Inhabit the World of Form

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The mind is very adept at creating worlds for itself to inhabit. That’s how we got born here to begin with in this world. It’s not a total fabrication on our part, but the fact that we’re tuned in to this particular world does come from our own intentions, our own desires. And from all the various pieces of raw material in this world, we create our own worlds about who we are. And we have many of them. When you’re down in the kitchen, you’re in one world. When you’re thinking about the past, you’re in other worlds. Thinking about the future, those are other worlds too. When you’re sitting here meditating, this is a particular world as well. This is the world you want to take as home base. Because unlike the other worlds, it helps you see clearly what you’re doing to create those worlds. It does require conscious effort to get the mind to settle down. And in the course of settling down, you’re dealing with a lot of the processes that go into world creation. You’ve got the desire, and if the desire isn’t there, you’ve got to give rise to it. Otherwise, this world is not going to last. And you’ve got the breath. That helps to fabricate your awareness. You can make the breath really rewarding. Think about it in different ways. What are parts of the body that don’t get enough breath energy? How about that line that goes down the front of your chest, down to the abdomen? Is that fully nourished each time you breathe in? If it’s not, give it some extra breath. Or how about your spine? How about your legs, your hands? And which part of the body does the breath feel suppressed? Try to open that up. You’re inhabiting your sense of the body as you feel it from within. That’s your world right here. It’s a world of form in the Buddhist terms. And the pleasure that comes from inhabiting this world is a higher level of pleasure, a higher level of well-being, than the pleasures that come from worlds built around sight, sound, smells, taste, tactile sensations, ideas of past or future. So work on this. Fabricate it with the breath. Make sure your perception is related to this. Try to give rise to feelings of pleasure. So this will be a good world to inhabit. And keep thinking about how to keep it going. As you get better at creating this world and keeping it going, then you have to think less and less about the process. In fact, you just center in on the breath, and that takes care of everything else. But as you’re getting into this, you have to think about the breath. How is the breath going? Where does the breath go? In what ways do you picture the breath to yourself? Then you evaluate the results. How is it going with the breath? Is the mind settling in? Is your awareness getting out of your head and down into the rest of the body as well? The more you can fully inhabit the body, the easier it is to stay here. And the easier it is to see when you’ve slipped off. The Buddha has that image of the six animals tied to a post. If there’s no post, and even though the animals are all in leashes and the leashes are tied together, they’re not going to stay in place. One of them is going to be stronger than the others, and it’s going to drag the others in its direction. Just remember that there’s a crocodile and a bird and a monkey and a dog. It’s hard to imagine that any of the animals are going to be stronger than the crocodile, because everybody else gets pulled down into the river and dies. That’s the way we normally live. Whatever sight or sound gets represented by the crocodile, that’s when it pulls everybody else in its direction. But if you fully inhabit the body, that’s what’s called mindfulness immersed in the body. That’s your post. Then you begin to see the other world. The other worlds that come spinning out of this. That’s the skill of learning how to stay out of those worlds. For the most part, we’re like hobos who hop from one train of thought to another. Sometimes we end up in places where we want to go, and a lot of times we end up in, who knows where, North Dakota. We don’t really realize that we’ve been creating these trains, we’ve been creating these worlds. We just want to inhabit them. They seem to be there. They seem to be a given. Then we look around in that world. Do we like this world? A lot of times, if it seems relatively good, we want to hammer down all the details to keep them under our control. There are no worlds where you can control everything. After all, they are fabrications. And if you’re focused on enjoying the world, then the energy that goes into fabricating the world gets misplaced, and you don’t see this. And then you think about the world outside. All your responsibilities with this person or that person, or issues with this person or that person, those are worlds, too. And our center of gravity tends to go in that direction, the world outside. Which is why you have to make an effort to bring your center of gravity in here, in this world, and inhabit this world fully. And see those other worlds as constructs, things you put together. This is the real skill of the Dhamma, seeing the processes by which we create these worlds. Otherwise, the Dhamma just becomes one more thing that we’re used to decorate the bookshelves in our worlds. You can think about this. You can sit in your study and think about the Dhamma. Decide whether you like it as it is, or you’d rather change it, or whatever. And if it were just vital words, it wouldn’t really matter. But if you don’t take those words and use them to develop the skill of learning how to step out of the worlds in your mind, you don’t get much out of it. But here the Dhamma really is a skill, which is why the Buddhists set up an apprenticeship so that people can learn how to get out of their various worlds, the worlds of their relationships, the worlds of their thoughts, and look at the processes of these worlds. As the Buddha said, it’s the craving that gives rise to these worlds that causes suffering. We don’t realize that we do an awful lot of fabrication to give rise to these things. A lot of them seem to be just a given—feelings of pleasure and pain, for instance. They just seem to be there. Then we react to what’s there. The Dhamma teaches us to look at to what extent we are fabricating them. And to what extent are we fabricating the suffering around them? Even feelings, the Buddha said, are not totally given. There’s an element of present karma that goes into how you experience a particular feeling. You’ve already shaped it by the time you know that it’s there. The mind is that quick. Or your perception that this is the way things are, it’s got to be this way. To what extent are you shaping that? If you hold on tight to those perceptions, they can cause a lot of trouble. They’re all part of a certain world, and the world around them can start collapsing in on you if you try to inhabit that world. So what we’re doing as we’re meditating is creating this world of the mind, the awareness centered in the body. It’s a more stable world against which you can notice the motions of the mind as it goes out after those other worlds. And you can ask yourself, “Do I really want to go there?” And it gives you the alternative so that you don’t have to go into the worlds that you don’t want to. So instead of thinking of the world out there as your basic reality, this becomes your reality. And as for the thoughts and desires that want to go out and straighten out the world outside, or the various worlds outside, it’s good to have this world as a place where you can watch them and ask, “Is this worth going to?” This is particularly useful when you have the issue of wanting to get everything settled outside first before you can meditate. As the Ajahns are always saying, the work of the world is never done. There are always going to be loose ends, always going to be unsettled issues. And as long as you take those worlds out there as your primary worlds, that’s going to be a real disturbance. But if you take the world of your present awareness here, inhabiting the body, and recognizing it as home base, then it’s a lot easier to live with the uncertainties outside, because you’re not trying to settle in on them. If you try to live in them, it’s like trying to move into a house that’s on a shifting sand dune. There’s always going to be disturbance. Nothing ever gets settled on that sand dune. But the world of the present moment is a lot more secure. In the beginning it doesn’t seem very secure at all. It’s very precarious. But as you get more familiar with it and move your center of gravity in here, you find that it does give you a good, solid post. You can tie your mind down and then watch as it runs out. Then you’ve got everything on a leash. If this particular animal is going in a direction where it’s actually going to get some good food, okay, let it go. But again, you keep it on the leash. Then you bring it back. Try not to leave this center. This way you can live in your various worlds when you need to, and you can get out of them when they start to collapse or they start to pinch you or they start to fall in on you. When they have their earthquakes and tornadoes and all the other changes that can happen to a world, this world gives you your safe victory place, your stronghold. When you’ve got this stronghold, then the changes in all your other worlds don’t really threaten the mind. And this habit we have of trying to keep creating worlds all the time, we begin to see through it and feel less and less need to go after those worlds. That’s when you’re safe. When you see the problems, you see the process before you jump in. Our problem is we jump in and then we have to deal with whatever it was that we created. But when you can see the process in action, you can see, “Oh, this is not a world I want to go into.” And that’s it. You can stand outside.

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