

The Missing Fabrication

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When you look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, one of the first things you may notice is the role played by fabrication. In the first tetrad, the Buddha talks about calming bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. In the second tetrad, he talks about becoming sensitive to mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions—and then calming those, too.

The question may arise, “Why does the Buddha talk in terms of fabrication?” Especially with the in-and-out breath, why doesn't he just say calming the in-and-out breath? The answer seems to be that he wants to call attention to the role that your intentions play in shaping the breath, shaping your sense of the body, and in shaping your sense of the mind. It's in this way that breath meditation becomes not just an exercise in tranquility but also an exercise in insight, because it's through these fabrications that we shape everything that comes through the senses.

One of the main lessons we have to learn as we meditate is to look at our filtering process and at the skill or lack of skill with which we shape things. This is especially important if insights suddenly appear in the course of your meditation. You have to ask yourself, “How am I filtering this?” If you know the filters well, then you're in a much safer position to deal with your insights properly. If you're ignorant of your filters, they can skew even the best insights in a really bad direction.

This is why you want to get this point down—how you shape things— and the breath is a good way of seeing that. It responds very quickly to these processes of intention, attention, and perception: how you pay attention to things, how you perceive things, the labels you put on things, the images you have in the mind. The Buddha talks about perception being a mental fabrication, but it also has an impact on the way you breathe and how you experience the breath—and you don't want that to be done in ignorance. After all, if it's in ignorance, it's going to cause suffering, so we want to bring knowledge to these processes, and we do it by working with the breath in the way the Buddha recommended.

Now, if you look at the instructions from another angle, though, you notice that something is missing. When the Buddha talks about fabrications in dependent co-arising, there are three kinds: bodily, mental, and verbal. Verbal fabrications are defined as directed thought and evaluation—how you talk to yourself, the way you focus on a topic and then ask questions about it, make

comments, decide what to do with it. That type of fabrication is not mentioned in the steps of breath meditation. There's no talk about becoming sensitive to verbal fabrications or calming verbal fabrications. But if you're reflective as you do the breath meditation, you can't help but notice that the mind is doing this kind of fabrication as well. After all, the instructions where the Buddha says that you train yourself, "I will breathe in sensitive to the whole body, I will breathe out sensitive to the whole body": That's a verbal fabrication. In fact, all the training steps are verbal fabrications.

As you're trying to get the mind to settle down in concentration, you've got to talk to yourself about your object—adjust it and adjust the mind so that they can fit snugly together. This is all verbal fabrication. And even though as you get into the second jhana you drop verbal fabrication, there's a trace of it that hovers around the practice. As you move from one level of concentration to another, you may note the fact. When you come out, you have to talk to yourself about where you were and what you did so that you can gain a sense of the road map of the mind.

Some of the steps in the various steps of breath meditation require a fair amount of verbal fabrication. When the Buddha talks about gladdening the mind, sometimes you have to talk to it. When he talks about concentrating the mind, you talk to it. In both cases, you talk to it until you've achieved what you want. The mind feels refreshed. The mind feels steady. Then you can stop the talking. But you don't simply calm verbal fabrication for the sake of calming it. You use it first to whatever extent it's needed. Then you can let it go.

Even more so in the steps that have to do with insight in the fourth tetrad. The Buddha talks about breathing in and out keeping track of inconstancy, and from there breathing in and out keeping track of dispassion. Now, how do you go from inconstancy to dispassion? One way is with those five steps the Buddha talks about so often. When you're focusing on something for the sake of insight, you want to see how it's originated—in other words, what causes it—and how it passes away. You also want to look at the allure: Why is it you go for it? Even though it may pass away on its own, you dig it up sometimes. Why? What's the attraction?

Then you look at the drawbacks. This is where you bring in the perceptions of not-self, inconstancy, stress, the fact that it's alien, empty—all those perceptions that the Buddha lists as mental labels that will incline you to want to put things down. Only then do you get to the release or escape, which is dispassion.

That all involves a fair amount of verbal fabrication. Especially when you're trying to figure out the allure, you have to ask a lot of questions. When you're

looking at the drawbacks, you have to figure out which perceptions are going to be useful for you.

So it's not that you become sensitive to verbal fabrications and then you calm them down. They perform many useful functions at different stages along the path. As Ajaan Lee says, of the three types of fabrication, verbal fabrications for most people are the most troublesome, because the way you talk to yourself can be extremely unskillful and cause a lot of suffering. But if you learn how to do verbal fabrication with knowledge, it becomes the most useful tool on the path. You learn how to talk to yourself more skillfully, with a sense of time and place.

It's the same as with right speech in general. In right speech outside, you want your words to be true, beneficial, timely. In the same way, here in training verbal fabrication, make sure that what you tell yourself is true and beneficial and that this is the right time and place for it. Is it the time and place to be engaged in this kind of fabrication or is it a time to let it go? And when do you pick it up again?

Learning how to master verbal fabrication and do it with knowledge requires a lot of skill and time. It's more complex than bodily fabrication, more complex than mental fabrication. It has more ins and outs. So even though the Buddha doesn't mention verbal fabrication in his breath meditation instructions, issues around verbal fabrication are all there.

This is a good lesson in how we have to read the texts. Remember that the texts were never meant to be read on their own. They were part of a community, a community of practitioners, and you have to learn about them from people who have experience practicing with them. As the Buddha said, there are some texts that you have to simply take as they're given. Don't try to draw any other consequences or ideas out of them. But there are others where you have to draw out further implications.

So given the fact that there are three fabrications and he mentions only two of them in this discourse, in this case it's a sign you've got to think about the missing one. Why don't you just become sensitive to it and calm it? Because your engagement with it is going to have to be a lot more complex. But as with all types of fabrication, you really want to get sensitive to it and master it so that as insights arise in the mind, as knowledge comes to you in the meditation, you're aware not only of what the knowledge says but also of how the mind is fabricating around it.

This reflective quality where you look back at yourself: This is what keeps you safe. This may be one of the reasons why one of the first images the Buddha taught to Rahula when he described the path was of a mirror. You look into the mirror of your actions and you see your mind. In this case, the mirror is made up of the actions in the mind itself, so you have to be doubly reflective. But as you're more

sensitive to this area—the fabrication going on in the mind—you see that it's happening all the time. Every time you open your eyes to look at something, fabrication starts. Even the intention to open your eyes is a type of fabrication. The intention to look at this, look at that, pay attention to this, not pay attention to that—it's all fabrication. You want to be sensitive to that, because when something arises in the mind, it's very easy to focus on the wrong details or to give a little space for a little bit of pride or desire of various kinds. If you're sensitive to that kind of thing, then you're safe. If you're not sensitive, then even the best knowledge can lead you astray.

So try to get sensitive to the way the mind filters things, how it shapes things, what it pays attention to, what it doesn't pay attention to. When you do these processes in a state of awareness, you've got yourself protected all around.