



2020-09-05 Fabrication (Sankhara)

Part 1: Lecture

SPEAKER

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Our topic today is "sankhāra," to be translated as: fabrication, volitional formations, and habitual tendencies. I prefer the translation of fabrication that the word sankhara in Pāli literally means, "to put together."

It reveals the extent to which we put together our experience. Experience is not a given. There are raw materials coming in from our past actions but in the present moment, we fabricate our present experience out of that raw material. And we do it in ways that we're often not aware of.

Understanding the extent to which we fabricate our experience makes us sensitive to how we can do it in a more skillful way. And ultimately, how we can use fabrications to find a happiness that is unfabricated, something that is not subject to being put together. Because everything that is put together, arises, stays for a while, and passes away. There's nothing really lasting about it.

Understand the importance of fabrication in the Buddha's teachings. It's good to stop and think for a bit about the Buddha's own quest for awakening. He basically tried three paths that we know of. Two of them turned out to be false paths. One path was the path of forcing the mind into stillness. Thinking that you could find an undying happiness just by making the mind still through willing it to be still. But then he discovered the fact that willing it to be still meant that it, too, was fabricated and was not going to last.

So, he tried another path, a path of austerities. He decided to burn away the impurities in mind in hopes that there was some pre-existing pure state that could be attained when all desire for pleasure was burned away. That didn't work out. You realize he would have died if he'd continued with that path. The path that did work though was one he remembered as a child when he had gotten the mind into patience spontaneously.

And instead of trying to use concentration as the goal or the path, you use it as part of the path itself. In other words, you intentionally fabricate a path to becoming, a dedicated path to the deathless which involves the process of what's called "becoming" where you take on an identity in a particular world of experience.

And this can be your identity as a human being in this human world right now. Or it can be momentary identities that you take into the mind as you think about various things that you



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would like to do, desires that you have. Your sense of you as the person who would benefit from having that desire fulfilled, and you as a person who can actually get the desire fulfilled.

That's the process of becoming. If you end up fabricating a path, it could take you to the threshold of something that was unfabricated at which point you have to abandon the path. Now, in abandoning the path you can't destroy it because that would be giving into what the Buddha was craving, for non-becoming which was a cause for suffering. And so, what you have to do is you have to find the raw material out of which becomings are made before they coalesce into becoming a sense of who you are in a world of experience.

Develop dispassion for those raw materials before they can create a state of becoming and then the process will stop on its own. Well, turns out though, the raw material for these becomings are the processes of fabrication. These are intentional acts.

So what you have here is a path that uses fabrications strategically. It uses them to create the path to view fabrications from the point of view of a concentrated mind. You can see the process is a fabrication that has to happen in the mind. And then, finally, you have to abandon them. That includes ultimately abandoning even the path of concentration and the discernment that you've developed.

This is what two of the prominent images in the canon of practice are: one, the image of a raft and, two, the image of a mirror. In the case of the raft, you have to get across to the other side of the river if you want to find safety. And so there's no nirvāṇa yacht that's going to come and pick you up.

So you have to put together a raft from twigs and sticks and things that you find on this side of the stream, at the side of the river. And then you hold on to the raft and you use it to cross. You use your hands, use your feet, which is a symbol for right effort. And then you get to the other side, that's when you let it go.

You step onto the shore, you don't need the raft anymore. As for the image of the mirror, one of the prominent themes in the practice and one we'll be going over many times during the course of the day, it's that when you're looking at fabrications, you're not just looking at fabrications outside.

Where you get the mind into concentration, you develop discernment, you develop insight, use it, analyzing things outside. But then you have to turn around and look at the fact that your concentration, the activity of inside itself is something that's fabricated and has to be let go of.

So, these two images give an idea of the strategy that's involved with fabrication. They help us to understand the Buddha's teachings which themselves are fabrications the Buddha left behind. After all, any language is involved in the process of fabrication.

We have to read his teachings strategically, too, to realize that they're not ends in themselves. We're not trying to just arrive at right view. But the nature of all fabrication is for the sake of some purpose. In this case, for the purpose of finding the deathless, putting an end to suffering.



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So, for example, the Four Noble Truths, they have duties associated with them. The duties of the Truths are for the sake of the cessation of suffering. And these are related to that theme that I just mentioned. We're going to use fabrications, to view fabrications, and then abandon them.

So you can see them in action and instead of doing them in ignorance, you can do them with knowledge. If you do them with ignorance, you're going to suffer. If you do them with knowledge, they can become a part of the path to the end of suffering. There are two main frameworks for understanding fabrications. The first is the five aggregates. And the second is what the Buddha simply calls three types of fabrication.

The viewing and fabrications, that has to do with the First Noble Truth. You want to see the process of fabrication, understand why it's happening, and gain a sense of its value, when it's useful, and when it's not useful. Because insight is not only seeing things as they are but also making value judgments about how useful things are for the purpose of putting it into suffering.

As for abandoning, that relates to the duty with the Second Noble Truth which is craving, you have to let it go. And finally, we use the fabrications of the noble path, the Fourth Noble Truth.

So in line with the image of the raft, the questions we're going to be dealing with is how far do you use fabrications before we let them go? Which kind of fabrications should be treated in which way, aligned with which duty in the form of noble truths? And, finally, how far would they have to be developed before you knew when and how to abandon them?

There's a passage where the Buddha said that if we wanted to develop insight, you go to someone and ask them how to regard fabrications, how to investigate fabrications, and how to see fabrications with insight. Those three verbs Regard, Investigate, and See with insight are going to form the framework for our discussion today.

This morning, we're going to talk about issues regarding fabrication, how you view them, and you get a sense of how you can understand the process of fabrication, and the different types of fabrication, and some of their uses along the path. Then this afternoon, we'll go into questions of how to investigate fabrications and how to see them with insight for the purpose of getting beyond them.

In terms of regarding fabrications, as I said, fabrications are intentional actions. These can be physical or mental actions and the conditions that they shape. As the Buddha said, fabrications have three defining characteristics: one, they arise; two, they pass away; and three, they alter while they are staying.

He says that the opposite, the unfabricated, has three characteristics: there's no arising, no passing away, and no alteration while staying. That's a very radical proposition the Buddha is giving us right there. Every change you experience and all your six senses comes from fabrication. Which means that you're putting more into the shaping of your experience than you may think.



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Simply seeing an image with the eye is not just leaving it there as an image on the eye. You try to interpret in terms of three dimensional space: What is this object? Where's the object? How is it located in relationship to other objects in space? All that's going on in the mind as soon as you see something.

Also, the judgments you place on things in terms of whether they're worthwhile or not, whether they're interesting or not, those, too, are fabrications. The fact that you're actually engaging in your senses comes from an intentional act. We're going to be taking this pretty deeply into our experience here because everything that we experience, in a sense, is fabricated.

The Buddha gives an image. He says it's like we get raw material from the past and then we shape it into our actual experience with the process of fabrication in the present moment. So, the purpose of the path, first off, is to become more sensitized to what those intense, subtle, intentional actions are.

Now, both of them were applied to the First, Second, and Fourth Noble Truths. In other words, the Buddha's analysis of suffering, his analysis of the cause of suffering will involve understanding these two sets of fabrications.

And also, as we develop the path, we're going to be engaged in these two sets of fabrications as well. We use them to develop dispassion, fabrication in the First and Second Noble truths. But then ultimately, after we develop them, the Fourth Noble Truth, we have to use them to develop dispassion for our concentration and insight. This is where the image of the mirror comes in.

First, let's talk about the five aggregates. The five aggregates are form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. Related to the First Noble Truth, these are the clinging aggregates. In other words, we cling to them. The word for clinging, *upādāna*, means that we take sustenance, we feed on these things.

And that's the Buddha's analysis for suffering. Every case, he says, where the mind suffers, is going to be an instance of clinging aggregates. These clinging aggregates play a role in sensory experience in general. As the Buddha said, you see a form, there's going to be a feeling that arises from the form. You have a perception about the form, you identify with the perception. And then you elaborate it with thought constructs which are kind of like fabrications. And then you're conscious of all these processes.

So that's one role for the aggregates. The other role is that we use them to construct our primary element of becoming which is our sense of self. Who we are is made out of different aggregates or our sense of who we are. That's an important distinction. The Buddha never defines what you actually are.

He says if you define what you are you limit yourself but the way we go through life we tend to define ourselves around the aggregates. In other words, either we identify ourselves as our body or as our feelings or as our perceptions, thoughts, constructs, or any combination of these.



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Or we feel that we are the owners of these things or we feel that these things are inside us or we are inside these things.

For instance, we may decide that we are an infinite state of consciousness and all the other aggregates that we identify with exist within that infinite state of consciousness. So, these are the two main roles for the aggregates in the First Noble Truth. But sensory experience, in general, deals with the five aggregates and is our raw material with which we construct our sense of self.

Let's look at the five aggregates in more detail. As I said, they are related to clinging and the word for clinging was related to feeding. And I think the best way to understand the aggregates is to think about how you go about looking for food.

You start with the form. You've got the form of your body and you've got the form of the food that you're thinking of looking for the body in order to sustain the body. You've got the feeling and, in this case, it's the feeling of hunger that drives you to look for food. Then followed by the feeling of satisfaction, the feeling of fullness, a pleasant feeling that comes when you've eaten.

In terms of perception, in your mind you perceive what kind of hunger you have. So what would I like today? Would I like an ice cream cone or would I like something salty? Would I like a relationship? I mean, all kinds of feeding can come under this type of clinging.

Once you've identified the feeling then you look outside for what kind of food out there exists that could satisfy this hunger. This is how we negotiate our way through the world in the very beginning. There was looking for what we can eat. You see a child crawling across the floor. They run across a little block or something like that. What's the first thing the child does? Sticks it right in the mouth to see if it's edible. That's our first primary perception, edible or not edible, can be eaten or not eaten.

Once you've identified something that could be food then the next question is, what do you have to do in order to get that food? And then once you have gotten it, what do you have to do in order to make it something that you can eat? If you get a raw potato, you can't eat it as it is, you have to do something with it. All of this is fabrication. And then, finally, consciousness would be your awareness of all these processes as they go on.

Now, there's an anomaly here in that the term "fabrication" is one of the aggregates, but it also covers all five. Next, explained by what I said just now, which is that our past karma presents us with the raw material for our present experience but it doesn't become a present experience until we fabricate it into specific aggregates.

There's a potential for a feeling and then we fabricate it into the actual feeling. There are potentials for perception, there are potentials for thought constructs, we fabricate them into these things. What this means is that all the aggregates play an intentional, purposeful role.



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Now, these aggregates are ongoing activities. They're not just the results of our past actions, the Buddha actually defines them as verbs. Feeling feels, perception perceives, fabrication fabricates, consciousness cognizes. So there are activities that we're engaged in all the time.

And if you say you cling to an activity, it basically means you do it again and again and again, usually without reference to whether it's actually getting the results you want. But you have this compulsion to just keep repeating the activity in hopes that you'll find the sweet pepper in the bushel. You probably know the story.

In some of the descriptions, these aggregates arise prior to sensory contact and in others they come after. In other words, prior to sensory contact you have some intentions, you're looking for something. Then you go out and look in the world trying to find out what it is that you want. That's the intentional element.

Then in other cases, something comes up, you know, a sight appears, a sound appears. And then you develop some intentions around that sound, around that sight. So there's a reciprocal role here. Your sensory input is shaped by your aggregates of fabrication and then your fabrications can be put into motion by your sensory input.

There's a similar reciprocal role with regard to the sense of self. In other words, you give rise to a desire for something in the case of having that desire. You have to have a sense of who you are, who's going to benefit from having that desire fulfilled, then who you are, who has the talent in order to do it, who has the ability to do it.

Like, you might get a desire for a pizza right now. Yes, okay, when the Zoom meeting is over, I'm going to order a pizza. And so, on the one hand, there is the you there who is the you who is going to enjoy the pizza. But the you there is also the you who knows how to get a pizza. You can either order it or find some way of sticking it out and getting it at a store someplace.

So that would be a case in which the intention arises prior to the sense of self. But then the Buddha also says that once you've developed a sense of self, in order to maintain that sense of self and in order to feed that sense of self requires that you give rise to more fabrications.

So that's the role played by the aggregates and the First and Second Noble Truths. Now, in the Fourth Noble Truth, the Buddha says we can use these aggregates to shape a state of concentration.

It's interesting to note that the state of concentration that you can shape with the aggregates is kind of like food for the mind. The Buddha compares the different elements in the path. In a particular image he has of a fortress, concentration is the food. Right effort is the soldiers. Learning is there as the weapon. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper. But concentration is what feeds the right effort and what feeds the right mindfulness.

So, just as the five aggregates are best understood around the process of feeding, you can think of creating the food of concentration for the path. For instance, with the breath, that would



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be form, the body as you feel it. And then as you stay with that breath and you create a feeling of well-being, that's got a feeling.

You have to hold in mind a perception of the breath in order to keep the mind anchored. And then you talk to yourself in the beginning stages about the breath. Is the breath comfortable? Is it not comfortable? What can I do to make it more comfortable? Once it is comfortable, how do I maintain it? Once I maintain it, how do I get the most out of it by spreading that sense of well being through the body? All of that is fabrication.

And then consciousness is your awareness of all these processes. So, here you have, as you're doing the path, you've got the aggregates right there. In fact, that's your primary hands-on experience with getting a sense of what these aggregates are. As you make them into a state of concentration, you begin to get a sense that when the Buddha's talking about perception, what is he talking about? When he's talking about fabrication, what is he talking about? You've learned this through creating that state of concentration.

As you have the state of concentration, it gives you a non-sensual bliss and allows you to see that other fabrications -- you may have other forms, other ways of searching for pleasure -- are not nearly as good as this.

So what you're seeing here is the fact of fabrication, that you are putting these things together, until you're getting a sense of the relative value. Maybe you could fabricate a desire for ice cream right now or you could fabricate a desire to get the mind to settle down. And you can ask yourself which of these two processes would be more worthwhile; which gives the longer, more lasting state of happiness. And this is incredibly important.

As we go through the day and we talk about fabrication, you have to see, one, the fact of fabrication, the extent to which you are putting your experience together. And then, two, the relative value. Insight is going to be a value judgment as to which fabrications are worthwhile, getting involved with which ones are not.

Because after all, you have to put energy into these things in order for them to happen. So it's not like you're switching channels, just watching one TV show and then switching to another TV show. You're actually having to produce the TV shows before you can watch them. And then you have to ask yourself, well, which ones are going to be worth watching?

I've often used this as a technique when I'm meditating, when distracting thoughts come up in the mind. And I ask myself if this were a movie, would I pay to see it? Usually the answer is, no, the acting is horrible. You can see the plot miles down the road.

And so the Buddha is basically saying, look at all of your experience that way. See the effort that you put into putting these things together and then ask yourself, is it really worth it? You have so many choices in life as to how you want to put your experience together, what would be the best ways to do that? So, insight will involve both seeing the fact of fabrication, as I said, and getting a sense of the relative value during the fabrication.



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We'll come back to these two steps as we discuss more advanced stages of insight this afternoon. So those are the five aggregates. Those are one way in which the Buddha has you analyze the processes of fabrication as you get involved with them.

Now, there's another way of analyzing which the Buddha simply calls the "three fabrications" which are bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication. Now, the list of these three comes in the context of dependent co-arising. It's the very first element that comes in dependent co-arising after ignorance.

These fabrications are conditioned by ignorance and then they condition consciousness. Now, in the context of dependent co-arising their meaning is unclear. Is the Buddha talking about fabrications that say what shaped one lifetime to the next or talking about fabrications of your present experience right here now?

However, there are other contexts where the Buddha talks about these three types of fabrication. And it turns out that they apply in both cases both to how you shape your experience in the present moment and also how your actions in one lifetime can have an impact on shaping future lifetimes.

For example, in the context of the First and Second Noble Truths, the Buddha talks about these three fabrications, bodily, verbal, and mental, as the karma leading to rebirth. In this case, they simply mean bodily action, verbal action, and mental action or intentional action. And he says that these different types of fabrication can lead either to bright rebirth, dark rebirth, mixed, or they can lead to pleasure, pain, or what's called "the imperturbable" when you get into states of formless concentration.

So, in terms of the First and Second Noble Truths, the Buddha's talking about how the karma -- bodily, verbal, and mental karma, has an impact from one lifetime to the next. Now, in the context of the Fourth Noble Truth, the Buddha gives a definition of these three types of fabrication as they play a role in your concentration. In this case, bodily fabrication is your in and out breathing. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation.

In other words, you direct your thoughts to a particular meditation topic like the breath. And then you evaluate it. Is the breath good, is it not good, the questions I mentioned earlier, like, what can I do to make the breath more comfortable when it is comfortable? How do I keep it comfortable? How do I make the most out of it? All of that counts as verbal fabrication.

Then, finally, mental fabrication is perceptions and feelings. In this case, you would have the perception of identifying the breath or identifying a feeling of pleasure and then the feelings you have. These things shape the mind. When the Buddha defines these things, even though he does it in the context of states of concentration, the definitions are not limited just to concentration.

This is an important lesson that you learn. As you get more sensitive to these three types of fabrication in your concentration practice, you begin to realize that you engage in them all day long. The way you experience your body is going to be influenced by the way you breathe. The



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things that you say are going to be influenced by the things you direct your thoughts to and the way you evaluate those topics.

As the Buddha said, before you break into speech you have to direct your thought to a topic and then evaluate it and come up with some comment on it or question about it. This is this something you're doing all the time as you go through the day.

And the same with perceptions and feelings. You go through the day and you get a sense of how perceptions shape your experience of, say, when you're dealing with another person. You're dealing with your boss and you realize that you have a perception in the back of the mind that the boss is a monster. That's going to have a big impact on how you engage with the boss.

So, these three types of fabrication are happening all the time. Simply, as you get the mind into concentration, you get more and more conscious of what you're doing and how you're doing it. Sometimes you hear people saying, "Well, I'm told to get into jhāna, I have to do directive thought and evaluation. So, how do I -- what is directive thought and what is evaluation?" And I keep telling people that these are things you're already doing. The Buddha's simply telling you do them in a more consistent and more focused way.

Now, there is an argument that these two different contexts, rebirth and concentration, are totally separate. That when the Buddha is talking about bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication in the context of rebirth, he's talking about one thing. When he's talking about bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication in the context of concentration, he's talking about something else. It's not related. But I don't see an advantage to seeing those things as not related.

Actually, you can realize any any bodily action you're going to do has to start with a breath. Any verbal action you're going to do has to start with directive thought and evaluation. And any mental action is going to have to start with feelings and perceptions. So it's very useful to see that these things are directly connected.

In other words, when you're sitting and meditating, you're seeing the processes that can shape not only this lifetime, this immediate moment, but also the rest of your lifetime. And on into future lifetimes. It's all happening right here.

In this way, you gain sensitivity to the fact of fabrication. You see that the way you breathe is something that you can change at will. You can direct your thoughts, you can evaluate things at will, you can change these as you'd like.

And you can even come up with new perceptions that will have an impact on the feelings that you focus on and how you interpret them. So, you're seeing the fact of fabrication as you go through your life and you're also seeing the relative value of these things. You begin to realize that because you have choices you're not just stuck with things as they are. You have potentials that you can develop and you have to get a sense of what potentials are worth developing and which ones are not.



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So, those are my thoughts this morning regarding fabrication which basically means understanding the two main contexts that the Buddha uses for fabrications: the five aggregates and the three types of fabrication. And how both of these contexts are used to analyze and understand suffering in the First and Second Noble Truths, suffering, and its cause.

Also, they're going to be useful in developing the path to the end of suffering. This is a particular feature of the Buddha's teachings. If you're going to understand these things, you have to make something good out of them first.

So, it's not like you're on one side of the divide looking at fabrications on another side. You're on this side using these fabrications, mastering them as skills so that you can look at these well-fabricated experiences. You look at your other experiences as you've gone through life and realize you haven't fabricated them quite so well.

So, you see both the fact of fabrication and you get a sense of the relative value that you can learn to master these things as skills. You have to master the skills before you ultimately can let go.

So, if you're looking into understanding the five aggregates, on the one hand, and the three types of fabrication on the other, look at how you are meditating. Look at how you are trying to gain insight into the things that weigh the mind down and you'll be able to analyze the problem out there.

Once that problem out there is taken care of, then you can analyze the techniques that you're using in order to analyze the problem. And see that these, too, are fabrications that ultimately you can let go of. And that's how true freedom is found.

So, that was the path that the Buddha found. After trying to will himself to awaken, he realized he couldn't will himself. But he realized that if he took a more strategic approach, creating the path and then learning how to abandon the path skillfully, then the Buddha was able to gain awakening. We can take him as our guide. So, that's the talk for this morning.