

The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Papāñca and the Fabricating Mind

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Introduction

Last week we explored **dukkha as friction** — the structural ill-fit at the center of experience — and how the wheel of dependent arising keeps that friction in motion. This week we look more closely at one of the key mechanisms that multiplies that friction: **papāñca** (pronounced pa-PAN-cha).

Papāñca is often translated as “mental proliferation” or “conceptual diffusion.” It describes what happens when the mind moves from bare sensory contact into self-referential narrative that keeps going.

Madhupindika Sutta (MN 18)

The **Madhupindika Sutta** — “The Honeyball” — offers a precise description of how papāñca unfolds in real time:

“What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one proliferates upon. From what one has proliferated upon, a person is beset by perceptions of papāñca with respect to past, present, and future forms cognizable via the eye.”

This can be understood as a sequence of unfolding moments:

1. **Contact** — a sense base meets an object: seeing, hearing, thinking
2. **Feeling tone (vedanā)** — pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral
3. **Perception** — recognition, labeling
4. **Thinking** — conceptual engagement begins
5. **Proliferation** — the mind elaborates, narrates, extends
6. **Being beset** — the proliferations feed back as perceptions, trapping awareness

Notice where the process pivots: at the move from **feeling tone to perception** — from “this is unpleasant” to “this shouldn’t be happening to me.” This is often the first moment where the self is recruited into the experience.

KALAKĀRAMA SUTTA (AN 4.24)

The Kalakārama Sutta offers a complementary angle. The Buddha describes the awakened mind as one that does not *land* on experience:

"The Tathāgata does not conceive of a seen thing apart from the seen. He does not conceive in what is seen, does not conceive from what is seen. He does not conceive 'the seen is mine.'"

This is the obverse of papañca: a mind that contacts experience without the self taking up residence in it. The Bāhiya Sutta names the same quality directly: *in the seen, only the seen*. Both suttas point to what papañca forecloses — bare contact without elaboration — and what becomes possible when proliferation loses its grip.

The Three Roots of Papañca

The Nibbedhika Sutta identifies three underlying forces that drive proliferation. These are not occasional visitors — they are the habitual engines of the fabricating mind:

1. Taṇhā — Craving

The drive toward or away from experience. Craving does not wait for an invitation — it arises automatically from pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones. Once craving engages, the mind begins building scenarios: how to get more, how to avoid loss, what might go wrong, what should have happened differently. Each scenario requires another, and proliferation begins.

2. Māna — Conceit

Not vanity exactly, but the comparing mind — the reflex to locate oneself in relation to others as better than, worse than, or equal to. Māna recruits the self into every perception. It is why an offhand remark can occupy the mind for hours: the self has been implicated, and the proliferating mind works to defend, justify, or repair the implication.

3. Diṭṭhi — Views

Fixed positions — about the self, the world, others, how things should be. Views act as filters that pre-shape perception before contact even completes. When experience confirms a view, proliferation reinforces it. When experience challenges a view, proliferation defends it. Either way, the bare moment is already buried.

Papañca and Dependent Arising

Papañca is not a separate teaching from dependent arising — it is a zoom lens on the same process. Last week's wheel showed how contact → feeling → craving → clinging sustains the turning. Papañca names what happens inside that chain at the cognitive level: the mind does not simply crave — it narrates, elaborates, and builds entire architectures of thought around the craving. Those architectures then feed back as fresh perceptions, creating new contact, new feeling tones, new craving. The wheel does not just turn — it spins faster.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Papāñca is not unusual or dramatic. It is the texture of everyday mental life:

1. A tone of voice becomes a story about what someone thinks of you, and the story runs for an hour.
2. A financial number becomes a narrative about a future that has not happened
3. A physical sensation becomes a symptom, the symptom becomes a diagnosis, the diagnosis becomes a catastrophe
4. A memory arises, recruits an emotion, generates a grievance, and then rehearses a conversation that will never occur.

In each case, the bare moment — the tone of voice, the number, the sensation, the memory — is real. What the mind does with it is fabrication. The practice is not to stop thinking, but to notice the precise moment when perception tips into proliferation. That noticing, even briefly, interrupts the momentum.

This is why the Buddha's response to papāñca is not suppression but clear seeing — what the tradition calls *yoniso manasikāra*, appropriate attention. Not “stop thinking” but “see what is actually happening at the point of contact.” The *Bāhiya Sutta* points to the same moment: in the seen, only the seen.

In Meditation

Sitting practice is essentially a laboratory for observing papāñca in slow motion. The breath is the anchor — the bare moment of contact. What arises around it is the fabricating mind at work: plans, judgments, memories, self-assessments, commentary on the commentary. The instruction is not to eliminate this activity but to recognize it clearly as fabrication rather than reality, and to return — lightly, without drama — to the bare moment.

Each return is not a failure recovered from. It is the practice itself. Noticing “I have been proliferating” is already beyond proliferation.

This return is most accessible right at the first flash — the image, the sensation, the shift in tone — before the story begins to fully form.

In Daily Life

Papāñca is often most visible in charged moments. A simple event can rapidly become a full narrative, and then an identity.

1. Something happens
2. A reaction forms
3. A story develops
4. “This is what this means.”

5. “This is who I am in this situation”

Notice how solid and justified this can feel — how little it feels like a process while it is happening.

Reflection Questions for Discussion

1. Can you recall a recent moment when bare experience (a sound, a word, a sensation) rapidly became an elaborate mental story? What was the first step beyond the bare perception?
2. Which of the three roots — **craving, conceit, or views** — most often drives your own proliferations? Can you give an example?
3. The Buddha describes being “beset” by papāñca — the proliferations become perceptions that trap awareness. Have you experienced this quality of being caught inside a mental narrative that felt more real than what was actually present?
4. What happens when you notice the shift from feeling tone to story in real time?
5. How does recognizing papāñca change your relationship to thought? Is the goal to think less, or to see more clearly?
6. Where in daily life — outside of formal meditation — might the practice of returning to the bare moment be most useful?
7. The Kalakārama Sutta describes a mind that doesn't "land" on experience. What would it feel like to meet an experience without the self immediately taking up residence in it?

The fabricating mind is not a problem to eliminate. It is simply the mind doing what untrained minds do. The practice is to see it clearly enough that it no longer runs the show unnoticed.