication.

These steps also encourage you to calm these fabrications to bring the mind to deeper and deeper states of tranquility and concentration. For instance, as [AN 10:20](#) points out, calming bodily fabrication leads ultimately to the fourth jhāna, where in-and-out breathing ceases.

“And how is a monk calmed in his bodily fabrication? There is the case where a monk, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is how a monk is calmed in his bodily fabrication.” — [AN 10:20](#)

Read in conjunction with [SN 36:11](#), this passage would imply a parallel interpretation of step 8 in the breath meditation instructions—calming mental fabrication: It could potentially carry you all the way to the highest formless attainment, the cessation of perception and feeling, for that is where the mental fabrications of perception and feeling are totally calmed.

At the same time, the steps dealing with the mind show that you don't simply observe the mind passively. You actively try to gladden a constricted mind, steady a restless mind, and release a burdened mind. And with what can you do that? With the bodily and mental fabrications explicitly mentioned in the first two tetrads, along with the verbal fabrications that, implicitly, constitute the mind's directions to itself as it engages in the Buddha's sixteen steps.

All of these exercises promote insight in the form of a *value* judgment: that the calmer fabrications can become, the more solid the sense of well-being they provide, and the more fully they enable you to follow through with the duties of the four noble truths.

This insight helps you use the calm of concentration to peel away any defilements that would pull you out of concentration. For instance, as the Buddha notes, without having access to and an appreciation of the calmer pleasures of jhāna, you wouldn't be able to abandon passion for sensuality

regardless of how much insight you had otherwise developed into sensuality's drawbacks.

“Even though a disciple of the noble ones has clearly seen with right discernment as it has come to be that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, still—if he has not attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that—he can be tempted by sensuality. But when he has clearly seen with right discernment as it has come to be that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, and he has attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that, he cannot be tempted by sensuality.” — [MN 14](#).

SEEING. However, regardless of how subtle the calm of concentration, and how superior it is to other fabrications, it's still fabricated. It's still not the goal, because it's a form of becoming.

This is where, if we want to find the unfabricated, we have to adopt the Buddha's strategy for avoiding both craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming. In other words, we have to see fabrications in a way that develops dispassion for them before they can turn into states of becoming.

The Buddha recommends a five-step approach in developing this dispassion: seeing the origination of fabrications, their disappearance, their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them, which is dispassion ([SN 22:26](#)). The first two steps focus on gaining further sensitivity to the fact of fabrication; the remaining ones, on rendering a more radical judgment of their value.

The Buddha details the first two steps of this approach in [SN 22:5](#).

He begins by establishing his reasons for basing the approach on having developed the mind in concentration:

“Develop concentration, monks. A concentrated monk discerns in line with what has come to be. And what does he discern in line

with what has come into being? The origination & disappearance of form. The origination & disappearance of feeling... perception... fabrications. The origination & disappearance of consciousness.

In other words, in a concentrated mind it is possible to observe the five aggregates clearly “as they have come to be” ([Iti 49](#)) before they are fabricated into states of becoming.

Then the Buddha analyzes the origination and disappearance of the five aggregates. The explanation is the same for all five, so we can focus on one, the aggregate of fabrications.

“And what is the origination of fabrications? ...

“There is the case where one enjoys, welcomes, & remains fastened. And what does one enjoy & welcome, to what does one remain fastened? One enjoys, welcomes, & remains fastened to fabrications. As one enjoys, welcomes, & remains fastened to fabrications, there arises delight. Any delight in fabrications is clinging. From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering....

“And what is the disappearance of fabrications? ...

“There is the case where one doesn’t enjoy, welcome, or remain fastened. And what does one not enjoy or welcome, to what does one not remain fastened? One doesn’t enjoy, welcome, or remain fastened to fabrications. As one doesn’t enjoy, welcome, or remain fastened to fabrications, any delight in fabrications ceases. From the cessation of delight comes the cessation of clinging. From the cessation of clinging/sustenance, the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming, the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering.” — [SN 22:5](#)

Notice three things. One, the term “origination” here doesn’t apply to the simple arising of fabrications, but to the causal factors that bring their arising about.

Two, notice that the causal series in both cases—the origination and the disappearance of fabrications—is initiated by your own intentional actions. This point is meant to focus your attention inside, at the genuine cause of suffering, to see why you choose the unskillful courses of action that lead to unintended consequences, such as pain, distress, and despair. This approach of inward reflection calls to mind the Buddha’s remarks to Rāhula: that to purify his mind, he would have to reflect on his actions in the same way that he would reflect on his face in a mirror. It’s through seeing your mind clearly in the mirror of what you’re doing that you can identify its blemishes and clean them away.

The third point to notice here is that the language of the analysis, for both the origination and the disappearance, changes in mid-course. It starts by talking about what one—an individual—does. In other words, the explanation is expressed in personal terms, in terms of becoming: an individual interacting with a world of experience. Then, with the arising or non-arising of delight, the terms of the discussion become more impersonal: events in a causal chain, with no reference to an individual doing or experiencing them or to a world in which they occur. This way of viewing these events is precisely what enables the mind to escape the terms of becoming.

But that doesn’t negate the usefulness of starting the discussion in terms of becoming. When a mind engaged in becoming sees how its actions lead to suffering, it’s motivated to change its ways: to learn and adopt the mode of explanation that avoids becoming and leads to the end of suffering. *It’s for precisely this reason that although the Buddha wants to get his listeners to view fabrications in impersonal terms before they get shaped into becoming, he also has to express his teachings in personal terms so that his listeners will feel motivated to adopt the impersonal perspective to begin with.*

The impersonal mode of explanation that the Buddha uses here is called dependent co-arising. It’s a way of viewing events directly experienced influencing other events directly experienced, without

reference to the question of whether there is or isn't anyone experiencing them, a world in which they are happening, or other hidden causal factors acting behind the scenes. In fact, instead of happening in the framework of a world, a self, or a being, dependent co-arising in its most complete form provides the framework for understanding how notions of "world," "a self," or "a being" arise and become objects of clinging in the first place.

To maintain the framework of dependent co-arising, the Buddha was careful never to answer any questions about who or what was doing the events listed in the framework. For instance, in [SN 12:12](#), he refuses to answer such questions as "Who feels?" "Who craves?" "Who clings?" In [SN 12:35](#), he refuses to answer such questions as "Which is the consciousness, and whose is the consciousness?" "Which are the fabrications, and whose are the fabrications?" The reasons he offers for refusing this last set of questions are the same in each case, and can be illustrated with his response to the question about fabrications:

"Which are the fabrications, lord, and whose are the fabrications?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One said. "If one were to ask, 'Which are the fabrications, and whose are the fabrications?' and if one were to say, 'Fabrications are one thing, and these fabrications are something/someone else's,' both of them would have the same meaning, even though their words would differ. When one is of the view that the life-principle is the same as the body, there is no leading the holy life. And when one is of the view that the life-principle is one thing and the body another, there is no leading the holy life. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle: From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications." — [SN 12:35](#)

In all these cases, the questions and their resulting views come from thinking in terms of becoming, whereas the Buddha is intentionally trying to get his listeners to not think in those terms if they are to gain release. This is one of the reasons why, in [MN 2](#), he states that such questions as, "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this

being come from? Where is it bound?” are all unfit for attention. He wants his listeners to get themselves out of the mental framework that forces them to choose between becoming and non-becoming, resulting in further becoming—and further suffering—in either case.

So the purpose of the first two steps in the Buddha’s five-step approach to dispassion is to provide a framework, and a sensitivity, that allows for the escape from that double jeopardy.

The next three steps in the five-step approach are detailed in [SN 22:26](#). Here again, the explanation is the same for all five aggregates, so we can learn about all five by focusing on the discussion of the aggregate of fabrications.

“The pleasure & joy that arise in dependence on fabrications: That is the allure of fabrications. The fact that fabrications are inconstant, stressful, subject to change: That is the drawback of fabrications. The subduing of desire-passion for fabrications, the abandoning of desire-passion for fabrications: That is the escape from fabrications.” — [SN 22:26](#)

Here the discussion switches from seeing the *fact* of fabrication to judging, in a clear-sighted way, its *value*. As the Buddha notes in [SN 22:60](#), all of the five aggregates do provide pleasure. If they didn’t, beings wouldn’t be infatuated with them or defiled by them. But it’s because the aggregates are also stressful that beings can become disenchanted with them, dispassionate toward them, and—through dispassion—reach the higher well-being of purity. So these three steps focus first on the pleasures of the aggregates, to see exactly how the mind falls for them; then on the drawbacks, to see the suffering that comes with clinging to the aggregates, so as to arrive at a liberating value judgment: The suffering far outweighs the pleasures of the allure. This judgment is what leads to disenchantment and dispassion. With dispassion, the motivating force driving acts of fabrication ceases, so the fabrications themselves cease, and the mind is released.

To induce the value judgment leading to this release, the Buddha recommends cultivating several sets of perceptions and applying them to fabrications of every sort. The most prominent of these perceptions are

the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. The logic with which they lead to disenchantment can be illustrated by the following questionnaire, which is applied to all five aggregates. Because all five are treated in the same way, we can focus how it's applied to the aggregate of fabrications:

“What do you think, monks: Are fabrications constant or inconstant?”

“Inconstant, lord.”

“And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?”

“Stressful, lord.”

“And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, lord.” ...

“Thus, monks... any fabrications whatsoever that are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: All fabrications are to be seen with right discernment as they have come to be: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, ‘Released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’” — [*SN 22:59*](#)

Notice that, in the last question of the questionnaire, the Buddha is not asking the monks to come to the conclusion that there is no self. He's simply getting them to make a value judgment: Given the drawbacks of fabrications, is it fitting to cling to them as “me” or “mine”? No. That judgment, in and of itself, when it goes deeper than any allure of fabrications, is enough to bring the mind to release.

“In seeing six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of inconstancy with regard to all fabrications without exception. Which six? ‘All fabrications will appear as unstable. My mind will not delight in any world. My mind will rise above every world. My heart will be inclined to unbinding. My fetters will go to their abandoning. I’ll be endowed with the foremost qualities of the contemplative life.’” — *AN 6: 102*

“In seeing six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of stress with regard to all fabrications without exception. Which six? ‘The perception of disenchantment will be established within me with regard to all fabrications, like a murderer with a drawn sword. My mind will rise above every world. I’ll become one who sees peace in unbinding. My obsessions will go to their destruction. I’ll be one who has completed his task. The Teacher will have been served with goodwill.’” — *AN 6: 103*

“In seeing six rewards, it’s enough for a monk to establish the perception of not-self with regard to all phenomena without exception. Which six? ‘I won’t be fashioned in connection with any world. My I-making will be stopped. My my-making will be stopped. I’ll be endowed with uncommon knowledge. I’ll become one who rightly sees cause, along with causally-originated phenomena.’” — *AN 6: 104*

Now, the Buddha is not simply presenting these perceptions as an exercise in the abstract. Instead, they are to be applied to your real-time actions in shaping fabrications. Here again, the image of the mirror—the reflective nature of the practice—comes to mind. You advance in the practice by looking carefully at what you’re doing.

And a prime example of this reflective contemplation is the way in which the Buddha has you apply it to the practice of concentration. In other words, you don’t reflect only on everyday, defiled actions. You also reflect on the fabricated skills you are mastering as you develop the path. This is because the practice of concentration has helped to loosen attachments to activities outside of the path, and the mind’s main attachments now are to the fabrication of concentration itself. When

these subtler attachments are removed, the only remaining possible object of attachment is the act of insight.

There are several passages, such as [MN 52](#) and [MN 140](#), that illustrate how to focus on the drawbacks of concentration. [AN 9:36](#), however, goes into the most detail on the stages by which concentration can be analyzed and its drawbacks brought to light for the sake of release:

“Suppose that an archer or archer’s apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk... enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: ‘This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very dhamma-passion, this dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.” — [AN 9:36](#)

First, the jhāna itself is analyzed in terms of the five aggregates that go into it. Then any of eleven perceptions can be applied to see the drawbacks of those aggregates. The perceptions listed here can all be subsumed under the three main perceptions: “Inconstant” and “disintegration” come under inconstancy; “stressful,” “disease,” “cancer,”

“arrow,” “painful,” and “affliction” under stress; and “alien,” “emptiness,” and “not-self” under not-self.

Several mental acts then follow. First, an act of judgment: The mind turns away from the aggregates and develops a verbal fabrication that inclines it to the deathless. And then it stops. In some cases, this stopping of the mind is enough to lead to full awakening. In others, there remains a subtle clinging—expressed as passion and delight ([SN 22:121](#)). The word “dhamma” applied to this clinging can either mean the dhamma—the phenomenon—of the judgment inclining the mind to the deathless, or to the experience of the deathless itself, seen as an object of the mind (another meaning of *dhamma*). This subtle level of attachment prevents full awakening, but it nevertheless allows the mind to reach the penultimate level of awakening, called non-return. The difference between these two outcomes appears to lie in how thoroughly all-around the meditator reflects on the aggregates as activities: If he or she neglects to notice the attachment that remains to the activity of discernment, the awakening will not be complete.

This means that, for the sake of release, you have to abandon attachment not only to the practice of concentration, but also to the activity of insight. After all, most of the work of insight consists of developing strategic perceptions, but even at their most perceptive, perceptions are still fabrications. [SN 22:95](#) goes so far as to compare them to mirages—empty, void, without substance. The goal of release, however, is the substance of the whole practice ([AN 10:58](#)), so perceptions must not be confused with the goal. This means that, on reaching this stage, the mirror of insight has to reflect back on itself in a way that allows the mind to abandon it if release is to be total.

There are very few explicit discussions of this point in the Canon, although it is implicit in several passages. For example, it’s implicit in the fact that right view is listed as a factor of the path—which is fabricated—and not as a feature of the goal, which is not ([Iti 90](#)). It’s implicit in the simile of the raft, in which the raft is to be abandoned on reaching the further shore ([MN 22](#); [SN 35:197](#)). And it’s implicit in the simile of the relay chariots, in which the chariots are not to be confused with the palace to which they lead ([MN 24](#)).

[AN 4:194](#) makes the same point a little more explicitly. After developing the elements of the path leading to release—virtue, concentration, and discernment—the meditator makes the mind dispassionate toward all phenomena conducive to passion, and then releases the mind from the factors conducive to release:

“And what, TigerPaws, is the factor for exertion with regard to purity of release? That same noble disciple—endowed with this factor for exertion with regard to purity of virtue, this factor for exertion with regard to purity of mind, and this factor for exertion with regard to purity of view—makes his mind dispassionate with regard to phenomena that are conducive to passion, and liberates his mind with regard to phenomena [*dhammas*] that are conducive to liberation. He—having made his mind dispassionate with regard to phenomena that are conducive to passion, and having liberated his mind with regard to phenomena that are conducive to liberation—touches right release. This is called purity of release.” — [AN 4:194](#).

In other words, the final step toward release requires gaining release from the phenomena that lead in its direction.

Two discourses show that you can do this by applying to all the factors of the path the same five-step approach that was applied to fabrications in general so as to gain release from them: seeing them in terms of origination, disappearance, allure, drawbacks, and escape.

“Monks, there are these five faculties. Which five? The faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment. When a disciple of the noble ones discerns, as they have come to be, the origination, the disappearance, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from these five faculties, he is called a disciple of the noble ones who has attained the stream: never again destined for the lower realms, certain, headed for self-awakening.” — [SN 48:3](#)

“Monks, there are these five faculties. Which five? The faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment. When—

having discerned, as they have come to be, the origination, the disappearance, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from these five faculties—a monk is released from lack of clinging/sustenance, he is called an arahant whose effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who is released through right gnosis.” — [SN 48:4](#).

Here it's worth noting that even the stream-enterer—one who has attained the lowest of the four levels of awakening—has seen the drawbacks of discernment and the escape from discernment. It's simply that such a person has not followed that insight all the way to the end of the defilements.

However, the passage that shows most clearly how the mirror of insight is applied to insight itself for the sake of going beyond it is [AN 10:93](#). In it, Anāthapiṇḍika the householder—a stream-enterer—is engaged in a discussion with a number of sectarians concerning their views about the cosmos, the self, and the fate of a fully awakened person. Anāthapiṇḍika applies the following analysis to each view, showing that in holding to the view, the sectarians are holding to stress. In other words, he focuses on the view, not in terms of its content, but in terms of its status as a mental fabrication that's an object of clinging and thus an instance of stress. Or to put it another way, he looks at the view, not in terms of what it describes, but in terms of its performance: what it leads the person holding it to do. Take, for instance, the view that the cosmos is eternal:

“As for the venerable one who says, *'The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have,'* his view arises from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. This venerable one thus adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress.”

The sectarians then question Anāthapiṇḍika as to his own view, and he responds:

“Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have.”

The sectarians think that they can catch Anāthapiṇḍika in his own trap, but he shows that he is already far ahead of their game:

“So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress.”

“Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it has come to be, I also discern the higher escape from it as it has come to be.”

When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, their heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. — [*AN 10:93*](#)

What this shows is that Anāthapiṇḍika has taken his insight into the fact and value of fabrications, viewed as actions, and used it to find the escape from any attachment even to the act of fabricating right view itself.

One way to understand Anāthapiṇḍika’s strategy here is to view it as an example of what is meant in the four steps of the fourth tetrad in breath meditation:

“[13] He [the monk] trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on inconstancy.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on inconstancy.’ [14] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on dispassion [or: fading].’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out

focusing on dispassion.’ [15] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on cessation.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on cessation.’ [16] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on relinquishing.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on relinquishing.’” — [*MN 118*](#)

The step of focusing on inconstancy starts with applying the perception of inconstancy—and its companion perceptions, stress and not-self—to fabrications, both inside and outside the meditation. The step of dispassion comes as a result, when the allure of fabrications is seen with insight to be no match for their drawbacks. Because passion is what drives the act of continuing to fabricate fabrications, dispassion brings that fabrication to an end, and fabrications cease on their own. The step of relinquishment is when the analysis then focuses on the fabrication of insight itself, and that fabrication, too, is abandoned.

These steps help to explain the Buddha’s strategic approach to framing his teachings, and our need to approach those teachings strategically, too. He had to employ teachings expressed in personal terms, showing the drawbacks of becoming, for people to be willing to apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to their most ingrained habit: repeatedly creating identities as beings in worlds of experience as means for gaining the pleasures they’ve been accustomed to feeding on. He had to use teachings expressed in impersonal terms for this listeners to reflect on their actions in the proper way to bypass the dilemma posed by the need to avoid both craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming. That way, through dispassion, they could allow the processes leading to becoming to cease. And he had to remind his listeners that they had to reflect on the fact that even their insights framed in impersonal terms ultimately had to be relinquished so as to realize unfabricated release.

It’s in this way that the mind is totally freed from attachment to fabrications of every sort—the five aggregates, as well as bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications in all their meritorious, demeritorious, and imperturbable forms. The reflective strategy employed here follows the Buddha’s solutions to both of the dilemmas that faced him before his awakening: It focuses on *viewing* fabrications so as to avoid issues of

becoming and non-becoming. And it enables you to *use* fabrications to allow fabrications to cease, arriving at the threshold of the unfabricated, and then to *abandon* even the fabrications you used for this purpose, as the final step across the flood.

The main problem facing anyone who wishes to attempt this last step is to know when the mind is ready for it. If you attempt it too soon, you fall off the raft and get washed away by the current. If you wait too long, the raft floats near the shore but never arrives. A large part of the discernment exercised in following the path lies in being acutely observant as well as reflective, learning to read the needs of the mind in real time.

The Buddha concludes one of his discussions of insight with the simile of the swift pair of messengers:

“Suppose, monk, that there were a royal frontier fortress with strong ramparts, strong walls & arches, and six gates. In it would be a wise, competent, intelligent gatekeeper to keep out those he didn’t know and to let in those he did. A swift pair of messengers, coming from the east, would say to the gatekeeper, ‘Where, my good man, is the commander of this fortress?’ He would say, ‘There he is, sirs, sitting in the central square.’ The swift pair of messengers, delivering their accurate report to the commander of the fortress, would then go back by the route by which they had come. Then a swift pair of messengers, coming from the west... the north... the south, would say to the gatekeeper, ‘Where, my good man, is the commander of this fortress?’ He would say, ‘There he is, sirs, sitting in the central square.’ The swift pair of messengers, delivering their accurate report to the commander of the fortress, would then go back by the route by which they had come.

“I have given you this simile, monk, to convey a message. The message is this: The fortress stands for this body—composed of the four great elements, born of mother & father, nourished with rice & barley gruel, subject to constant rubbing & abrasion, to breaking & falling apart. The six gates stand for the six internal sense media. The gatekeeper stands for mindfulness. The swift pair of

messengers stands for tranquility [*samatha*] and insight [*vipassanā*]. The commander of the fortress stands for consciousness. The central square stands for the four great elements: the earth-property, the liquid-property, the fire-property, & the wind-property. The accurate report stands for unbinding [*nibbāna*]. The route by which they had come stands for the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.” — [SN 35:204](#).

Notice that the messengers of tranquility and insight deliver the message of unbinding, and not the message of jhāna or the three perceptions. In other words, they themselves are not the message. They arrive at the central square of the fortress simply to serve their *attha*, their purpose, which is release. Notice, too, that they leave the fortress after delivering their message. The commander of the fortress doesn't seize hold of them or make them stay.

This doesn't mean, of course, that they're not welcome to return later to serve the commander in other ways and on another footing. After emerging from the experience of full awakening, arahants can continue making use of right view, right mindfulness, and right concentration for other purposes: The texts mention that although there is no further task for the arahants to perform, they engage in these path factors for the sake of mindfulness and alertness and for a pleasant abiding ([MN 107](#), [SN 22:122](#); [SN 47:4](#)). And the many suttas in which the Buddha and his arahant students teach others show that they maintain their full range of mental capabilities to help others along the path. But as [SN 47:4](#) makes clear, their relationship to the factors of the path is no longer the same. They experience them “disjoined” from them. In other words, they no longer need them for the purpose of putting an end to suffering and stress, so they no longer have any need to feed on them or cling to them.

But as for the messengers' original role in your own practice now, your ability to take a reflective approach to all levels of the practice—from your actions in general, through the act of concentrating the mind, through the act of developing dispassion for all fabrications by developing and then

abandoning the perceptions of insight—is what enables you not to mistake the messengers for the message, and you can leave them free to return by the way they came.

The eye of the mind... isn't attached to views—for there's yet another, separate sort of reality that has no 'this' or 'that.' In other words, it doesn't have the view or conceit that 'I am.' It lets go of the assumptions that, 'That's the self,' 'That's not-self,' 'That's constant,' 'That's inconstant,' 'That arises,' 'That doesn't arise.' It can let go of these things completely. That's the Dhamma, and yet it doesn't hold onto the Dhamma, which is why we say that the Dhamma is not-self. It also doesn't hold on to the view that says, 'not-self.' It lets go of views, causes, and effects, and isn't attached to anything at all dealing with wordings or meanings, conventions or practices. — Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, "The Path to Peace & Freedom for the Mind"

If we can get our practice on the noble path, we'll enter unbinding. Virtue will disband, concentration will disband, discernment will disband. In other words, we won't dwell on our knowledge or discernment. If we're intelligent enough to know, we simply know, without taking intelligence as being an essential part of ourselves.... This is where we can relax. They can say 'inconstant,' but it's just what they say. They can say 'stress,' but it's just what they say. They can say 'not-self,' but it's just what they say. Whatever they say, that's the way it is. It's true for them, and they're completely right—but completely wrong. As for us, only if we can get ourselves beyond right and wrong will we be doing fine. Roads are built for people to walk on, but dogs and cats can walk on them as well. Sane people and crazy people will use the roads. They didn't build the roads for crazy people, but crazy people have every right to use them. As for the precepts, even fools and idiots can observe them. The same with concentration: Crazy or sane, they can come and sit. And discernment: We all have the right to come and talk our heads off, but it's simply a question of being right or wrong.

None of the valuables of the mundane world give any real pleasure. They're nothing but stress. They're good as far as the world is concerned, but unbinding doesn't have any need for them. Right views and wrong views are an affair of the world. Unbinding doesn't have any right views or wrong views. For this reason, whatever is a wrong view, we should abandon. Whatever is a right view, we should develop—until the day it can fall from our grasp. That's when we can be at our ease. — Phra Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, "Beyond Right & Wrong"

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