Leaving the Worlds Behind

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The Buddha tells the story of two acrobats. The teacher, or the master acrobat, gets up on the top of a bamboo pole that’s been set up in the ground, set straight up, standing way up on the tip top, and then asks his apprentice, to get up on his shoulders. And the master says, “Okay, you watch out after me and I’ll watch out after you, and that way we’ll come down safely.” And the apprentice says, “Nope, that won’t do at all. I’ll watch out after myself, watch out after my balance, you watch out after yours, and that way we’ll come down safely.” And the Buddha said, in that particular case, the apprentice was right. It’s easy to forget where our responsibilities lie. We have this power within us, ourselves, through our intentions, shaping our thoughts, our words, and deeds. And we have to be responsible for that first, making sure that we’re acting on the most skillful intentions in whatever we do. This requires a lot of care and feeding of the mind. All too often we treat our own minds carelessly. Taking in all sorts of garbage, feeding the mind, and all sorts of harmful things, things that actually destroy its strength. And as a result we don’t have the strength we need to be responsible, or we have to be. We spend all of our time looking at other things, concerned about what other people are doing, so that we neglect where our real power lies. This is why you have to be very careful what you take in. The Buddha teaches restraint of the senses as a basic prerequisite for meditation, and all too often we forget about it. We don’t look at things that stir up greed, anger, and delusion. We don’t listen to things that stir up greed, anger, and delusion. In a way it seems like we’re placing blinders on ourselves, and the mind immediately reacts. We want freedom to look. We want to look and listen and taste and smell without any restrictions. But when you realize we’re not just experiencers, most of us tend to think that we want to go through life experiencing all kinds of stuff. The fewer limitations on our range of experience, the better. And if we were just experiencers, there might be some way to argue for that, but we’re not. We’re also actors. We do. We shape. And that’s where we really have to be responsible. And again, the Buddha doesn’t say, “Don’t look at anything at all.” He says, “Just notice the details that would provoke anger.” You learn not to look at those details. You look at other details. The same for lust, the same for greed, the same for fear, delusion. You don’t look at the details that stir up unskillful states. Learn to counteract them by looking at other details. And again, this doesn’t mean being an ostrich pretending there’s nothing bad out in the world. It’s learning to focus on what’s really useful for maintaining the state of your mind, what’s really useful for maintaining your ability to be responsible. So you have to have principles in your looking, principles in your listening. So that you can do what’s best for any particular situation. Again, this means you’re not ignoring the needs of other people. You’re actually putting your mind in a better position where it can help other people when it has to. Because you’re not just draining your strength away, draining your strength away. I was talking to someone tonight who had decided to have news blackout for the whole day. Didn’t look at the newspaper, didn’t look at TV. Then a friend of his came to visit him, and the friend had obviously been looking at the newspapers, listening to the radio, watching TV, and was just totally worn out, totally distraught, as everyone’s reliving the events of last year. So in a situation like that, if suddenly you needed help from one of those two people, which person would you want your help from? The one who’d maintain his stability by being wise in what he looked at and what he didn’t look at. So we tend to think that to be responsible we have to know everything that’s going on in the world. Well, that’s impossible. When you look at the news, what is the basic message of the news? That the important things in the world are things that are being done by other people, some other place. What you’re doing right now is of no importance. That’s basically what the underlying message of all the news is. So you have to learn not to fall for that message. Remind yourself that what you’re doing right here, right now, is very important. That’s what the Buddha’s teachings are all about. Because there’s unskillful karma, there’s skillful karma, and there are really different levels of skillful karma. It comes down to four types. There’s what he calls dark karma with dark results. In other words, the kind of karma that leads to unpleasant results here and around every birth. There’s bright karma with bright results, again, leading to pleasant results here and around every birth. There’s mixed, dark and bright, kind of a gray karma, which leads to mixed results within and around every birth. And then there’s karma that’s neither dark nor bright. It leads to the ending of karma. It takes you out of the round of rebirth. No one else is going to do that karma for you. You have to do it yourself. And the last one is the one that he really emphasized. How are you going to do that? Well, you’ve got to look after your mind, take care of your mind, if you’re going to get that skillful. We tend to think of people leaving the round of rebirth as being selfish, leaving everybody else behind. It’s interesting to remember, though, that when the Buddha talked about samsara, he didn’t mean a place. Samsara is a process. It’s something people do. They go around creating worlds. And when one world begins to wear out, you’ve got to create another one. And when that one wears out, you create another one. You keep creating worlds and moving into them and having to move on, move on, move on. And you bump into other people who are creating their worlds as well. In fact, it turns out that your world has to feed off the worlds of other people. Their worlds have to feed off other people’s. And the whole process would be innocuous if it weren’t for the fact that there’s so much suffering involved, even just within your own world. The worlds keep caving in on you and killing you. And then you have to go through the process of rebirth all over again, finding another world, giving rise to it through your actions. Just think about having to go through childhood all over again, going to grade school, going to high school. All the things that bring you to adulthood. And then having to be an adult all over again. Then having to grow old again, over and over and over again. Remember what the Buddha said about the tears you’ve shed through your many lifetimes compared to the water in the ocean. The tears you’ve shed, he said, are greater. Think about that the next time you look at the ocean. The next time you go play in its waves, remind yourself you’re playing in your accumulated tears. On top of that, there’s the suffering we cause each other because our worlds need to feed on the worlds of other people. Sometimes our interactions are good, mutually beneficial, mutually enjoyable. But there’s a lot in this process of world creation that depends on feeding off the worlds of others. Think of your food, your clothing, your shelter, the medicine you need in order to keep yourself fed, clothed, sheltered, healthy. Even if it’s just very basic, the process involves just a lot of suffering. That’s why we have that chant every night, reflecting on the requisites, realizing that our own ongoing lives require the support of others, depend on the suffering of others one way or another. And so you try to use those requisites as responsibly as possible. And the most responsible way is to learn how to get over this addiction you have for creating worlds. This is why the process of learning how to get out of the cycle of birth and redeath is not a selfish one. It’s more like overcoming a bad habit, an abusive habit, overcoming an addiction. Once you learn how to overcome it, you can be an example to others, you can teach others how you did it so they can do it themselves. When you get to not creating worlds anymore, then you’re not at the very least you’re lightening their load. One less world to feed. So it’s not like you’re going from one place to another. It’s you’re learning how to stop bad habits, stop this wandering on. Now it’s true, the Buddha said that making comparisons following the path of his practice is like going from one place to another. After all, the path is called a path. Sometimes it says you cross over the river to the furthest shore. But the strange thing is, when you get to that furthest shore, many of the poems, particularly in the Sutta Nibbata, that talk about going to the furthest shore, they also make the point that once you get over there, there’s no here, there, or in between. And you realize that all the parameters of time and space that you thought were sort of a given in which you acted were actually created by your activity of wandering on. It sounds kind of unsettling, but the Buddha says, “Haven’t you reached the point where you’ve had enough? Don’t you want to try an alternative?” And it’s not like when you try the alternative you’re trapped there. If you decide that once you’ve reached the furthest shore that you would rather go back, you’re perfectly free. But the thing is that people have gotten there. Of the people who have gotten there, no one has ever wanted to come back. Once they’ve broken the habit, they never want to come back to samsara again, in the sense of the infinitive, to samsara, to wander on again. So how do you get there? Well, being very responsible for what you’re doing right now. Paying careful attention to what you’re doing right now. Because only by watching after your actions, being careful about what you do and say, I think that you learn how to be more and more skillful, both in the sense of bright karma and ultimately in the sense of karma that’s neither dark nor bright, leads to the end of karma. It all depends on whether you’re tired of creating suffering or you want to keep on creating more. If you’ve had enough, you have to look inside and be responsible inside. That’s the best gift you can give to yourself or to anyone else.

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