

Non-Violence

Madhupindika Sutta: The Ball of Honey

Translator's Introduction

This discourse plays a central role in the early Buddhist analysis of conflict. As might be expected, the blame for conflict lies within, in the unskillful habits of the mind, rather than without. The culprit in this case is a habit called *papañca*. Unfortunately, none of the early texts give a clear definition of what the word *papañca* means, so it's hard to find a precise English equivalent for the term. However, they do give a clear analysis of how *papañca* arises, how it leads to conflict, and how it can be ended. In the final analysis, these are the questions that matter — more than the precise definition of terms — so we will deal with them first before proposing a few possible translation equivalents for the word.

Three passages in the discourses — *Digha Nikaya* 21, *Majjhima Nikaya* 18, and *Sutta Nipata* 4.11 — map the causal processes that give rise to *papañca* and lead from *papañca* to conflict. Because the Buddhist analysis of causality is generally non-linear, with plenty of room for feedback loops, the maps vary in some of their details.

In *Digha Nikaya* 21, the map reads like this:

the perceptions and categories of *papañca* > thinking > desire > dear-and-not-dear > envy and stinginess > rivalry and hostility

In *Sutta Nipata* 4.11, the map is less linear and can be diagrammed like this:

perception > the categories of *papañca*

perception > name and form > contact > appealing and unappealing > desire > dear-and-not-dear > stinginess/divisiveness/quarrels/disputes

In *Majjhima Nikaya* 18, the map is this:

contact > feeling > perception > thinking > the perceptions and categories of *papañca*

In this last case, however, the bare outline misses some of the important implications of the way this process is phrased. In the full passage, the analysis starts out in an impersonal tone:

"Dependent on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises [similarly with the rest of the six senses]. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling."

Starting with feeling, the notion of an "agent" — in this case, the feeler — acting on "objects," is introduced:

What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind). What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one "papañcizes."

Through the process of papañca, the agent then becomes a victim of his/her own patterns of thinking:

Based on what a person papañcizes, the perceptions and categories of papañca assail him/her with regard to past, present, and future forms cognizable via the eye [as with the remaining senses].

What are these perceptions and categories that assail the person who papañcizes? *Sutta Nipata* 4.14 states that the root of the categories of papañca is the perception, "I am the thinker." From this self-reflexive thought — in which one conceives a "self," a thing corresponding to the concept of "I" — a number of categories can be derived: being/not-being, me/not-me, mine/not-mine, doer/done-to, signifier/signified. Once one's self becomes a thing under the rubric of these categories, it's impossible not to be assailed by the perceptions and categories derived from these basic distinctions. When there's the sense of identification with something that experiences, then based on the feelings arising from sensory contact, some feelings will seem appealing — worth getting for the self — and others will seem unappealing — worth pushing away. From this there grows desire, which comes into conflict with the desires of others who are also engaging in papañca. This is how inner objectifications breed external contention.

How can this process be ended? Through a shift in perception, caused by the way one attends to feelings, using the categories of appropriate attention [see *Majjhima Nikaya* 2]. As the Buddha states in *Digha Nikaya* 21, rather than viewing a feeling as an appealing or unappealing thing, one should look at it as part of a causal process: when a particular feeling is pursued, do skillful or unskillful qualities increase in the mind? If skillful qualities increase, the feeling may be pursued. If unskillful qualities increase, it shouldn't. When comparing feelings that lead to skillful qualities, notice which are more refined: those accompanied with thinking (directed thought) and evaluation, or those free of thinking and evaluation, as in the higher stages of mental absorption, or jhana.

When seeing this, there is a tendency to opt for the more refined feelings, and this cuts through the act of thinking that, according to *Majjhima Nikaya* 18, provides the basis for papañca.

In following this program, the notion of agent and victim is avoided, as is self-reflexive thinking in general. There is simply the analysis of cause-effect processes. One is still making use of dualities — distinguishing between unskillful and skillful (and affliction/lack of affliction, the results of unskillful and skillful qualities) — but the distinction is between processes, not things. Thus one's analysis avoids the type of thinking that, according to *Digha Nikaya* 21, depends on the perceptions and categories of papañca, and in this way the vicious cycle by which thinking and papañca keep feeding each other is cut.

Ultimately, by following this program to greater and greater levels of refinement through the higher levels of mental absorption, one finds less and less to relish and enjoy in the six senses and the mental processes based on them. With this sense of disenchantment, the processes of feeling and thought are stilled, and there is a breakthrough to the cessation of the six sense spheres. When these spheres cease, is there anything else left? Ven. Sariputta, in *Anguttara Nikaya* 4.174, warns us not to ask, for to ask if there is, isn't, both-is-and-isn't, neither-is-nor-isn't anything left in that dimension is to papañcize what is free from papañca. However, this dimension is not a total annihilation of experience. It's a type of experience that *Digha Nikaya* 11 calls consciousness without feature, luminous all around, where water, earth, fire, and wind have no footing, where long/short, coarse/fine, fair/foul, name/form are all brought to an end. This is the fruit of the path of arahantship — a path that makes use of dualities but leads to a fruit beyond them.

It may come as cold comfort to realize that conflict can be totally overcome only with the realization of arahantship, but it's important to note that by following the path recommended in *Digha Nikaya* 21 — learning to avoid references to any notion of "self" and learning to view feelings not as things but as parts of a causal process affecting the qualities in the mind — the basis for papañca is gradually undercut, and there are fewer and fewer occasions for conflict. In following this path, one reaps its increasing benefits all along the way.

Translating *papañca*

As one writer has noted, the word *papañca* has had a wide variety of meanings in Indian thought, with only one constant: in Buddhist philosophical discourse it carries negative connotations, usually of falsification and distortion. The word itself is derived from a root that means diffuseness, spreading, proliferating.

The Pali Commentaries define *papañca* as covering three types of thought: craving, conceit, and views. They also note that it functions to slow the mind down in its escape from *samsara*. Because its categories begin with the objectifying thought, "I am the thinker," I have chosen to render the word as "objectification," although some of the following alternatives might be acceptable as well: self-reflexive thinking, reification, proliferation, complication, elaboration, distortion . . .

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