

Exploring Fabrication

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The Buddha once told the monks that they should practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, “I already do practice breath meditation.” So the Buddha asked him, “What kind of breath meditation do you practice?” And the monk said, “I focus on the breath, let go of any hankering after the past, any hankering after the future. I try to be equanimous toward the present as I breathe in and as I breathe out.” And the Buddha said, “Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it’s not how you get the most out of breath meditation.” And then he described the sixteen steps, four tetrads of four steps each. What’s interesting about the steps is how much they focus on the process of fabrication.

In the first tetrad, the Buddha talks about training yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. And then the next step is to calm bodily fabrication, i.e., the effect that the breath has on the body.

In the second tetrad, he talks about training yourself to breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to rapture, gives rise to pleasure. And then you breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication, noticing the effect of feeling and perception on the mind: the feelings of rapture and pleasure you’ve been inducing, and also the perceptions by which you can stay focused on the breath. What affect do those have on the mind? Then you try to calm that affect. In other words, you move from rapture to ease, and then finally to equanimity. With the perceptions, you try to find ways of perceiving the breath energy in the body that make things easier for the mind, lighter for the mind.

In fact, that’s a lot of what it means to go through the various levels of concentration: Your perceptions of the breath grow more refined. For instance, you think of the breath as an energy filling the whole body. If it can maintain its fullness—everything is so connected in the body that you don’t need to breathe in or breathe out—then you move to even more refined perceptions: perception of space, consciousness, infinite consciousness without any end. You’re sitting here and you have no sense of where this consciousness ends. That’s the ultimate, as the Buddha said, in the oneness of the mind. Everything seems one. You’re one with your object, and your consciousness is one with everything. Then you drop the oneness and go to nothingness, from nothingness to the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. In every case, the feelings and perceptions get

more refined; they have less and less of an impact on the mind. That's called calming mental fabrication.

Then in the third tetrad the Buddha talks first about simply being aware of the mind, and then noticing when the mind needs to be gladdened, satisfied, or refreshed; when it needs to be steadied; when it needs to be released. And each of those approaches to bringing the mind into balance requires a certain amount of fabrication: After all, feeling and perception have an affect on the mind, and the breath has an indirect affect on the mind through the feelings.

So how do you use these fabrications to gladden the mind? How do you use them to steady the mind? How do you use them to release the mind? In some cases, the Buddha says, you simply watch a particular defilement or a particular hindrance that's weighing the mind down, and simply by watching it, it goes away. Other times, as he says, you have to exert a fabrication to let go of a particular cause of stress. And that can involve bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrications, which are directed thought and evaluation; and mental fabrications, which are feeling and perception.

Now, all of this is to get you really sensitive to the process of fabrication. It's not just a matter of things coming and going, arising and passing away. The mind has an intentional element in all of its experiences. Basically, you take the potential for, say, a form or a feeling or a perception, fabrications, or consciousness—these potentials come from your past karma—and then you fabricate them into an actual experience of the aggregates. There's an intentional element in all of these things.

As the Buddha said, the essence of insight is learning how to investigate the process of fabrication so that you see it with insight. So when you're dealing with the breath in line with these steps, you're developing tranquility and serenity, but at the same time you're gaining insight into this process of fabrication—because you play with it. The only way you can understand cause and effect is by adjusting the causes, changing the causes, and see what kind of impact the adjusting has on the effects. That's when you actually see what is a cause and what is an effect. If you change a cause, and what you thought was an effect is still there in the same way as before, well, maybe that wasn't the cause.

So you're here to understand the impact that the breath has on the body. You try to understand the impact that feelings and perceptions have on the mind. You consciously try to sensitize yourself to them by trying to change that impact as you breathe in, as you breathe out. So you're working on tranquility and insight together, by steadying the mind, by calming these fabrications. This doesn't mean suppressing them. It means allowing them to get more refined, so that ultimately

you'll see the extent to which the mind shapes its experience, and the extent to which it's causing stress that it doesn't have to cause. That's what the calming is all about. And you can get the mind into really good states this way.

This is how you create the path. Remember, the path is something that's fabricated. It's not just a matter of letting go, letting go, letting go. You have to develop, develop, develop too. That's the task with regard to the path. Because the path is fabricated, it too gives you some hands-on experience with this process of fabrication, learning how to do it well. And, in this context, all kinds of things that you might have rejected as not belonging to the path are actually admitted back in—but, on the condition that they be skillful.

Venerable Ananda talks about using craving and conceit on the path. It has to be a skillful craving; it has to be a skillful conceit, but these processes, which eventually we're going to have to let go of, we first have to learn how to handle skillfully. The Buddha talks about *papañca* the kind thinking where you think of yourself as an object. And, ultimately, you will have to let it go, but there are some uses for *papañca* on the path. It develops a good sense of *samvega*. You think about all the suffering you've had in the past and caused in the past, and all the suffering you're going to cause in the future if you don't get onto the path. That's a really good motivator.

So this is how we learn about things. This is how we gain insight into them, by working and playing with them, manipulating them. Manipulating is not all bad. If we didn't manipulate these things, we wouldn't learn anything about them. How do you think scientists learn anything about anything at all? They play. They fool around. They poke this, they change that, they set fire to this, explode that, so that they can learn exactly what is a cause, what's an effect, and how they're connected.

And we're exploring here too. Always try to take this attitude of exploration. Use your powers of observation, use your ingenuity to figure out how things work, both in the body and in the mind. And see how far this process of fabrication can take you, because you're not going to let go of fabrications until you've pushed them as far as they can go.

That's with the last tetrad is all about. You begin to realize that the raw material from which you been building these things has its limitations. It's inconstant. It can provide only a certain amount of ease. Because it's inconstant, that ease is going to wobble. And a wobbly ease is not necessarily a very comfortable place to be. Think of a chair with uneven legs. If you're sitting in the chair, you can't really relax into the chair because the chair might tip over. You've got to stay tense, at least for a little bit, to maintain your balance.

That's the way it is with all the ease and pleasure that comes from anything fabricated. It requires a certain amount of tension to keep your balance. And there will come the point where you ask yourself: Is it worth it? As long as the path hasn't been fully developed, yes, it is worth it. But as these factors get more and more developed, you begin to realize that this is as far as fabrication can take you. You begin to lose your taste for feeding on these fabrications.

That's where dispassion comes in. You lose your passion for fabricating. And because you lose that passion, the process of fabrication begins to fall apart. Because, after all, fabrication did depend on factors coming out of the mind, the mind's hunger for these things, its thirst for these things. When it's no longer hungry or thirsty, it just stops. And when it stops, everything else stops. That's where you let go of everything, even the path, even the discernment that got you there.

So this is how we understand fabrication. This is what insight is all about—not just watching things arising and passing away, but realizing the extent to which the mind causes them to arise and to pass away. You've got to dig down into this deep level.

That's why we work with the breath, because the breath goes really deep into your awareness, both of the body and of the mind. When you're close to the breath, you're close to the sources of fabrication. That's where you can see how these things come about. And as you manipulate them, you get a sense of their range, how far they can go, and then how far they can't go.

This is why all the great meditators of the past were not people who just got really tired of things, and got really world weary, and just stopped with a sense of depression. That's not how they found awakening. They actively pursued it: How far can you go? What can you do to bring about true happiness? They used their ingenuity. They used their powers of observation. They actively explored it. That's what brought them to the edge of fabrication, and how they got beyond.

So try to approach the meditation as a process of exploration. You're exploring this process of fabrication in body and in mind. And the breath is a good place to start, a good foundation for your experiments. Remember the Buddha's basic approach throughout his practice was: "I'm doing this, I'm getting these results. Is it good enough? Well, no. What can I do that's better?" And then he tried something new, using his powers of observation and ingenuity, and setting really high standards for himself, really high standards for the type of happiness that would leave him satisfied. Because it's only when you aim high that you can actually hit high. You never hit any higher than you aim.