Step Outside the World

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My first morning in Thailand years back, I looked out my hotel window, down to the street below, and I caught sight of a woman putting food in a monk’s bowl. I had seen movies of people putting food in monk’s bowls. It was presented as something that everybody does. It was a natural part of Thai culture. But actually seeing it happen was a very different experience. To me it looked like a subversive act. It wasn’t the case that everybody in the market—and it was a market street—was putting food in the monk’s bowl. It was just that one woman and that one monk. He came up, she came out with the food, put it in his bowl. They didn’t say a word, and he slept. He slept back into the crowd. It looked subversive. And it was. There is a subversive part of the Buddhist teachings. The monk stood for a totally different set of values from the market. Everybody in the market was buying and selling, and women were hawking their wares. Yet this was something different. It was a gift. But the monk wore, the way he looked, represented a very different set of values. And here was a woman in the market supporting that set of values. Later, as I got to know the forest tradition, I reinforced that sense of the forest tradition being something separate from Thai culture, standing outside it a little bit. People go over to Thailand, and this is part of their introduction to Buddhism, or their introduction to Thai Buddhism. The forest tradition is part of the general picture of Thai culture. But especially back when I was with Ajahn Phuong, this was before the forest tradition became very popular, the way he lived was something outside of the culture. His values were very different from many other Thai people I’d ever met. He represented the customs of the noble ones, which was a very different set of customs from the ones of ordinary society. Ajahn Mun used to be attacked for the way he practiced. Again, we think of the forest tradition as being one integral part of Thai culture. But when Ajahn Mun started out, he was bucking a huge trend. He used a huge established tradition. The way he practiced the Thedanga practices, the way he wore his robes, the fact that he practiced out in the forest, was very different from the general tradition of Thai Buddhism. People would attack him for it. They’d say, “Why don’t you behave the way other people do? Why don’t you follow our good Thai or Lao customs?” And he would say, “Thai customs, Lao customs, the customs of any country, these are the customs of people with defilements, the customs of people who suffer, stuck in suffering. I want to follow the customs of the noble ones. Those are the ones who gain release from suffering. The way they behave, the standards that they set, those are the ways I want to behave. Those are the standards I want to follow.” It was because he didn’t let himself get sucked into the ordinary values of the culture. That was why he was able to succeed. He established something that stood apart. This principle is one of the things that keeps Thai culture healthy. The fact that it has room for a whole set of values that stand apart. And as people who practice the Dhamma here in the West, we have to learn that same principle as well. We have to learn how to stand apart. Because as that passage we chanted just now says, the world is swept away. If we let ourselves get sucked into the world, we get swept away along with it. When aging comes, we get swept away with aging. Illness comes. Death comes. We get swept away with these things. We have to learn how to stand outside. So even though we’re aware of the world, we participate in the world. But we’re not in the world. That’s when we’re safe. That’s when we can be free from being swept away. One of the words in the Buddha’s vocabulary, pāva, shows the connection between how we approach worlds outside and how we approach worlds in our mind. On the external level, we live in our pāva. We live in a level of being. It’s the sensual level, the human level. On the internal level, we create worlds in our mind. You can see it happening. It’s like a little bubble forming in your mind or just in the general area of your body. There’s a whole world in there. And you go into it and suddenly find that it’s not a bubble in your body. You’re in the bubble now. And it can take you. It can float off in different directions, like a kite with its string cut. It can float off in different directions and come down who knows where. And if you let yourself get sucked into that bubble, you’re in for trouble. As a meditator, you have to learn how to stand outside to see the process of the bubble forming. Then you can notice whether it’s something worth going with or not. Because some of our thoughts really are worthwhile—things we have to do, things we have to say, things we have to plan about. But a lot of them are just random bubbles. Some of them are actually harmful. And for the most part, people just let them get sucked into whatever comes up and attracts their attention. They go with it. It’s like getting onto a train without asking where the train is going to go. You just jump on the train and go wherever it takes you. That kind of living is dangerous. And yet that’s the way most of us live. We let ourselves get sucked into these worlds, wherever they take us. We get sucked in and swept away. We find that we have nothing of our own in there. They give us no shelter, and they’re never satisfactory. Some of them are useful, but in and of themselves they don’t provide any real satisfaction. So we have to develop strong powers of mindfulness and concentration to withstand this tendency of going into these worlds. Mindfulness is actually composed of two things, mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. You establish a frame of reference, a body, in and of itself. In other words, not the body as it relates to the world, but just the body in and of itself, as you experience it right here on its own terms. Or feelings in and of themselves, simply the arising of a feeling that’s passing away. Mind states, mental qualities. You choose a frame of reference and you stay there. These are the topics of concentration. As I said this morning, the Buddha didn’t draw a clear line between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. They shade into each other. The four foundations of mindfulness, or the four establishings of mindfulness, are the themes of concentration. The factors that develop mindfulness are mindfulness and alertness. Alertness is knowing what you’re doing, knowing the results of what you’re doing, coupled with ardency, the ability to really stick with it, to put effort into the practice, the effort to be sensitive, the effort to be focused. When these are all working together, they slide very naturally into concentration practice. The Buddha often talks about how the four foundations of mindfulness lead naturally into the seven factors for awakening. Which are the factors of concentration? Mindfulness, analysis of qualities, rapture, persistence, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Mindfulness practice is supposed to lead there. When you get to the fourth jhana, you’ve got purity of mindfulness. That’s the only place where mindfulness is really pure. At the same time, the mind is really solid. It’s firmly in its frame of reference, the whole body as a whole, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, with the breath still and the mind in equanimity. This is the frame of reference where you can see these bubbles of little worlds coming up in the mind and not necessarily have to get sucked into them. It’s like driving past a drive-in theater. You have your choice. As you drive past, you look at the screen and you suddenly realize, “That’s Red Butler. That’s Scarlett O’Hara.” And you get sucked into the story. And you go on with the wind. Or you can see it simply as colors, flashes of light flashing on the screen. This, that, and the other thing. Looking at it the first way is dangerous. You can drive off the road. Looking at it the second way, you see, this is all that is. It’s just flashes of color. Yet people can cry and laugh and get all excited by these flashes of color. It gives you a sense of samvega, a sense of dispassion, and that’s safe. So, when your foundation is really solid, mindful, alert, ardent, fully aware of the body, with mindfulness immersed in the body, you can stand outside those worlds. In the same way, you can stand outside the world outside. You’ve got a place where you can observe what’s going on. You can watch the values of society. You can ask yourself, “Do I really want to go there? Do I really want to get sucked into that thought world?” Then you can look at society as a whole and see how futile it is. All the clamoring, all the time spent in getting and spending is a society that conspires to put people who are blatantly selfish, filled with greed, anger, and delusion, put them in power, and praise them. Is this a society you really want to get sucked into? Step back even further. The whole human condition. Is this something you really want to be sucked into? It may seem heartless to step outside this way, but it’s not. The Buddha stepped outside, but he had the compassion to help other people get out as well. It’s not that he just turned his back on the world and ran away. There’s a famous retelling of the Buddha’s story in Thai. A major part of the story is devoted to how the Buddha, after his awakening, went back home. He taught the Dhamma to the rest of his family, and many of them became arahants. A lot of people focus on how horrible it was that Prince Siddhartha left his wife, left his son, but they forgot to notice that he came back and taught his wife to be an arahant, raised his son. When his son became mature, when he reached adulthood, he was an arahant. Very few fathers can do that for their family. So having this place in the mind where you really are a solid puts you in a safe position, but it also puts you in a position of strength. You can use that strength both to help yourself and to help other people. Like the woman in the market, you have one foot in front of you. You have one foot in both worlds. Or, to be more precise, you’ve got both feet outside the world, but you can reach in when you need to and offer another perspective. Having this outside perspective helps you keep your mental health, and other people who pick up on it. It helps you gain a measure of health as well. So this subversive act that we’re doing here, stepping outside of the world, is not the sort of subversive act that destroys the world, like anarchism or terrorism. It’s actually an act of kindness. After all, the Buddha was often compared to a doctor. He healed the illnesses of the world. And the reason he was able to heal them was because he was able to step outside them, gain release from them, and then show the way to other people. So the practices we have here of meditating, learning how to step outside our thought worlds by creating a good foundation for the mind, this principle works with the world outside as well. We can step outside of that by staying within the same foundation. We can have respect for it, maintain it, sustain it, making it the place where we take our stand so that when the worlds get swept away, we’re not swept away along with them. And we’re not part of the confusion that gets other people swept away as well. That, right there, is a real gift.

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