

# Fabrication

March, 2001 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

The mind has a basic habit, which is to create things. In fact, when the Buddha describes causality, how experiences come about, he says that the power of creation or *sankhara* — the mental tendency to put things together — actually comes prior to our sensory experience. It's because the mind is active, actively putting things together, that it knows things.

The problem is that most of its actions, most of its creations, come out of ignorance, so the kind of knowledge that comes from those creations can be misleading. For this reason, what you want to do in the process of meditation is to back up, to get down as close to this process of creation as you can, to see if there's a way to do it skillfully that leads to knowledge, that leads you to a point that breaks through ignorance. And that means, instead of building up a lot of things, you let things fall apart so you can get down to exactly where these basic forces in the mind are putting things together.

Now it so happens that when we bring the mind to the breath, we have all these basic forces right here in their most elemental forms. The breath is the factor that fashions the body. It's what they call *kaya-sankhara* or the "physical putting-together." The breath is what puts life together in the body. If it weren't for the breath here, things would start falling apart really fast.

Then there's verbal fabrication, *vaci-sankhara*, the act of putting things in words. The two basic verbal sankharas are directed thought and evaluation. And you've got those right here, too. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then evaluate the breath: How does the breath feel? Does it feel good? If it does, stay with it. If it doesn't feel good, you can change it. This is about the most basic level of conversation you can have with yourself. "Does this feel good or not? Comfortable or not? Yes. No."

And then you work with that. What are you working with? You're working with mental fabrication, *citta-sankhara*, which covers feeling and perception: feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. And then perceptions are the labels the mind gives to things: "This is pleasant. This is painful. This is this and that is that."

When you've got the mind with the breath, you've got all of these things brought together: the feelings that come with the breath, the perceptions that label the breath: "Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out. Now the mind is like this. Now it's like that." The directed thought and the evaluation are there as well, keeping you focused on the breath and on evaluating the breath. So these things are all together. If you stray away from here, you're usually straying away into distraction, into the realm of further elaboration, in which you lose this basic frame of reference and create a whole other one. It's what they call "becoming" in the texts, when you create other worlds in the mind. Once you get into those other worlds, you lose touch with the process of creation. You lose touch with how becoming is brought together. So you've got to learn how to take those worlds of distraction — and the processes that form them — apart.

The Buddha talks about various ways of dealing with distraction. Once you've realized you've left your original frame of reference, you bring yourself back. In other words, you remind yourself. In some cases, the simple act of reminding is enough to disperse that other little world you've created for yourself and come back to this one.

Other times you have to reflect actively on the drawbacks of that other world, of the thinking that creates it, especially if it's thinking imbued with lust, aversion, delusion, or harmfulness. You've got to remind yourself, "What would happen if I thought about this for a while?" Well, you'd create certain habits in the mind, and once those habits are imbedded in the mind they lead to actions that can create all kinds of problems. When you see the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, you say, "I don't need that. I've had enough of that in my life." You drop it and come back to the breath.

Other times you can consciously ignore the distraction. A little world appears in your mind and you say, "I don't want to enter into that," but for some reason it just doesn't go away. You realize the reason it's not going away is because you're paying attention to it. Even if you don't like it, paying attention to it is enough to keep it going — like a tar trap. You touch the tar with your hand and you get stuck. You try to pull yourself loose from the tar with the other hand and you get both hands stuck. Pull yourself off with your foot, your foot gets stuck. Bite the tar, your mouth gets stuck. So the only way to deal with it is to not touch it. In other words, don't pay attention to it. You know it's there, but you just don't give it any mind. After a while, from lack of attention, it'll die away.

A fourth way of pulling yourself back is to notice that when there's this process of creation, when there are these little worlds you create in your mind, an element of tension goes with them. Things would be a lot easier if you didn't create these worlds, if you'd just relax whatever physical and mental tension supports these things. So look for the tension. Once you can locate it, just relax it. When you relax the tension, the thought goes away.

A fifth way, when none of these other methods work, is to tell yourself, "Okay, I'm going to clench my teeth, press my tongue against the palate, and *I will not think* about that other thing." In other words, just through the force of your will you force it out of your mind. This is the method of last resort: the one that's the least precise and works only as long as your will power lasts. But sometimes it's the only thing that will clear the air. If we were to compare these various methods to tools, this would be the sledgehammer. It may be crude, but you need one in your arsenal for cases when scalpels and Exacto knives can't handle the job.

So when one of these other little worlds gets created in your mind, you use whichever of these methods work to let go of it and bring yourself back to the most basic levels of the process of creation: the breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings, perceptions. Stay right on this level.

What do you do with them on this level? Well, you can create levels of concentration in the mind. Concentration is a kind of creation, but it's a creation that instead of obscuring the process of what's going on in the mind actually makes it clearer. You create, but without leaving these basic levels of your frame of reference. In other words, you put them to use in a new way. You put feelings to use in a new way. You learn how to create a feeling of pleasure from the breath so that the pleasure gets more and more intense, more and more solid. Just the act of sitting here breathing gets really refreshing. And if you stay with the feeling as a feeling, in and of itself, it doesn't pull you off into other mental worlds. You stay right here. It feels good right here.

So instead of feeding on the pleasure in an aimless way, you do it in a systematic way. That way you can keep the mind with a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture, and it doesn't wander off. That's what the concentration is all about. As it strengthens the mind, it gives direction to the mind. It takes the desire for pleasure and puts it to good use. Once the mind feels comfortable in the present moment, it's not going to wander off anyplace else. It feels good right here. A lot more satisfaction comes from the sense of ease right here than from the little bits and pieces of satisfaction coming from the other worlds you can create with your mind.

Again, this is a process of creation, but it's a lot more skillful than normal. It keeps things on a basic level where you're in touch with the process. You don't lose sight of it. It's like the difference between sitting out in an audience watching a play and being behind the stage. Behind the stage, you see the actual play, but you also see what goes on behind it. In that way, you're a lot less likely to get carried away by the illusion of the play.

Now, of course, pain is going to come into your meditation as well. Sometimes it's out-and-out pain. Other times it's more subtle. And again, as with the pleasure, instead of thinking that you're on the receiving end of the pain, a victim of the pain, you start putting it to use. The pain is there for you to comprehend. That's what the Buddha said in his teachings on the four noble truths: The task with regard to pain is to comprehend it. Once the mind is solid enough and stable enough so as not to feel threatened by the pain, it can analyze the pain on whatever level it may be, searing pain or more subtle stress. As you comprehend the pain, you start finding that you understand the mind a lot better, too. All the little animals in the mind that tend to gather around pain: You begin to notice who they are, what they are, and you realize, "That's not me. It's just these thoughts that tend to cluster around pain." If you want to identify with them, you can, but they're going to turn your mind into a menagerie. They're going to create a lot of turmoil. And so you learn how to let them go.

Even when you're focused on the pleasant levels of concentration, you'll find that as you get more and more sensitive toward these various levels, a subtle element of stress accompanies each one of them. Once you identify where that stress is, you let it go. That takes you to a more subtle level of concentration. You stay there for a while. In the beginning, you don't notice the stress in the new level. It's like going into a bright room where your eyes haven't yet adjusted to the light. At first you see nothing but the dazzle. But if you stay there for long enough, your eyes begin to adjust and you begin to notice, "Oh, there are shapes, there are forms, there are things in this room that you can see."

It's the same as you go from one level of concentration to the next. Take the stress of directed thought and evaluation, for instance. Once the breath really feels full, really feels satisfying, you don't need to keep evaluating it. You don't have to keep reminding yourself to stay with it. You're just there, there, there, there, there with a basic perception. You let go of the directed thought and evaluation, and *Bong* — you come down to a much deeper level.

You go through this step by step. You realize what an important role perceptions play in this, the labels you put on things. You're constantly labeling the breath. When the breath is still so that you can drop that label, you begin to label the sense of space that's left, then the sense of knowing that's left as you drop the label for "space," then all the way up to the sphere of nothingness. That's still called a perception attainment. It's based on the label that the mind puts on the experience that keeps you there.

So again, you're with these very basic, basic levels of creation in the mind. When you start taking them apart, that's when things really get interesting. Instead of building, building, building up, you're letting go, letting go, letting go, bit by bit by bit. And then, of course, you're getting attached to the new level you reach, but it's a good attachment. Otherwise, you'd go floating off to other worlds. This attachment here, at least, keeps you in the present moment where things can begin to open up. And instead of elaborating on it, you keep applying the teachings of the four noble truths and keep the questions basic: "Where is the stress here?"

This is especially important when you get to the level of infinitude of consciousness or the infinitude of space. On those levels it's easy to develop a sense that you've reached the ground of being from which all things come and to which all things return. If you're not careful, you can really start philosophizing on this theme, elaborating on it, getting into all kinds of abstractions about the relationship between the absolute and the relative, emanation — all sorts of big, buzz-word issues. But they're totally irrelevant to the real problem in the mind — that there's still stress here. If you're still stuck here, you haven't gone beyond, you haven't reached the Deathless.

You've got to keep asking that same old basic question: "Where is there stress here?" Look for it. See what you're doing that keeps the stress going, see that it's unnecessary, and then let go. Ultimately you open up to something totally unfabricated.

So instead of building things up that pull you away from the present, you start by building up states of concentration in the mind. These are types of fabrication, of course, but they're the type of fabrication that keeps you within this frame of reference: the very absolute present. They don't distract you into other levels where you lose touch with the basic building blocks in the process of fabrication.

This is a basic pattern throughout the Buddha's teachings: Before you let go of things, you first have to learn to do them skillfully, mindfully, with

awareness. The doing, the mastering of the skill, is what enables you to know them. This brings us back to that basic principle we talked about earlier: We wouldn't know anything, there would be no awareness at all, if there weren't any *doing* in the mind. You have to learn how to do things more and more skillfully until finally you can get to a level where the mind becomes too sensitive to do anything. And at that point it opens up to a totally different kind of awareness.

So you make use of what you've got. The Buddha noticed that all things fabricated have an element of stress. But what are you going to do? How are you going to get to the unfabricated? You can't use the unfabricated as a tool because that would be fabricating it, and that's not its nature. You learn how to use the process of fabrication in a more skillful way. You divide things up into the four noble truths. There's stress, the origination of stress, the cessation of stress, and the path. The path is a process of taking things that are stressful — these perceptions, these feelings, these processes of creation — and using them in a skillful way. So you use fabrication to undo fabrication and then finally reach a point where everything opens up to the unfabricated.

It's an extremely skillful path, a skillful approach. It takes the raw materials that we've got around us all the time — the activities that we ordinarily use to create experience — and teaches us how to use them in a more skillful way. Getting down to basics. Keeping away from abstractions. Once there's an abstraction in the mind, there's a new level of being in there, a new frame of reference; it pulls you away from the present. A lot of self-delusion comes through abstraction. A lot of opportunity for lying to yourself comes through abstraction. So we keep things basic. We keep our nose to the ground. Just look at the basic things we have: physical, verbal, and mental fabrication. Learn how to put them to the proper use. Use them more and more skillfully. Get more and more in touch with the actual process of fabrication right here in the present moment. That's where things open up.