

Working with Fabrication

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When the Buddha lists the various conditions that lead to suffering, he starts out with the way ignorance conditions our fabrications. It sounds pretty abstract, but it's actually a very useful tool for understanding what we're doing and how we can step back from the way we ordinarily create suffering. We can learn how to fabricate in ways that are actually more skillful.

After all, the path itself is a fabrication. We put together right mindfulness. We put together right concentration. All the other factors of the path are things that are put together, which is what *fabrication* means. It doesn't mean manufacturing total lies or unreality. It simply reflects the fact that we do shape our experience.

We do it in three ways. There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath. That's what we're focusing on right now. As you breathe in and breathe out, you're fabricating your experience right there. There's also directed thought and evaluation, which are called verbal fabrication. These are the things you say to yourself—all the different voices in the mind. Pick up a topic, and then make a comment on it. Directed thought is picking up the topic. Evaluation is the comment, which can either be a statement or a question. Finally, there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. Feelings are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions are the labels we apply to things—the words or images we hold in mind. When you compare perception with directed thought and evaluation, a perception is like an individual word, whereas the directed thought and evaluation deals in whole sentences.

These have a huge impact on how we experience things. All the different voices in the mind, all the different committee members, all our different identities are made up of these various forms of fabrication. This is where the teaching gets useful. A thought comes into your mind, an emotion comes into your mind, telling you that you want to do this or that: If you realize that it's not skillful, you can look at it and ask, "Okay, what kind of fabrication is going into this?"

One of the reasons we work with the breath and try to get really sensitive to the breath energies is so that you can be sensitive to how a particular thought goes along with a particular way of breathing. If you recognize that it's unskillful, you change the way you breathe, and that weakens the power of that particular thought. This is especially useful when you're dealing with addictions, because as soon as the desire for a hit comes up, whatever the hit is, you tend to tense up.

That then becomes proof that you've got to do something right away to deal with the tension in the body, to deal with the sense of dis-ease. You can short-circuit that by breathing in a way that's really relaxed, pulling yourself out for a bit and saying, "Okay, I *can* breathe in a way that's really comfortable." That weakens the desire, weakens the need for the hit. Then you can start looking for what the thoughts are saying. You can see that they're making things up, and you don't really have to believe them.

So when you think about these concepts of fabrication, remind yourself that these are important tools for learning how to step back out of the particular thought world that goes along with that member of the committee. In the Buddha's terms, these members are what he calls becomings. There's an identity, but there's also a particular world that goes along with that identity. Say you have an addiction to chocolate. When the voice comes in and talks about chocolate, then immediately all the things that are relevant to eating chocolate are part of that world. To get away from the suffering and stress inherent in that world, you learn how to step out, step back.

Ajaan Fuang used to say that looking at your thoughts, you learn how to look at them this way. You step back a bit. It's like watching TV: You don't get *into* the TV set. I think that's the way he looked at TV. Most people nowadays *do* get their heads into the TV set, even though physically they don't get in there. What he's talking about is like stepping back and being a critic. You think, "This TV show here, how do they make it? What did they do well? What did they not do well?" You don't get involved in the story, believing in the characters and identifying with them. You step back and see them as something made up, something put together for a particular purpose.

Then you can ask yourself, "What is the purpose of this?" For most TV shows, it's to sell something or to sell you on a particular idea. And when you start seeing the motivation behind that thing, you can pull yourself out and say, "I don't want to get involved in that. I don't want to believe that thought world."

It's like the events during 9/11. I was staying up at Mount Rainier that day. It turned out that in Mount Rainier National Park, there was only one TV set available for people, and it was in the main lodge. I walked in and saw that they had it on. CNN, I think it was, had already got the theme music and the headline for the event, and I realized, "Okay, they're creating a world around that event, and I don't want to be part of that world." So I turned around and walked out.

In same way, when you can see intentions in the mind and realize that you don't want to identify with them, you *can* pull yourself out. And it's a lot easier to

pull yourself out when you learn how to look at the various voices in your mind simply as conglomerations of these different kinds of fabrication.

Now, the trick on the path is learning how to use fabrication as part of the path. After all, right view is a type of fabrication, but it's a particular type of fabrication. It's the kind that can pull you out of other fabrications.

Anathapindika, who was a student of the Buddha and a layperson, was asked one time by some members of other religious sects, "What does the Buddha believe? What are his views on things?" And Anathapindika, who was quite advanced in the practice, said, "You know, I don't know the entirety of his views." "Well, how about the monks? What are their views?" "I don't know the entirety of their views, either, but I can tell you about my views. But first, I'd like to hear yours."

So the various members of the sects talked about the hot topics of the day: whether the universe was finite or infinite, eternal or not eternal, whether the soul is the same thing as the body or whether there's a separate soul and a separate body, and what happens to enlightened people: When they achieve enlightenment and then die, do they go out of existence? Do they exist? Both? Neither?

You look at those questions, and you can see basically that they all have to do with becoming. What is the world? What is the person? Where does the world come from? Where does the person come from? Where does it go? Then they go into a long series of related issues. Anathapindika said, "In each of these cases, when you cling to that view, the clinging itself is going to be a cause of suffering. In holding on to that view, you're holding on to suffering."

So they said, "Okay, what's your view?" He said, "Whatever is fabricated, whatever is put together, leads to suffering, and is not worth clinging to as me or mine." And they said, "Okay, when you hold on to that view, then of course you're holding on to suffering, too." He said, in effect, "No, it's a tool. You use it to take apart your clinging. You see the extent to which you can escape the suffering." That silenced them. He went later and told the Buddha what had happened, and the Buddha said, "That was a good way to answer those people."

In other words, right view is a type of fabrication, but it focuses on watching the fabrications of the mind, and for that reason it contains the seeds for its own transcendence. It allows you to look at fabrications, all other fabrications, and learn how to let go of them. Look at them, whatever the issues are—even big, cosmic issues—and see that the desire to hold on to that particular issue and get that particular issue answered is going to tie you down to suffering. The real issue is learning how to step back from that. You use right view to step back from it. Then you also use right view to step back from the fabrication of right view, to

take apart any attachment you might have to right view. That's what gives you freedom.

So that's the skill of the practice: You start by learning which fabrications are useful for the purpose of letting go of unskillful fabrications. These can deal with anything, any of the voices you have in your mind from ordinary, everyday addictions to the bigger addictions like the issues of where we come from, or what's the ground of being in the cosmos. The Buddha has you look at the desire to get that question answered. Where does that desire come from? The questions may not be obviously unskillful, but he says as long as there's any kind of clinging there, there's going to be stress and suffering. You have to learn how to step back from it and just see that as a voice in the mind that's composed of these different kinds of fabrication. When you gain a sense of dispassion or disenchantment even for skillful fabrications, then you can let go. Then you're free.

The image of freedom coming from letting go is one that the Buddha usually illustrated with fire. In those days, they believed fire clung to its fuel, and when it went out, it went out because it let go of the fuel. All too often, we feel that we're trapped by something because the thing is clinging to us, holding on to us, but the image here is the other way around. We're trapped by our own acts of holding on. In some cases, they're blatantly unskillful. In other cases, they seem relatively skillful but they still cause suffering.

So what we're doing as we're working with the breath here is working with all the different forms of fabrication. The breath itself is the bodily fabrication; you can adjust that any way you want. Then as you do the adjusting, you're engaged in directed thought and evaluation, asking yourself if the breath is comfortable. If it's not, what can you do with it? How can you change it? Then there are the feelings of relative levels of pleasure as you work with the breath, and also the perceptions that you hold in mind: What's the breath energy doing in your body? Where does it come in? Where does it go out?

You get more and more sensitive to these processes to see how you're actually engaged as you create the state of concentration. That achieves two things. One, it gives you a good place to stay so that you can look at other forms of fabrication objectively. And in the course of creating this sense of concentration, you become more sensitive to the processes of fabrication involved in concentration itself. You use these processes until they've done their service and, as with right view, you then learn how to take them apart. Then you're free.

But don't be too quick to take them apart. A lot of people are afraid they're going to get stuck on concentration. I have a student who's a financial advisor, and he was concerned about getting stuck on concentration. I told him, "It's like

somebody in your office who has just received a raise. They've got a new position. They come into your office and say, 'How can I move up the ladder quickly? What's the next step up the ladder? I don't want to get stuck in this position.' You've got to tell the person, 'Okay, the way you move up the ladder is by doing your current position really well.' It's the same with the concentration. You've got to learn how to do the concentration really well before you can move beyond it."

So staying here a long time doesn't necessarily mean you're stuck. It simply means you're working on learning how to see these processes of fabrication more and more skillfully, more and more clearly. When you move into deeper states of concentration—say, when the directed thought and evaluation fall away—then you see, "Oh, that is a particular type of fabrication. This is how it starts, and this is how it ends."

When you get to the fourth jhana and even the breath stops, and all that's left is mental fabrication, Ajaan Lee has a nice image for this process. He says it's like having ore that has lots of different metals in it. You heat the ore up. After a while, when you reach the melting point of one metal, that'll dissolve and leave the ore. Then you raise the heat a little bit more, and you reach the melting point of another metal, and that'll dissolve. Because the melting points are different, they come out separately. It's the same with these different kinds of fabrication. As you get deeper and deeper into concentration, they fall away separately. That's one of the ways you get insight into them: seeing how they separate out.

But the important lesson is that you've got to learn how to use this understanding. And you *can* use this understanding for all kinds of things in your life, starting with really blatant addictions and moving into some of the more subtle addictions—anything that's causing stress and suffering.

So even though the teachings on fabrication may seem abstract, they're really very direct and very good tools for learning how to pull yourself out of the thought worlds, pull yourself out of the identities of all the different committee members, using the skillful ones in order to gain more strength over the unskillful ones. When the skillful ones have done their job, you turn your attention on those until you reach the point where you realize you don't need to take on those identities anymore. Then you're totally free.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, one of the statements he made that really attracted me to his teaching was that he said the whole purpose of this is to purify the heart. This is how you purify it. You get it to the place where it's not clouded by any fabrication at all.