

Sensitive to Fabrication

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There's a passage where the Buddha describes the characteristics of things that are fabricated and of things that are not fabricated. With the things that are fabricated, you can detect their arising, you can detect their change as they remain, and you can detect their passing away. As for the unfabricated, there's no arising to detect, no change, no passing away.

When we remember that the Buddha defines fabrication as "intention," we realize that he's saying something pretty radical here: Everything you experience through the senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas—is shaped by your intentions. These things change. So when you detect change, you know there's some element of intention behind it. Without that intention, the sensory experience wouldn't happen.

Now, not all change is *caused* by your intention. If there's a rockslide, you can't say, "I intended the rockslide down the mountain to happen." But your experience will have an element with which you've fabricated it—how you've made sense of it, how you responded to it, how you reacted to it—and the Buddha's pointing there. He's saying, "Everything you experience through the six senses is fabricated in this way. It's all going to change, and there's stress in the change." Which means that if you're going to look for lasting happiness, the six senses are the wrong place to look. You've got to dig deeper inside. That's what we do as we meditate: We dig down into the present as we try to calm down our fabrications.

They're pretty active. In fact, the mind's fabrications play more of a role in our sensory experience than we tend to realize. We go out to sense things. The Buddha talks about this as an *asava*, an "outflow." We flow out to our senses through our sensual plans, our desire for becoming, and just out of plain ignorance—and because of that ignorance we're bewildered.

Think about when you were a little kid, really small, and you were dealing with pain. Pain is why we think—why we try to figure things out. If we had no pain at all—if everything were just perfectly blissful—there wouldn't be any thinking, any need for it. But because of pain, we're bewildered, and we try to figure things out.

Back when I was in school, I read about a psychologist, Jean Piaget, who had studied children to figure out how they constructed their view of the world. It wasn't that they just gradually put things together, adding more facts bit by bit, and finally arrived at a worldview. They had full worldviews from very early

on. In their early worldviews, kids have some very strange ideas of causality. Then then they begin to realize: This is not working. So they have to destroy that old worldview and adopt a new one.

This is how we grow: not just by increments, but by revolutions inside. When there's enough pain or suffering that we realize that holding onto our way of viewing the world is no longer worth it, we let it fall apart, and find a new one to replace it. Finally we get to a point where we're satisfied with our worldview. We reach a stage where we think that even though there might be some pain and suffering, some stress, inherent in our worldview, it's good enough. "I can manage": That's the attitude.

But the Buddha says there's something better. There is an unfabricated dimension that can be experienced. So he wants us to look at our way of viewing the world and tells us, "It's not good enough. You're putting up with a lot of pain and suffering that you don't have to." This is why he encourages us to look at the suffering inherent in these things—everything that's intended. "Wherever there's change," he said, "look for the element of stress there." Because, when you look there, you can see there's fabrication—you realize you're doing something. You're implicit in that change.

This means you have to change your habits. This is one of the reasons why there's a lot of resistance to the Buddha's teachings. But then, when you turn around and reflect that there's a lot of stress and pain in your current worldview—and that you may be responsible for it—you're more willing to give him a fair hearing.

This is also why he has you develop a sense of *samvega*, because people have gone through lives—*many* lives—holding on to their worldviews, sometimes fairly skillful, sometimes not, and they go nowhere but around and around.

We hold to our worldviews because we figure we can arrive at some well-being by making certain assumptions, and whatever stress is involved is a means to a better end. But within *samsara* there are no ends; everything is just a means. You arrive someplace and, as soon as you've arrived, it starts eroding away. There's a passage where the Buddha says, "However they conceive it, it already has become something else." When you see this, the futility of the whole process is what gets to you.

It's in this way that *samvega* is much more impersonal, say, than compassion. You see beings causing a lot of suffering and there's some compassion, but then you realize that the whole framework of being a being is inherently stressful, and it's not accomplishing anything. It's just a lot of unnecessary pain.

When my father was approaching death, I went back home—he was going through the last stages of Parkinson’s dementia—and I could see there was a lot of suffering in his mind, in his heart. Yet it was hard to get in to help him because he was demented. I kept thinking to myself, “What purpose does this serve?” It serves no purpose at all, yet we keep coming back.

Think of King Koravya: He’s so old that when he means to put his foot in one place, it goes someplace else; he’s sick—he has a recurrent illness—and each time it hits, his courtiers are sitting around waiting for him to die, basically: “Maybe this time he’s going to die. Maybe this time he’s going to die.” He’s amassing wealth that he knows he’s going to have to leave behind; and yet, when there’s an opportunity to conquer another kingdom, he would go for it, even if the other kingdom were on the other side of the ocean.

All these things that make us suffer, and yet we come back for more.

We reflect on this so that we can turn around and look at ourselves: What are we doing that’s keeping us going? After all, the motor is inside: this habit of the mind to fabricate things for the sake of something. But then, what is it for the sake of? Whatever it is, it’s for the sake of something else, and that’s for the sake of something else. It’s like an unending chain. There’s no real point of arrival through the process of fabrication—except for one. You can get to the deathless by fabricating the noble path.

That’s why we adopt the Buddha’s way of looking at things, which is to turn around and look at these processes—the processes by which we create our worldviews, our sense of what’s worth doing, what’s not worth doing—and seeing how we put them together, all the steps.

How are you going to see the steps? By making the mind really, really quiet; giving it one thing to think about. Only when you focus on one intention, and make up your mind that you’re going to stay with that one intention, do you see the other little intentions that want to push you away.

Otherwise, we’re like a boat with no anchor, floating on a river, and we’re so far from shore that we have no clear points of reference. Currents come from one direction, they come from another direction, the boat goes here, it goes there, meanders around, but we really don’t notice it. “It’s just the way of boats, just the way of the ocean”: That’s what we think. But if we were to have an anchor to try to keep the boat in one place, we could start seeing, “Oh, there’s a current that’s coming from the north,” or a current from the south, or waves are coming, they’re pushing you left or right.

So we try in the same way to get the mind still. We anchor it in the present moment with the breath and make up our minds that we’re going to breathe in

such a way that we minimize bodily fabrication and minimize mental fabrication, to calm the bodily fabrication, calm the mental fabrication— in other words, too calm the breath, calm our perceptions. Then we'll be able to pick up subtle things that are going on in the breath, in the body, that we didn't see before.

And also in the mind: We'll see the stages by which the mind creates a reaction, creates a worldview and then reacts within it, or responds, or is more proactive. The more quickly we can pick up on these things, the more clearly we can see the steps in the process.

The purpose of this is to see how arbitrary a lot of those processes are. Here again, there's a sense of *saṃvega*: This is what you've created your life around, these little movements in the mind, and they're all so arbitrary.

So why do we keep coming back for more? You look in, you look in, to see what's the allure. What do you think you're going to accomplish? When it really hits home—that the drawbacks really outweigh whatever advantage, whatever allure there was to those things—that's when you really let go.

Now the response is not *saṃvega*. It's *dispassion*. It's something else; it's a maturing, realizing that, "Oh, this is what I've been doing all along, and it's doomed. No matter how nice a world I can imagine, it's all going to fall apart, and then I have to build something out of the wreckage."

And sometimes it *is* wreckage and sometimes there is injury. In other words, in the way we feed on things—the way we go around trying to find our happiness—sometimes we're good, we behave ourselves, and we do it in a relatively harmless way; other times, no, we're more careless. And even in the harmless ways of looking for happiness, there's going to be a lot of stress.

As I said, when that hits home, then the mind is ready to open up to something that's not fabricated. It's going to fight all the way—it's going to say, "Well, maybe there's something better, a better fabrication"—because that's what we're used to doing: just keep fabricating, intending, creating something for the sake of something that we think is going to be even better. It's when the mind finally lets go, puts down all of its tools: That's when we find that, "Oh yeah, there is an unfabricated, and we've been willfully ignoring it all this time."

That's when we've really listened to the Buddha's message and gotten the most out of his way of looking at things. When he talks about fabrication, he's not talking about trees and mountains in and of themselves, even though they are constructed out of conditions; he's more interested in how you're constructing your experience of trees and mountains and everything else. When you learn how to be more reflective in this way and look at how you're engaging in things—and you see that it's been your engagement that's been the problem—that's when

you've benefited from listening to the Buddha's teachings. You have a sense not only of the Dhamma but also what the Dhamma aims at—what its goal is, its *attha*, what it's all about.

And you realize how compassionate the Buddha was to focus on *these* issues. After he'd gained his awakening, he could have talked about anything he wanted to, but he saw that teaching people to be reflective on how they go about looking for happiness—so that they don't do it with bewilderment but they bring more and more knowledge to what they're doing—was by far the best use of his time. And because he used *his* time well, we should make sure that we use ours well, too.