

Worlds & Their Cessation

THE BUDDHA'S STRATEGIC VIEW OF THE COSMOS

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Recently, while teaching a retreat sponsored by a vipassana group in Brazil, I happened to mention devas and rebirth. The response was swift. The next morning, as I was looking through the slips of paper left in the question box, two questions stood out. The first was a complaint: "Why do we have to listen to this supernatural stuff? I don't believe in anything except for the natural world I can see with my own eyes." The second was a complaint of a different sort: "Why are Western Buddhist teachers so afraid to talk about the supernatural side of the Buddhist tradition?"

To answer the second question, all I had to do was point to the first. "It's because of questions like these. They scare teachers away from the topic." I might have added that there's an irony here. In an effort to be tolerant, the early generation of Western Buddhist teachers admitted dogmatic materialists into their ranks, but these materialists have proven very intolerant of the supernatural teachings attributed to the Buddha. If he was really awakened, they say, he wouldn't have taught such things.

To answer the first question, though, I asked a question in return: "How do you know that the natural world is real? Maybe what you see with your eyes is all an illusion. What we *do* know, though, is that suffering is real. Some people have the kamma to experience supernatural events; others, the kamma to experience only natural events. But whatever the range of the world you experience, you can create real suffering around it, so that's what the Buddha's teaching focuses on. He's got a cure for suffering regardless."

Here I could have added even more. The awakening that goes beyond suffering also goes beyond all worldviews, but the path leading to that awakening requires that you adopt a provisional sense of the world in which human action has the power to bring suffering to an end. This is the same pattern the Buddha adopts with regard to views about the self: Awakening lies beyond all views of the self, but it requires adopting, provisionally, a sense of your self as responsible and competent to follow the path.

The parallel way the Buddha treats these two issues comes from the fact that "self" and "world" go together. In his analysis, suffering arises in the process of becoming (*bhava*), which means the act of taking on a sense of self in a particular world of experience. This becoming comes from craving. When we cling to a craving, we create a sense of self, both the self-as-consumer who, we hope, will enjoy the attainment of what we crave, and the self-as-producer who does or doesn't possess the skills to attain it. At the same time, the self needs a world in which to function to satisfy its cravings. So we fashion a view of the world as it's

relevant to that particular desire: what will help or hinder our self in our quest for what we want.

These worlds can be strictly imaginary scenarios in the mind—in which case there are very few constraints on the shapes they can take—but they also include the world(s) in which we function as human beings. And in cases like this, there *are* constraints: The human world, when you push on it, often pushes back. It doesn't always respond easily to what you want, and is sometimes firm in its resistance. As we look for happiness, we have to figure out how to read its pushback. When we gain a sense of what can and can't rightly be expected out of how the world works, we can adjust our cravings to get the most out of what the world has to offer. At the same time, we adjust our sense of self, developing skills to fit in with the world so that we can produce happiness more easily, and consume it more frequently.

This is why our sense of self is so intimately tied to our sense of the world—and why people can get so incensed about the differing worldviews of others. If we feel that they're trying to get away with things that our own worldview doesn't allow, we're offended because they're not playing by the rules to which we've submitted. Some of the people who are convinced that the world has no supernatural dimension feel that people whose worldview allows for the supernatural are trying to get away with magical thinking. Some whose worldview *does* have room for the supernatural—and who find in that dimension the source of their values—are upset by people whose materialist/naturalist views allow them to operate in a world unrestrained by any objective moral law.

These battles have been going on for millennia. The Pali Canon—the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—shows that they were already raging at his time. Several long discourses are devoted to the wide variety of worldviews the Buddha's contemporaries advocated, and if anything, people in India at that time had a greater variety of worldviews than we do now. Some maintained that the world and the self were purely material; others, that there was a soul that remained the same forever; others, that the soul and the world were identical; and still others, that the soul perished at death. Some argued that moral laws were just a convention; others, that a moral law was built into the cosmos. Some believed that the world had a creator; others believed that it arose by chance; others, that it has existed without any beginning point at all. Some believed in other realms of being—heavens and hells—while others did not. Some believed in rebirth, while others did not. Some believed in a finite cosmos, some in an infinite cosmos, some in a cosmos that was both or neither. The list could go on and on.

The Buddha's response to these controversies was interesting. Instead of jumping into the fray to debate these issues, he focused first on the kamma of building a worldview: what kinds of actions led to a particular view, and what kinds of actions that worldview would inspire. He then judged these actions as to whether they resulted in more suffering or less. Only then did he decide which

features were required by a provisional worldview that would lead to suffering's end.

His approach was very wise. Arguments over worldviews boil down to questions of inference: what kind of facts can be judged to be real, and what ways of inferring a world from those facts can be judged to be valid. And where do we get our facts? We learn about the world by acting in it. We learn about walls by bumping into them; about people, by trying to get what we want from them. Then, from the results of our actions, we infer more about the world than our actions actually tell us. There's a lot more to the world than the parts that respond to our actions, and our inferences fill in the blanks. So the Buddha, instead of giving reality to the inferences, decided to focus on their source: our actions. After all, we know them—or should know them, if we're paying attention—much more directly than the worlds we've inferred.

His conclusion was that all possible worldviews were instances of clinging, and that clinging, in turn, was suffering. Just as we suffer in the activity of what the Buddha called I-making and my-making, we suffer in the process of world-making. Even though we feed off these activities—"feeding" being another meaning for *upādāna*, the Pali word for clinging—we end up having to pay dearly for what we eat. This is true whether our sense of the world has a supernatural aspect or not.

Now, these worldview-clingings have two dimensions. On the one hand, they focus on five things, called aggregates (*khandha*):

- the body as it moves around in the world;
- feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain;
- perceptions, the labels we apply to things;
- fabrications, the way we put our thoughts together; and
- consciousness, our awareness at the six senses.

On the other hand, these clingings can take four forms:

- view clinging, the act of holding to a view of the world;
- doctrine-of-self clinging, the sense of "you" that functions in that worldview along with the sense of "you" as the person who is proud to espouse that view;
- habit-and-practice clinging, a sense of how things have to be done, both in shaping and defending a worldview and then, once it's shaped, how you have to act in the context of the rules of that worldview; and
- sensuality clinging, fascination with the sensual pleasures that a worldview has to offer.

It's easy to see how this analysis of clinging applies to worldviews that have no supernatural aspect as well as to those that do. For example, in terms of the self holding the view, "naturalists" can be very proud that they're hard-headed realists; "supernaturalists," very proud that they've been singled out for privileged information. In terms of habits and practices, each side can be very insistent that the way they draw inferences about the world is "scientific"—as

they define the term—and that they know for a fact what ways of behavior are actually valid in the context of their worlds.

From the Buddha's point of view, though, all these ways of clinging are suffering. And the wise task with regard to suffering is to comprehend it—which means to see how it's caused, how it passes away, what its allure is, what its drawbacks are, and finally how to escape from it through the dispassion that comes from seeing that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure.

MUNDANE RIGHT VIEW

To comprehend clinging and suffering in this way is not simply an intellectual exercise. It requires developing all eight factors of the noble path, an all-around skill that grows in many stages. This path requires a strong sense that there are such things as skillful and unskillful actions. It also requires a resilient sense of motivation that can carry you through the setbacks and obstacles in developing, among other skills, strong mindfulness and concentration. All of this, especially as you're getting started on the path, requires a certain sense of the world to explain the path and to affirm why it's a possible and desirable course of action.

Which is why the Buddha doesn't simply recommend dropping all views about the world. As he notes in DN 1, taking a stance of agnosticism toward all issues deprives you of any grounds for deciding what's skillful and not. When you're deprived in that way, you're open to doing unskillful things that will yield bad long-term consequences. So, instead of dropping views about the world, he recommends—in the form of mundane right view (MN 117)—a provisional sketch of the world that serves the purposes of the path to the end of suffering, one in which that path is both possible and desirable. In other words, he's giving you something relatively skillful to cling to until you reach the level of skill where you no longer need to cling. At the same time, he recommends overcoming I-making and my-making by starting first with the step of developing, provisionally, a healthy sense of self capable of following the path (AN 4:159). Only when these senses of the world and of the self have served their purpose do you put them aside.

Note, in both cases, that he's recommending just a *sense* of self and a *sense* of world, not a full-blown view about either self or world. As he saw, the path requires just a small body of assumptions, enough to act as working hypotheses that point you in the right direction. In terms of the self, the Buddha discouraged his monks from trying to answer such questions as "What am I?" "Do I exist?" "Do I not exist?" (MN 2). Instead, it's enough to develop and use a sense of self that's responsible and competent as a producer (Dhp 160), and who feels enough self-love to want only the best happiness for the self as a consumer (AN 3:40). In terms of the world, the Buddha refused to take a position on whether or not the world was eternal or infinite (MN 63). He also discouraged his followers from engaging in speculation about the world, saying that it would lead to "madness and vexation" (AN 4:77). In fact, he never gave a complete picture even of a

“Buddhist cosmology.” The maps detailing the many levels of the Buddhist cosmos were later extrapolations from comments scattered in the early texts. What he did offer was just a handful of leaves (SN 56:31).

A prominent leaf in that handful was a view of the world in which the mind’s acts of fabrication play an important role. On one level, this is eminently sensible. Given the effort that goes into constructing worldviews, why bother fabricating a worldview, as some people do, in which the mind’s activities play no effective role—in which they’re regarded as nothing more than after-effects of physical events, for example, or denied any reality at all? (DN 2) It’d be a senseless waste of time.

But the Buddha’s purposes were more specific than just common sense. The path to the end of suffering requires a view of the world in which:

suffering is real,
 the mind’s fabrications, under the power of ignorance, are the cause of suffering, and
 those same fabrications, when treated with knowledge, have the power to bring suffering to an end.

This means, as a preliminary principle, that the Buddha’s provisional worldview could not be purely materialistic. He established this point with the line that his followers posted in the first line of the Dhammapada: “The heart/mind is the forerunner of all phenomena.” With this line, the Buddha rejected the worldview in which the mind is simply the passive recipient of sense data, or in which its functions are nothing more than the after-effects of physical processes. In a materialist universe, the problem of suffering wouldn’t rightly be regarded as a problem, because it can’t be detected by material mechanisms. And even if a materialist were inconsistent enough to want to do away with suffering, he’d explain it as a material problem, to be solved through material means, such as chemicals or electric shock. The principle that the mind comes first, however, allows for suffering to be regarded as a genuine problem, and that it might potentially be solved by training the mind’s fabrications.

This is why the main leaf in the Buddha’s worldview is that the processes of fabrication are real. Unlike some later Buddhist theorists, such as Nāgārjuna, the Buddha stated clearly that fabrications—even though they’re conditioned, inconstant, and subject to change—really do exist (SN 22:94). If they weren’t real, the suffering they create also wouldn’t be real, and there would be no point to teaching a path to the end of suffering.

But fabrications are not simply real. They are *the* dominant factor in shaping not only our views about the world, but also the structure of the world, the events we experience within that structure, and the way we experience those events.

In giving fabrications such a large role to play in shaping the world, the Buddha is also implying that the world shares the limitations of fabrications. Like them, it’s inconstant, stressful, and subject to change. No permanent happiness

can be found within its confines. This is the main motivation for wanting to get out of it.

But when we examine the Buddha's picture of how fabrications construct the world, we find that he also gives them a prominent role in providing the way out. To take on that role, though, the mind has to accept certain assumptions to guide it in fabricating the path. The Buddha set out these assumptions in the provisional sketch of the world that he called mundane right view. The assumptions are these:

there is generosity—i.e., the act of generosity is a choice (this principle denies strict determinism);

actions are real;

there are the results of good and bad actions;

there are beings;

some beings, such as your parents, deserve gratitude;

there is a world after death;

there are, in some of those worlds, spontaneously reborn beings—i.e., beings in the heavens, hells, and realm of the hungry ghosts, who, based on their kamma, arise without parents; and

there are contemplatives who, practicing rightly, have come to know these things as facts.

These are all principles to be taken on conviction. Some people ask how one can be expected to know these things before accepting them, but that's missing the point. These principles are explicitly labeled as right *views*, rather than right knowledge. You're not expected to know them at the beginning of the path. They're working hypotheses, "right" because they're right for the job: They lead you to act in a way that will lead to the end of suffering. Only at the moment of full awakening are they replaced with right knowledge.

The Buddha realized that he couldn't prove these principles to an unawakened audience, but he did provide a pragmatic test: By accepting these principles, you're more likely to engage in skillful actions than if you accepted their opposites. That much is easy to see. Of course, a willingness to accept the principle that views can be tested by putting them into action requires at least some confidence that actions can be chosen and have the power to yield differing results. But the Buddha wasn't interested in teaching people whose minds weren't open enough to accept at least this much.

The discourses add some details to the worldview sketched out in mundane right view. In terms of action, AN 3:62 rejects any worldviews in which all experience of pleasure and pain can be attributed to previous actions, to the will of a creator god, or to pure chance. As the Buddha points out, such views don't provide any grounds for claiming that there's a difference between skillful and unskillful actions, or that there could be such a thing as a path of practice.

The Buddha's provisional worldview also makes reference to heavens, hells, and rebirth. This means that his concept of nature contained what we would call a supernatural dimension. But it's worth noting:

- that his sketch of the cosmos, as revealed in the discourses, was not simply picked up from the worldviews of previous Indian religions; and
- that he deprived the supernatural dimension of the authority it enjoyed in other religions of the time.

To begin with, his view of kamma, and of the places where beings can go after death, was distinctively his own. Compared to previous thinkers, he gave a much larger role to kamma in shaping both the process of rebirth and the worlds to which beings are reborn. Those worlds, especially in his sketch of the higher heavens, correspond to what he learned about the levels of the mind that he encountered in the course of bringing his mind to awakening. Although he affirmed the existence of some of the devas taught in the Vedas, the structure of his cosmos puts them in their place, in both senses of the term. In other words, they are demoted to the lower heavens and sharply downsized in importance. Even the Great Brahmā, the highest god in the brahmanical pantheon, is assigned to a middling level of heaven, reigning there over the ignorant, not because of any innate greatness, but because he exhausted the merit that would have allowed him to stay on a higher level (DN 1). This means that the Buddha's audience would have found his worldview just as novel and strange as Western audiences do now.

It's also worth noting the serious constraints he put on the value of knowing the supernatural. Even though, as he stated, full knowledge of devas was a necessary part of his own awakening (AN 8:71), it wasn't necessary for everyone. He needed it because, without that knowledge, he couldn't have taught people whose kamma led them to experience devas in their own meditation. But what he learned about the devas was that they can be very unreliable. Instead of coming in just two varieties—angels and demons—they come in all gradations of goodness and potency. And they're not always emissaries from a higher power, either evil or good. Knowing these facts helps to protect a person who has visions of such beings, or who encounters them through mediums, from being overly fearful of them or giving them too much confidence.

Some devas have a good sense of the Dhamma (MN 134; SN 9:14), some don't (SN 1:20), and even those who do can be fickle in sharing their knowledge (SN 9:14). Some, like Māra, are hungry for power. Others are downright corrupt—see the origin story to Pārājika 3 for a chilling example of a deva who gives evil advice. Devas who claim to be creators of the universe are especially hypocritical and ignorant (DN 1; DN 11).

What all this means is that the supernatural knowledge coming from devas—what they tell you about the cosmos, for example, about how to act, or about the meaning of life—can't always be trusted.

Similarly with psychic powers: The Buddha mastered a wide range of such powers on the way to his awakening, and he continued to use them in the course of his teaching career (MN 86). But he warned any monks who had such powers not to display them to the laity (Cv.V.8). As he explained in DN 11, the display of psychic powers is always open to suspicions of trickery, whereas a Dhamma that, when put into practice, shows results is the only proof of a teacher's truthfulness.

Several stories of psychic powers in the Canon show that they attract the wrong kind of attention from others (see the origin story to NP 23), and the case of Devadatta shows how a monk with psychic powers can actually use those powers to cause harm.

So even though the Buddha's provisional view of the world has a supernatural dimension, he places some very sensible restrictions on how much that dimension can be trusted. This fact is reflected in two important points:

- Even though the Buddha's awakening required gaining psychic powers and knowledge of devas, the full awakening of his students does not (SN 12:70).
- In judging whether teachers are to be trusted, their lack or possession of such powers doesn't enter into the equation at all. Instead, they should be observed to see if they possess two very natural virtues: They wouldn't tell a person to do something that would lead to that person's harm; and they wouldn't claim knowledge that they don't possess (MN 95). In other words, teachers are to be judged by their actions, to see if they're reliable guides on how to act.

After all, this is the main thrust of the Buddha's provisional worldview: the role of action in shaping the world. If teachers don't act with truthfulness and compassion, you can't trust them to teach you how to act wisely and skillfully with regard to the world. And skill is precisely what you need to learn how to master. Actions have the power to lead to a wide range of becomings—from the purely painful ones in hell to the purely blissful ones in the higher heavens. This is because the cravings that drive the mind to act can also drive it to being reborn (SN 44:9)—a process that comes from an inconceivable beginning (SN 15:3), and can, potentially, recur without end.

And the process doesn't go ever upward. After reaching the higher levels, beings easily become careless and irresponsible, clinging to the results of their past good kamma, and so fall. And because the cosmos is shaped by the actions of many beings, there's no one being in charge of the process. It has no purpose, and—in the words of MN 82—it's "without shelter, without protector." This means that the suffering experienced in all these ups and downs serves no higher purpose, either. It's pointless.

But the Buddha's provisional worldview does have a point: to develop a sense of dismay at the idea of continuing to stay in this world of fabrications, along with a sense of confidence that, if action has caused this problem, action can find the way out. And because the source of the problem is in the mind, the solution has to lie there as well. As the Buddha says to a former "sky-walker" in AN 4:45, there's no way that an end to the cosmos, free from suffering, can be reached by traveling, but it can be reached by looking inward, into the body together with its mind. This is where the cosmos, the origination of the cosmos, the cessation of the cosmos, and the path leading to the cessation of the cosmos can be found.

When the mind shifts its frame of reference to this perspective, it moves its right views from the mundane level to the transcendent.

TRANSCENDENT RIGHT VIEW

Mundane right view and transcendent right view both focus on the same topic—the mind’s fabrications—but they treat that topic from different angles. Mundane right view treats it in terms of beings and worlds. Transcendent right view drops those terms entirely and treats the processes of fabrication *as* processes, analyzed in terms of the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. This level of right view doesn’t deny the existence of beings or worlds. Instead, it simply changes to another frame of reference: fabrications within the mind, taken on their own terms. With regard to suffering, the question isn’t who in the world is suffering, who caused the suffering, or who’s going to put an end to suffering. It’s simply, what actions constitute suffering, what actions cause it, what actions bring it to an end. From this perspective, a distinctive duty is applied to events falling under each truth: suffering is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed.

By adopting this perspective, you can see even your sense of self and your sense of the world simply as actions. You then ask which of the four categories of right view these actions fall into, and apply the appropriate duty. When you regard something as “yours” or as a duty imposed by the world, it’s hard to let it go. But when you see it simply as an action under the rubric of the four noble truths, it’s easier to apply the appropriate duty. You see that views are forms of clinging, so you try to comprehend them. You see that they come from craving, so you try to let that craving go.

But because the mind is so used to thinking in terms of beings and worlds, this new perspective is hard to hold in mind. It keeps slipping back to its old ways of thinking. This is why right mindfulness—the ability to remember the right frame of reference and the duties implied by that frame—is an essential part of the path. The basic formula for right mindfulness starts by telling you to keep track of the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities in and of themselves. In other words, you view these raw materials for a state of becoming on their own terms, without putting them in the context of “self” or “world”—how, for instance, your body is viewed by the world or how it fits into your self-image vis-à-vis the world.

The formula then notes that you keep subduing any greed or distress with reference to the world. In other words, you drop any thoughts that deal in terms of “world” that would pull you out of your frame of reference.

The formula also notes that you develop three qualities to keep with the right frame of reference:

- mindfulness, remembering your frame of reference along with the duties appropriate to the four noble truths;
- alertness, the ability to see clearly what you are doing in the present; and
- ardency, the effort to apply the appropriate duty to whatever is coming up in the context of your frame of reference.

Maintaining this practice over time would become a dry, tiring exercise if it weren't for the fact that these "establishings of mindfulness" (*satipaṭṭhāna*) lead the mind to right concentration, which is suffused with pleasure and rapture. As long as the mind doesn't get distracted by the world outside, it can find a strong sense of well-being by developing this new perspective.

In the beginning stages of right mindfulness, the work of subduing greed and distress with reference to the world focuses on thoughts that would pull you to engage in the world outside. But with time, you come to see the world more and more in the Buddha's "noble" definition of the term: the six senses, their objects, consciousness at the senses, contact at the senses, and all the feelings that arise based on that contact (SN 35:82). In other words, you get less interested in extrapolating an outside world from these processes, and more interested in simply bringing knowledge to these processes in and of themselves. In this way, you bring the world into the context of the four establishings of mindfulness themselves, and under the framework of the four noble truths. The meditation is now not something that happens in the context of the world; the world happens in the context of the meditation. This doesn't mean that the world outside is an illusion, just that you realize that it's not the problem. The problem lies in the processes of the mind.

RELEASE FROM WORLDS

SN 12:15 shows where this practice leads: As you watch the origination of the "world" in the sense of processes, you reach a state of mind in which the thought of "existence" with regard to the world simply doesn't occur to you. As you watch the cessation of the world of processes, the thought of "non-existence" with regard to the world doesn't occur to you, either. You see the processes of arising and passing away as mere instances of stress arising and passing away. Because these processes have no further value in terms of "world" or "self," "existence" or not, you can let them all go. And in letting them go, the mind lets go of everything that's fabricated and caused, that arises and passes away. That's how it gains release.

MN 49 describes the state of consciousness revealed in this release as "consciousness without surface," a consciousness that—unlike the consciousness-aggregate—is not experienced through the six senses at all. In other words, it's not engaged in any world in any sense of the term. DN 11 adds that it's free from name and form, which means that—unlike, say, the infinitude of consciousness experienced in formless states of concentration—it's not involved in any sort of fabrication. In both of these discourses, this type of consciousness is presented as something that even the devas in the highest heavenly worlds don't know. After all, they're still in their worlds, whereas—in the words of DN 11—this consciousness is where no world finds a footing. It's the world's cessation.

The image used in SN 12:64 is of a light beam that doesn't land on any object. It may be bright in and of itself, but because it doesn't participate in the world in

any way, it can't be detected as existing, not existing, both, or neither. Its release is that total.

This is the goal where the Buddha's teachings on the world aim: to a state of mind freed from any world of any kind. In going beyond the world, you find that the Buddha's provisional worldviews were true, as far as they went, but that their genuine worth lies in that they allow the mind to go further than they do. As the Buddha's life story shows, people who have gone beyond worlds in this way can—as long as the body continues to live—still offer guidance and help to those still trapped in worlds, whether those worlds are of a natural or supernatural sort. This is why the Buddha was a teacher of beings not only human, but also divine. But there's something about an awakened person that no world or worldview can capture. And because the Buddha's worldviews can help those who adopt them to find that "something," that's why they're really worth taking on.