

In Touch with Your Fabrications

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Modern psychology tells us that we're suffering because we're not in touch with our feelings. The Dhamma tells us that we're suffering because we're not in touch with how we create feelings. "Feelings," here, of course, are emotions. They're a kind of *saṅkhāra*, or fabrication, and there are basically three: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Bodily is how you breathe—this is the part that gets the feeling into your system, into the body.

Verbal is how you talk to yourself, what you say about a particular situation that provokes greed, aversion, delusion, sorrow, envy—whatever the emotion may be.

Then there's mental—your perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the mental labels you use for identifying this as this and that as that. Sometimes these labels are individual words. Sometimes they're pictures. Then feelings, in this case, are feeling tones: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

These three kinds of fabrication are the basic elements we put together to create an emotion. One of the reasons why we meditate is to get in touch with those elements.

Once you see how they're used to fashion a state of concentration, then you begin to notice that, as you go through the day, you use them to fabricate other mental states—some of which are skillful, some of which are not.

And you learn, if you see that you're doing it in an unskillful way, that you have the choice to keep on doing that way, or not. Because that's what fabrication is all about: You're making choices. You're choosing to do something for the purpose of something.

When the Buddha defines fabrication, he defines it as taking the potentials for a sense of form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, or consciousness, and then putting them together into actual experiences of those aggregates for the sake

of something. Many of our problems come from the fact that we, in the past, did these things for the sake of what we thought was going to be a good solution—happiness, pleasure, whatever. Then it becomes habitual, and we start doing them in ways that are not so conducive to happiness. In fact, it's our ignorance of what we're doing that actually leads to suffering.

So, as we're meditating, we're learning how to do all of this with knowledge. You focus on the breath and you talk to yourself about the breath. That's two fabrications right there.

The Buddha gives you some ideas on how to fabricate, how to talk to yourself, how to breathe. Breathe, he says, in a way that's conducive to pleasure. Breathe in a way that's conducive to rapture, try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out.

First breathe in a way that's energizing. Ajaan Lee recommends taking three or seven deep, long in-and-out breaths to air things out in the body. As long as deep breathing feels good, keep it up. We tend to go through the day starved of oxygen, and as you're meditating, you're going to be calming the breath, so before you calm it, you want to make sure you have good energy inside.

Then you talk to yourself about the breath.

Here again, Ajaan Lee gives some examples: Ask yourself, is it too long, too short, too fast, too heavy, too light? What can you do to change it? When you've found a breath that feels good, what can you do to maintain it? As you maintain it, what can you do to let that sense of well-being spread, together with good breath energy, down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms; in the torso, starting in the area around the heart, going down through the different organs, down to the base of the spine again? Breathe in the eyes, in the ears. Try to let that sense of well-being fill the body, saturate the body. That's talking to yourself in a skillful way about the breath.

You're not talking to yourself about how something's wrong here: "I'm not getting the stillness I want. Something's wrong with the meditation. Something's wrong with me." That kind of talking doesn't help anything at all.

Just have breath, awareness, body. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha recommends when you're doing meditation that you start with the first three

frames of reference in right mindfulness: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves. Try to get them together on those terms without the usual narratives that can create a lot of unskillful emotions around them.

You're trying to depersonalize the whole process because emotion is a state of becoming. You're taking on an identity here in the body with these feelings. If you've found that it's causing you to suffer—even the best states of becoming will have some element of stress, but if they're blatantly causing you to suffer, why go for it? Part of the reason is that you just don't know how to do it any other way.

So here the Buddha's teaching you: This is how you put these things together. Try to see things before they come together for a state of becoming. Then the state of becoming will lose some of its sense of "This is who I am. This is what I really feel." Yes, you do feel it, but you don't have to.

This is how you can talk to yourself in new ways.

Then you can think about the perception: What was the image that sparked that emotion to begin with? What's the image that's maintaining it?

A lot of these images come out of the lizard brain, and they're very quick. They're like the subliminal messages on TV. They flash for a micro-second, and then they're gone, but they leave an imprint on the mind. It's the same with a lot of these perceptions. So if the mind is telling itself it's miserable because of this, this, this, you can ask yourself, "Is that really the case?"

It's the same with physical pain. We think that physical pain is just a given, but even before the contact that would cause the pain is happening in the body, the mind is habituated to a way of looking at pain, dealing with the pain, labeling pain, having perceptions around pain. These habits are like a little bundle.

What you're trying to do as you meditate is to separate out the bundle. So, see how you perceive the pain. Is it the same thing as the spot in the body where you feel it? Does it actually stay there? Is it solid? Does it have an intention? Does it even have an awareness?

Ask these questions, and you begin to get a little response here and there. The questions, in some cases, may be strange, but then again our perceptions around pain tend to be strange.

When you realize that something even as basic as physical pain is a construct, that you don't have to construct that way, then you can start asking yourself about your emotional pains. "Do I have to construct them in this way? If it's causing me to suffer, why am I putting this together like this?"

The whole message of the four noble truths is that we're creating suffering in ways we don't have to. The suffering comes from our actions, but we can act in a different way. We learn how to be sensitive, get in touch with the processes of fabrication. Then we can fabricate in more skillful ways.

You can fabricate a path. You can fabricate a path that leads all the way to the end of suffering. That's what the truths are telling you. So at the very least, you can learn how to fabricate a more wholesome emotion, something more skillful, something healthier for you. Even though it may seem something of a stretch, the mind needs to be stretched, just as the body needs to be stretched.

Just because something seems familiar doesn't mean that it's really you. It's simply something you picked up as an old habit, but you can learn new habits. You're not an old dog. You can learn new tricks.

So, rather than getting in touch with your feelings, get in touch with your fabrications. They function as the actions in the mind, actions in the body, that are putting things together to create feelings, to create states of becoming.

As you learn how to do this with knowledge as you're getting the mind into concentration, then you can apply that knowledge to other areas of life. And the mind will be a lot healthier and happier as a result.