

## *Maintained by Fabrication*

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There's a passage where the Buddha asks, "What is one?" and the answer is, "All beings are maintained by food." Well, it turns out there's another answer to that same question in another passage: All beings are maintained by fabrication. The fact that we exist depends on fabrication. We're taking the results of our past fabrications and we're using them as raw material to fabricate the present moment. In doing so, we provide raw material for the future. Each moment, we're constantly moving on, moving on. But the problem is that we're often blind as to where we're going.

All fabrication is done for the purpose of something, which means we have something in mind. Even animals with minimal brains have something in mind as they act. Think of the sea squirts. When they're born, they're looking for a place to stay permanently. They have a little brain that moves them around, directs them, chooses a spot. They settle in, and then they digest their brain because they feel there's nothing else they have to think about. They just feed from that point on. The fabrication in that case gets pretty minimal—just feeding without anything else in mind. We can see that that's a very limited idea of happiness, a limited idea of well-being. Well, the Buddha looks at us and sees us as sea squirts. We have very limited ideas about what happiness can be, what's available to us, what's possible, and we content ourselves with things that are not really worth being content with.

Often we're headed to places but we have no idea where we're going. The Buddha talks about different beings headed on the path to hell, headed on the path to the animal womb, headed on the path to the realm of the hungry ghosts, or human beings, or the heavens. A lot of those beings have no idea where they're going. Those on the path to hell don't think they're going to hell. Their picture of reality tells them something else. The same for those who are going to the womb of the animals, the realm of the hungry ghosts. No one intends to become that kind of animal, that kind of being. But they've been fabricating in that direction blindly, with an idea in mind about what's possible, what works.

So when the Buddha's teaching beings, he's not teaching people who are suddenly deciding they want to follow a path. They're already following paths, and his task as a teacher is to alert them as to what kind of path they're on, and to the better paths that are available.

This is why right view comes at the beginning of the path. Right conviction in the Buddha's awakening comes as the first strength, the first faculty. He's giving us

a picture to hold in mind, opening up possibilities for us to keep in mind as we keep fabricating.

I was talking the other day to someone who was saying he came to the meditation thinking that at the beginning he would just find his mind, where it was, what was going on on its own, and then decide to fabricate a state of concentration. Suddenly it hit him that he was already fabricating something else. We're fabricating all the time. It's just that we do it blindly, or as the Buddha would say, without alertness. So we want to be alert to what we're doing. But even so, it depends on having a picture and choosing whose picture we're going to take as our guide. As a philosopher once said, we live forward but understand backward. Well, we're fabricating forward, fabricating forward. And often it's too late when we realize which direction we've been going.

So we're fortunate to have the Buddha's teaching available. It gives us an idea of what's possible, what works in the world, how it works in the world, what kind of happiness we can attain through our fabrication. And it turns out we can arrive at something unfabricated. That's what makes this so special. Everything else in the world is fabricated and goes to fabrications: fabrications creating more fabrications, creating more fabrications, and it just goes on and on and on without end.

But he's telling us the unfabricated is possible. At that point, we don't have to be beings any more. That's a bit scary, because the unfabricated is going to require that we abandon a lot of things that we've been fabricating for in the past—things we thought were good, things we thought were worthwhile—which is why we have to keep reminding ourselves of what right view says: that our intentions really do matter, and that intentions can be developed to a level of skill that can take us all the way to the unfabricated, and that it's the ultimate happiness where you don't have to intend anything anymore.

You want to keep that in mind. Otherwise, we get tied up in the affairs of the day. "This person said this. That person said this. This person has it in for me, and this person"—whatever. As the Buddha said, what other people do to you is not going to take you to hell. What *you* do, though, *can* take you to hell. And you don't have to wait for hell at the end of this lifetime. Hell right now. At the same time, it's getting in the way of what opportunities you do have to search for something better.

So remember you're always fabricating. You are the product of fabrications. Your identities depend on the ones that you've latched on to. So ask yourself, if the Buddha saw you, which path would he see you on? And what would he tell

you so that your fabrications are not blind, so that you can fabricate with some understanding?

Now, granted, we take a lot of the Buddha's teachings on faith. But that's the position of all beings. Everybody is acting on faith. I was reading a while back someone claiming that the beliefs of a scientific worldview are not like the beliefs of a religious worldview. The scientific worldview is true. It's been proven. That's what the person said. But I can't think of anybody who holds on to a belief without some sense that it's been proven one way or another. And there's still so much, even in the scientific worldview, that we don't really know. Dark energy and dark matter are called dark because no one knows what they are. We don't even know if the future's going to happen. Time could end at any point.

There are so many things we take on trust. So the question is, who's trustworthy? And look at the path that's being recommended. If it's a purely materialistic worldview, everything would depend on survival. That's basically the road to hell, when you say that survival is the highest goal that we can have, because without the physical survival of the body, we can't do anything else. So that's the number one prerequisite. Oftentimes, to survive, people have to do some pretty nasty things. We see this all around us. Those people are on the road to a rebirth in an animal womb or a hell, but they don't know.

Then you look at the Buddha's path. It's a path of dignity. A path of honesty. It's built on virtue, and that right there has a lot to recommend it. Of course, it's not proof. As the Buddha said, you don't really have proof of his teachings until you've seen the deathless for the very first time. You're like the hunter in the forest looking for an elephant. You see likely signs. Even in the practice of jhana, even in the psychic powers that can be attained through jhana—those are just likely signs. The real proof comes when you actually see the elephant, when you get to the unfabricated and realize that it's true: It can be done. It can be attained.

The fabrications that create you, the fabrications that you're creating all the time, can't cause the unfabricated. But if you fashion them well, they can get you to the threshold, and from the threshold, you can go to it. That's when you know. The people who come back from that experience are people who are trustworthy. Again, we take this on faith. We take this on conviction. But it's a good faith. It's a good conviction. And it's a good thing to keep in mind as we practice, because as the Buddha warns us, a lot of the other "for the sakes of" that we could follow—the ones we take as a guide as we keep fabricating ourselves, fabricating our experience, and then using those fabrications to fabricate more—entail a lot of suffering.

We need a guide so that we're not totally blind as we head into the future. So choose your guide well. When you have a guide like the Buddha, keep his teachings in mind all the time because it's so easy to fall back into other paths, other ways of fabrication. After all, that's what we've been doing in the past. It comes easily. But when you look at what you've fabricated so far and decide that it's not good enough, then it's up to you to fabricate with more skill. That's when you can get on the right path.