

A Frame for the Day

September 4, 2014

When the Buddha teaches about fabrication, he's pointing to the extent to which our intentions shape our experience. This is a lesson you learn as you're meditating. You make up your mind to stay with the breath, to breathe comfortably, and then to stick with that intention. You begin to notice that you begin to give rise to feelings of pleasure—a sense of ease in the body, ease in the mind—all because you made up your mind to focus on a particular topic and to stick with it, and to do it as skillfully as you can.

Eventually, we're trying to develop a sense of disenchantment with fabrications. In fact, one of the reasons why we practice with them is that the more familiar we get with them, the more we realize their limitations. But we also realize that they have their potentials. After all, the path itself is fabricated. You can't do right view, or right resolve, or any of the factors through right concentration without intention, without fabricating them. You've got to put them together.

And you find that there are other benefits as well. You can use the process of fabrication to frame your day. They say that when Ajaan Mun would wake up in the morning, the first thing he would do would be to spread thoughts of goodwill. He actually had a chant that went through all ten directions—east, west, north, south, southeast, southwest, northwest, northeast, above, and below—spreading goodwill to all the beings in all those directions. On days when he wanted to chant the full thing, he'd go through many different types of beings, too: human beings, devas, common animals, hell beings. Now, the chant is not necessary for spreading goodwill, but some people find it helpful.

What's important is that you're fabricating a good frame for the day. This is your intention for the day. This is how you're going to view the day. The Buddha would recommend every day thinking the five reflections, that we're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, and that we're heirs to our karma. It may sound like a depressing reflection, but it's not meant to be depressing. It's just meant to be sobering. You realize what you have in life: lots of things that will separate from you. Your body itself is subject to aging, illness, and death. So, what do you really have? You've got your kamma.

This is to remind you of what's important as you go through that reflection: that your actions are important. The reflections on goodwill are to remind you that you want to act in a way that doesn't harm anybody, yourself or anyone else.

In other words, you don't break the precepts and you don't get anybody else to break the precepts, either. That's your real wealth.

There's another passage where the Buddha talks about the wealth of the world. He talks about five kinds. There's the well-being that comes from having relatives, the well-being that comes from having material wealth, the wealth that comes from having good health. Then there's the well-being that comes from having right view and virtue. As he said, the first three are not nearly as important as the last two. If you suffer loss in terms of any of the first three, that should be considered a small loss. Now, for a lot of us, that's hard to think about: losing our wealth, losing our relatives, losing our health. But it's going to happen. What doesn't have to happen is loss of right view or loss of your virtue. You lose those two only when you destroy them yourself.

So remind yourself of what's important as you go through the day. All of this is composed of verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. In other words, you focus on certain topics and you think about them, ask questions, make comments. So when you're spreading thoughts of goodwill, you're taking goodwill as your topic. That's your directed thought. Then evaluating it means trying to figure out ways in which you can extend goodwill to everyone.

It's good not to think that goodwill is just a big sandwich spread that you spread over the world without taking any account for individual people. There will be some people out there, if you encounter them in the course of the day, for whom it's going to be hard to maintain thoughts of goodwill. So you've got to talk to yourself: How are you going to maintain goodwill even with difficult people? You can think of some specific examples and then walk your way through the situation. What does it mean to have goodwill for that person? It means that you want to act in a way that's not harmful to that person's genuine well-being—and, if possible, actually helpful. You're wishing that that person would understand the causes for true happiness and act on them.

You have to realize that there are some people that you can actually help in that direction; there are others you can't. This is why equanimity is also one of the topics of the brahmaviharas: learning how not to get worked up about things you can't change. This is another good thing to think about.

As for mental fabrications, those are perceptions and feelings. Start with the perception of which of your belongings are valuable, and which ones not. You've got to hold those perceptions in mind. That way, whatever happens, you're not going to lose your virtue, and if there's anything you have to sacrifice in order to maintain your virtue—any wealth, or status, any of the ordinary things in the

world—remind yourself that you're willing to let it go, because that's not where your true wealth lies.

You're going to lose it anyhow at some point. But as I said, virtue and right view don't have to be lost.

It's like a woman I knew in Thailand. She was having dreams of a spirit coming to her, insisting that it wanted to use her as a medium. Yet even in the dream, she was adamant that she did not want that to happen. The spirit threatened her, saying, "Your mother's going to die, your father's going to die, if you don't give in." And again, even in the dream, she was able to say, "Well, they're going to die someday anyhow. I don't want the miserable life of being somebody's medium."

That's the right way to think. You don't want to sacrifice your virtue for anything, because the things that we would ordinarily sacrifice our virtue for are going to go away anyhow, at one point or another. So hold on to your virtue, hold on to your right view as your possession, because it's through virtue and right view that you can develop mindfulness, and through mindfulness, the rest of the path.

These are some of the reflections with which you want to start the day.

They also say that Ajaan Mun, at the end of the day, would spread thoughts of goodwill again. This was both for the sake of all the beings of the world and also for the sake of his rest at night. We sometimes forget that the way we meditate before bedtime, the way we prepare our mind for sleep, can have a huge impact on how the sleep goes and how our health goes in the sleep. A lot of people, to prepare for sleep, brush their teeth and whatever. The meditator's way of preparing for sleep, in addition to all that, is to prepare the mind, again, through thoughts of goodwill and then working with the breath, staying with comfortable breaths, staying with a breath that feels nourishing throughout the body. And if it turns out that by focusing on the breath, you're keeping yourself awake a little bit longer, that's perfectly fine, because the rest that comes from concentration, especially when the breath is comfortable, can often be a lot more refreshing and reinvigorating than the rest that comes from plain old sleep.

By thinking thoughts of goodwill and working with the breath, you're putting the mind in much better frame. As the Buddha says, if you think thoughts of goodwill on a regular basis, you find it easy to sleep, easy to wake up, you dream no evil dreams. Now, some meditators have found that, especially when they come to the monastery for the first couple of days, they have some pretty wild dreams. That's largely because when you're out there in the regular world, there're so many things pressing in on you all the time that the currents lying deep in the mind just stay pressed down. Then, when all of a sudden those outside currents are not

there, things inside come springing up. Well, that lasts just for a couple of days, and then things sort themselves out.

Then you'll find that this practice of focusing on goodwill, the practice of staying with the breath—if you want, you can repeat the word *buddho*, to remind yourself of the Buddha—helps the quality of your sleep. Again, if you find that you're not sleeping, or having trouble falling asleep, don't think of it as trouble. Just think: "Here's an opportunity to stay with the breath." Keep your mind as still as possible. There's nothing to worry about, as to whether you're going to fall asleep or not.

So the way you fabricate your day is a really important part of the practice. Try to create this framework when you get up, when you go to sleep. This is where you can use those teachings on fabrication. Bodily fabrication: the breath. Verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. Mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. You can shape the day, shape your waking hours, shape your sleeping hours, in a way that's conducive to your genuine well-being.