

## *Fabricating Goodwill*

*January 25, 2020*

One of the Buddha's basic insights was the extent to which we shape our experience, through a process he called fabrication—*sankhara* in Pali. And as he said, we fabricate for the sake of something. We have a purpose. The problem is, all too often we're ignorant of our purpose. We're like the CEO of a corporation who doesn't know what all his workers are doing. The corporation may have a stated purpose, but then the workers may have other purposes of their own. As you find in any study of bureaucracies, a bureaucrat's first concern is maintaining his or her position. The proper functioning of the bureaucracy comes second.

What we're doing as we meditate is to get more aware of what's going on in the lower echelons, to state a good purpose, and then to carry it through. This is going to require mindfulness, alertness, and determination. Once we've decided on a good goal, we have to make sure that the way we breathe, the way we talk to ourselves, the way we image the world to ourselves, is in line with that goal. As we leave meditation, we're going to make sure that we carry that determination with us to implement our goal, implement our stated purpose.

So you've got two kinds of fabrication going on, or two ways of talking to yourself. One is talking to yourself about the choice of your goal, and the second is about how you can implement it, how you can carry it through. And try to take advantage of the fact that we are shaping things. All too often we've just let ourselves be passive recipients of events and then we react. But we should be aware of the fact that we're entering into a situation and something's going to be accomplished by what we do. The more we can bring our various desires in line, bring our determinations in line, the more we can agree with ourselves as to what we really want to accomplish. And then we look at our preconceived notions about how to attain those things.

That's why, when we discuss issues like metta, goodwill, it's not just a matter of sitting with that determination—although that's an important part at the beginning, being mindful of our general goal. But it's also a matter of how we think about implementing that goal, how we carry it through. We usually don't think about this while we're meditating on the breath, but it's good at the end of the session—if you know you're going to get into a difficult situation in the course of the day—to think about how you can behave, how you can breathe, how you can talk to yourself, the images you want to hold in mind, so that you don't end up doing something unskillful, and that your participation in the interaction will also be for the good of the other people involved.

When you think about the Buddha's phrases for goodwill, they're not just, "May this other person be happy," or, "May I be happy," but there's also, "May this person not do anything unskillful." Because, remember, the other person is an agent, too. We're agents, so we have to think about what we're doing, why we're doing it. If we can get other people to behave in a skillful way, just as we're trying to behave in a skillful way, that requires some strategic thinking. All too often it's a bit too much to ask for you to come up with a solution to the problem right on the spot if you haven't been thinking in these terms beforehand. This is why it's a part of the meditation.

At the end of a session of breath meditation, you can stop and think, "If I go through the day, and this situation comes up, and so-and-so says  $x$  and  $y$ , what do I say in response?" See if you can keep breathing calmly in the midst of thinking about that. That'll give you practice so that you can breathe calmly when the situation actually arises, and then that calm breath will become a key to the doors of your memory so that you can remember, "Oh yes, I did think about this already, and this is what I thought might work." Then you try it out. If it doesn't work, you go back to the drawing board the next day.

It's in this way that your goodwill is not just an idle thought or a pleasant sentiment. It's a motivation. It's a determination. And it really can make a difference, both in how you shape your life and in how other people shape theirs. Because you have to remember that your actions do have an influence on other people, and you want that influence to be good. Now, it'll be up to the other person to take that influence and do something with it, and part of that is beyond your control. But you do your best. Because when you look back on a difficult situation, it's a lot easier to look back if you know that you went into it with good intentions. You may have made a mistake, but a mistake based on good intentions is much easier to think about than a mistake based on confused or unclear or bad intentions.

So try to bring your intentions in line with the principles of goodwill. You don't wish ill-will for anybody. You have to remember that there is a difference between anger and ill-will. Anger is just a negative response to something you don't like. Ill-will is the desire that somebody else suffer. Anger may alert you to a problem, but ill-will has no uses at all. You can think of anger as an alarm bell. When an alarm bell goes off, you don't need it to keep ringing. You turn off the alarm so that you can think clearly about what needs to be done.

So think about the options you have in terms of bodily fabrication—the way you breathe; verbal fabrication—the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication—how you picture things to yourself. The more alert you are to these processes, the more you can see where they're unskillful. You can look around to see how other people approach similar problems with more skill and you can learn from them. And then learn to use your ingenuity in applying

what you've learned. It's in this way that this process of fabrication—which, for so many of us leads to suffering—can actually become part of the path to its cessation.