

Lessons in Fabrication

November 22, 2022

Samsarantā bhavābhava: That's how the Buddha describes the course of the mind. It basically means, "wandering on from one state of becoming to another." We have a desire, and then around that desire we see a world in which that desire might be fulfilled. Then we take on an identity in that world. This is how we go from one thought world to another in the course of the day. It's also how we go from one life to another.

So if you want to understand the process of what happens at rebirth, look at what the mind is doing right now as it moves from one state to another, to another. You realize that you can get involved in some pretty negative states if you're not careful. Especially at the moment of death: You get desperate. You'll jump at anything. So you want to train the mind so that it's not desperate, so that it has more control over the process.

This is why the Buddha traced the causes in the mind that lead to becoming. As he said, whatever craving leads to becoming is going to lead to suffering. You can trace it back all the way to a process that the Buddha calls fabrication. *Saṅkhāra* is the Pali term. These are the things we do to put together our experience of the present moment.

We have raw material coming in from the past—the things we did, said, or thought in the past that are like seeds sprouting right now. And in that field of seeds, we have our choice as to which ones we want to pay attention to, which ones we *water* with our attention. Then we have our intentions in the present moment that put together those potentials and turn them into an actual experience.

Like right now: You're focused on the breath. The fact that you have this body sitting here comes from past actions. Some of the actions are pretty recent, others go way back, but you can do things with the potentials that they're yielding here right now. The breath is one such potential. You can breathe long, you can breathe short, fast, slow, heavy, light. No one is forcing you to breathe in any particular way.

This is one area where we still have our freedom. So take advantage of it because the way you breathe will have an impact on the pleasure or pain you feel right now. You can breathe in ways that are tight and constrictive. You can breathe in ways that are open, free-flowing.

You'll notice, though, as you focus in on the breath, that there are other aspects of the

process of fabrication that go along with it.

The Buddha outlines three altogether. There's bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication, which is, in technical terms, directed thought and evaluation. In simple terms, it's basically the way you talk to yourself: what you focus on, what you pay attention to, and what you tell yourself about what you're paying attention to, the questions you ask, the comments you make. That's verbal fabrication. Then there's mental fabrication, which is composed of perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the images you have in mind to name things, identify things, recognize things, remember things. Feelings are feeling-tones, not emotions so much as just the tone of the feeling: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

It's through these activities that we shape the present moment. It's also through these activities that we meditate. In teaching us how to meditate, the Buddha's actually giving us an alternative way of shaping the present moment. You look at his teachings, and they're basically instructions on how to fabricate well.

After all, the path is a path of fabrication. Right view is something you fabricate. You put it together with perceptions and thoughts. Concentration, you fabricate out of all the three types of fabrication. All the factors in between are also fabricated one way or another.

The Buddha even gives you instructions on how to breathe: Breathe in a way, he says, where you're sensitive to the whole body. Breathe in a way where you calm bodily fabrication. Before you calm it down, breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness and refreshment. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure. Breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrications: the perceptions and feelings that accompany the breath, the perceptions that help you to stay with the breath. Then breathe in a way that calms those fabrications down as well. Breathe in a way that gladdens the mind. Breathe in a way that concentrates the mind. Breathe in a way that releases the mind. So even in something as simple as how to breathe, the Buddha gives instructions.

The same with how to talk to yourself: All the different suttas are instructions telling you that this is a good way to think about this topic, that's a good way to think about that topic.

And as for the perceptions, you may notice that the Buddha uses a lot of analogies, as when he talks about goodwill, saying that just as a mother would protect her only child, you should protect your goodwill. You hold the image in mind that this is how diligent you should be in protecting your goodwill no matter what happens, just as a mother who has only one child would be really diligent in protecting that child. That's a good perception to hold in mind as

you shape your experience.

So you read through the Canon and realize you're getting instructions in how to fabricate the present moment in a skillful way.

Like right now, you're focused on the breath, you're talking to yourself about what ways of breathing feel good, and what ways of breathing don't feel good, and how you can induce the ones that do feel good.

You have a perception in mind of where the breath's coming in. You can play with that a lot. If you have pains in the chest, you can have a perception of the breath coming in the back. Pains on both sides of the body: Perceive the breath coming in both sides of the body, to loosen up the pain, alleviate the pain. Tightness here, tightness there: Think of the breath flowing through those areas of tightness.

So you learn how to breathe, learn how to perceive the breath, how to talk to yourself about the breath in ways that give rise to a sense of well-being. That's the feeling-tone you want right now. When the Buddha defines the various levels of right concentration, he starts out with a feeling-tone: pleasure and refreshment or just pleasure or equanimity. Those are the things we're working on.

As you get more and more sensitive to how these processes put together a state of concentration, it gives you insight into how you create other states of becoming as you go through the day. And when you know how to create them, you also know how to take them apart.

This is important, because we can get ourselves into some pretty negative states: greed, anger, delusion, fear, anxiety. These are all things we put together by the way we breathe, by the way we talk to ourselves, by the perceptions we hold in mind and the feelings we focus on. So, you want to learn alternative ways, better ways, for how to do this.

The important thing is that you keep in mind the principle that what you experience right now is partly due to past karma, but not totally due to past karma. In other words, there is some wiggle-room, you might say, in the present moment. All too often, we hear the Buddha's teachings boiled down to one word: "let-go," or "accept." But the Buddha was not a one-word kind of person, and his teachings are not one-word teachings.

For example, with acceptance, the only places I know where he uses the word *accept* are, one, when he accepts invitations; and two, when there's a death in the family or a death of someone you love, he says that you have to learn how to accept that fact. If you try to deny it,

you're going to cause yourself lots of suffering. But there are a lot of areas where the Buddha doesn't mention *accept* or *not accept* at all.

His own way of boiling things down to the simplest terms is that skillful actions should be developed, unskillful ones should be abandoned. It's not a one-word teaching. It starts with a distinction, and it's a distinction that requires sensitivity, because what's going to be skillful in any situation is going to depend on what you see happening in that situation—how you understand it, and how perceptive you are.

This sensitivity is something that's going to be developed over time as you practice. You can't say, "Well, I want to be skillful," and tomorrow, "Boop!" there you are, skillful. As with any skill, it's going to take time. It requires patience, but at least you can keep that question in the mind, "What would be the skillful thing to do right now?"

In his teachings to his son Rahula, he said to make it your intention that you're not going to harm anybody with what you do, or say, or think. If you see an intention arise in the mind, ask yourself, "If I followed this intention, would it harm anybody?" If you think it would, then you don't follow it. If you don't think it's going to cause any harm, then go ahead and do it. If you see that, when you're doing it, it actually does cause harm, you stop. If it's not causing harm, you can continue. When it's done, you're still not done: You look at the long-term results. If you see that what you thought was going to be okay was not—you actually did harm somebody—you learn from that. Talk it over with someone you trust. Make up your mind that you're not going to repeat that mistake, and then keep on training. If you see that you didn't cause any harm, then take joy in that fact. That way, you give yourself encouragement to keep on training even more.

That's the basic principle. Based on that principle, when situations come up, you can look at what you're doing and you may see that certain mental states are getting in the way. Say there's anger: Something wrong is happening. It's either injustice or someone's been disrespectful, dis-courteous, and you're angry about it.

Now, the Buddha doesn't say, "Well, just accept the situation, or just accept the anger, or try to accept both"—which would be really difficult. He says, in effect, "Look at what you're doing that's making it hard to see what's the skillful thing to do." And that's the anger.

If you can get the anger out of the way, then you can look at the situation and decide, "Does this require a response, or did I misperceive it to begin with?" When you see that it does require a response, and the anger is out of the way, you're in a much better position to come up

with a response that's skillful.

So you look at that anger. The important thing is that you learn how to look at it and not feel that you're totally surrounded or consumed by it. There's part of your mind that's not angry. Identify with that part. That's the part that's going to see you through.

Then you think about those different kinds of fabrication: The anger itself is fabricated. The way you breathe is aggravating it. What you're telling yourself about the situation is probably aggravating it. Even the perceptions, the images you hold in mind, can be aggravating it.

So you have to learn how to engage in other fabrications. Learn how to breathe in a way that calms you down, that doesn't feel so tight. If you allow yourself to keep breathing in a way that feels tight in the stomach or tight in the chest, right there will be a sense you've got to get that anger out of your system. And for most people, getting it out of their system means yelling at somebody or doing something. But you realize that a much better way of getting it out is learning how to breathe in a more skillful way to dissolve the sense of tightness. And as you've been meditating, you've learned how to do that.

This is why it's important that you don't just breathe any old way as you meditate. Learn how to be with your breath. Recognize ways of calming the breath down, releasing tension, so that you can use them when the anger comes.

Then look at how you talk to yourself: The first thing you've got to remind yourself of is that anger can make you do really stupid things.

This is one of the Buddha's front-line defenses when you feel anger and it's really hard to feel goodwill for the other person. At the very least, you can tell yourself, "If I act on my anger, I'm going to do stupid things. That's going to please my enemy. Do I want to please that person? No." This may not be the most skillful thought pattern—you're basically using spite to overcome anger, saying, "Okay, I'm going to overcome anger so that I don't please that person"—but then you realize also that you're actually showing goodwill for yourself: Who wants to do stupid things?

The problem is, when you're angry, things seem very clear. You tell yourself that you should clearly say this, you should clearly say that, but you have to remind yourself that's the clarity of tunnel-vision. You're closing off large areas of your mind. That's a perception to hold in mind to pull you out of the anger. Then you learn to talk about the situation to yourself, perceive the situation in different ways, so that you're not aggravating the anger, but you're not

lying about the situation, either. You can calm yourself down.

One of the ways of thinking that the Buddha recommends is that you say: “This person has done something to displease me. He’s harming me, harming somebody I love, or he’s actually helping someone I hate—but what should I expect? This is the way the world is.” Or, “This person has already harmed me in the past, has harmed people I love, has helped people I hate—but what should I expect?” Or, “The same things may happen in the future—what should I expect?” Finally, he says, “Don’t get worked up about impossibilities.”

There’s another place where he has you reflect on the nature of speech: There’s kind speech and unkind speech, harsh speech and gentle speech, true/false. There are people who tell the truth, people who lie. This is the nature of human speech. This doesn’t tell you just to give up and accept it. It’s basically saying: This behavior that’s got you angry is not all that outrageous. It’s all over the world.

The purpose of this line of thought is to remind yourself that “Okay, this person is not doing anything extraordinarily bad, so it doesn’t give you extraordinary rights to do whatever you want.” You have to be careful and skillful in how you respond. You don’t want to have the response that just keeps up the cycle of anger and keeps up the cycle of injustice. You want to act in a more considered way, a more skillful way, a way that actually gives long-term results.

All too often when anger comes in, we just want to get it off our chest. We don’t really use our concern for what the results are going to be. That right there is blotting out whatever sense of shame or compunction you may have—shame, here, being a *healthy* sense of shame: the opposite of shamelessness. It’s not the shame that’s the opposite of pride.

The Buddha does have you nurture a sense of pride that you’re a skillful person and trying your best to be as skillful as you can. But he also says that shamelessness is not going to help anything at all.

Compunction is thinking about the consequences of the action, and not wanting to do anything unskillful.

Those two qualities, you want to maintain. So, you can’t just tell yourself, “Well, I need to express my anger regardless of the consequences. Let the chips fall where they may.” If you really want to improve the situation, you’ve got to think about how to do it skillfully. And you’ve learned how to do that because you’ve learned how to deal with these three kinds of fabrication in your meditation.

You’ve also learned how to think about the potential you have for anger, the potential you

have for anxiety, the potential you have for whatever unskillful habits you may have. Think about them ahead of time.

All too often, we think that meditation is simply a matter of focusing on what you're doing in the present moment. But if you know that you have some unskillful habits, you can use the meditation time to think about them so that in the future you don't fall for whatever the mind tells itself as they come in. You need to have alternative ways of talking to yourself, alternative ways of breathing, alternative perceptions to hold in mind. So, sometimes it is a useful use of your meditation time to think about these things ahead of time.

It's part of right effort: Preventing unskillful states from arising, or if they have arisen, learning how to get rid of them as quickly as you can. So, there are times when you meditate and you should think about the future. You know a difficult situation is going to come up: How are you going to get through that situation without doing something unskillful?—so that you don't get overcome by anger, and then are left with the results of having acted on anger without much thought. Think of new ways of breathing, talking to yourself, holding perceptions and feelings in mind.

Thinking in terms of the three fabrications is a very useful way of analyzing what's going on in your mind. You learn it as you meditate, and then you take what you've learned as you meditate, and you apply it to the rest of your life.

This is one of the ways in which the meditation gets up off the cushion and actually helps with your life. Remember the word for meditation in Pali is *bhāvanā*. It means to develop. Whatever good qualities you can develop in the mind, it's all part of meditation. Whether you're sitting here with your eyes closed, or in the middle of an argument with somebody else, develop. Be skillful. Abandon unskillful qualities.

In other words, keep these instructions in mind. This is one of the meanings of the word *sarana*. We say we take refuge in the Buddha, refuge in the Dhamma, refuge in the Sangha, and one of the ways we keep taking refuge in them is that we keep them in mind. That's another meaning of *sarana*: things you remember.

Always remember that *the* most important event in the world—that should have an impact on everything you do, say, and think—is the fact that the Buddha gained awakening through his own efforts.

That's why that's the center of conviction: being convinced of the Buddha's awakening. Then, look at everything you're going to do, and say, and think in light of the implications of

that awakening. Don't just deal with concepts like not-self, or emptiness. Think of what his awakening means in terms of everything down to what to do when you get angry, and how to act, how to think, how to breathe, what perceptions to hold in mind, so that you can respond in a skillful way—day, after day, after day.

That's when the Dhamma shows its real benefits, and you see that you really can depend on it as a refuge.