Worlds Are Swept Away

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Look at the mind in a concentration because we need to do some very radical work on the mind. A lot of things we’ve been depending on—ideas, assumptions—we’re going to have to take them apart. And if you don’t have a good solid foundation in the mind, a good sense of well-being, a then it’s going to be very disorienting. You feel like the rug has been pulled out from under you and there’s no place to stand. So give yourself a good place to stand. Learn to be fully in the body. Occupy the body. Don’t allow any space for anybody else to move in. This way you start clearing out some of the committee members in the mind that are more obviously unskillful. You get a sense that this is where you belong. So that when other worlds and other ideas of who you are come up in the mind, you don’t need to grab onto them, you don’t need to hold onto them, and you’re willing to look at them in all fairness. To see why you don’t really want to go with them. Then again, you don’t feel like you’ve been deprived of anything because you’ve got something better right here. This is why we work on the identity of being a meditator. You want to walk like a meditator, sit like a meditator, act like a meditator, think like a meditator. So this identity gets really strong. And, of course, you want to have the skills of a meditator in actually staying with the breath and gaining some concentration so it’s not just an empty identity, that you feel solid within it. So often one of the best ways of dealing with the unskillful members of the committee is just to say, “Work on your concentration.” Because the bouncers in the mind that are going to get rid of those unskillful members, they need to be strong. So settle in right here. Have a sense of being really well-established right here. Find the spot in the body where it feels most natural to stay settled and just plug right in. So there’s a snug fit between your awareness and the breath at that spot. You’re not putting too much pressure on it. You don’t want to strangle it. But at the same time, you don’t want to be just sliding around. If you do move around inside the body, it will make it connect to the breath, clearing up areas that may be blocked, areas that may be tight and tense. So you do get a really strong sense that this is where you belong and this is your default mode. And then you can start taking things apart. The usual analysis is focusing on the places where you identify that this is you or this belongs to you, or this is your idea or these are your assumptions. Learn how to see that they’re inconstant, stressful, not self, or use any perception that allows you to get a sense of dispassion for them. But remember that your sense of self also inhabits a world. This is what becoming is all about. You don’t have a self without a world that goes with the self. The form in which it acts and in which it speaks and in which its actions have meaning. The context in which your actions are designed to get results. The Buddha also offers ways of looking at the worlds of the mind. That’s what that passage for Ratabala is. He comes from a passage where he’s asked by a king, “Why did you ordain?” After all, people who ordain tend to be those who have either lost money, lost their relatives, are getting old, have lost their health. They’re really hard up one way or another. Or it’s that question I got in Brazil, “You ordained. What went wrong in your life?” Nobody’s laughing. But the assumption is that when you ordain, something went wrong. What about Ratabala? Nothing went wrong in his life. Ratabala says, “We looked at the world, and we saw that the world is swept away.” The world in which you try to find happiness just keeps changing, changing, changing. It offers no shelter. We think we live in a world where there is everything that’s been running well, or relatively well, enough so that we can negotiate and we know that there are ways around this particular world. They really offer no shelter. Things could change radically, very quickly. The physical world could change. The social world in which you live can change radically. People die. We had a family come in here yesterday, and no one, the father, for a long time, apparently, toward the end of his life, had gone into very severe depression and had a heart attack. And then a month after that, the mother discovered that she had cancer, and she died a few months later. So the kids were suddenly, within a few months, totally bereft of their parents. This can happen to all of us. Things can change very radically. There’s no one in charge. There’s no one to say, “Okay, things are going to be okay. There’s going to be somebody to pick up the pieces.” There’s that romantic view that ultimately the world is going to take care of all your mistakes so you don’t have to worry. As the Buddha pointed out, there’s nobody to take care of those mistakes. People make mistakes, and they’re going to be the consequences. Yet we still come back to these worlds. We still crave them. You learn how to look at the world in this way. It sounds pretty pessimistic, but it’s actually good for the heart. It makes you realize that the things you really need are not out there. They’re in here. The world out there is unreliable. There are people out there you think you can depend on, and they just kind of drop the ball. Just the way of the world, you think, will provide for you. There is no word for providence in Buddhism. So just as the things that you really need latch on to are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, the things of the world are basically subject to aging, illness, and death. That’s what those first three contemplations are. The world is swept away. In the image that Rathabala gave the king, the king said, “What do you mean the world is swept away?” Rathabala asked him, “You’re a king now. When you were young, were you strong?” He said, “Yes, I thought I had the strength of two people.” “How about now?” “Well, now I’m eighty,” the king said. “Sometimes I think to put my foot in one place and I end up putting it someplace else.” That’s aging. Inconstancy. The world is inconstant, too, just like the things that you identify as self. The world is stressful. There’s illness. And the world can’t help you take away the pain. It can give you painkillers, but there are some pains that painkillers can’t reach. And there’s nobody there who can help share the pain so that you don’t have to feel so much. Even the king couldn’t get his courtiers to share his pain. In the meantime, they’re sitting around waiting for him to die. And the way they say it, it sounds like they’re hoping for him to die so that they can get involved in their power struggles again. So here he is, a king, and yet he’s surrounded by people he can’t trust, people who can’t help him. The world has nothing of its own. Nobody owns anything. Nobody has any clear need for anything. It either gets taken away or you die. But you can’t hold on to things in the world and say, “I’m going to have them the next time around, too.” You know, we keep craving these things. The purpose of this contemplation is to see if the craving is really misguided. Raja Pala asked the king, “Suppose someone said that there was a kingdom to the east that you could conquer, all the possible wealth you could want, a weak army. Would you go for it?” “Of course,” the king said. “How about another kingdom to the south, one to the west, one to the north? How about a kingdom across the other side of the ocean?” The king said, “Sure, I’d go for that one, too.” Here he is, eighty years old, about to die. And all he can think of is getting more of these worlds that offer no shelter and have no one in charge. So you look at these worlds and ask yourself, “What kind of identity do I really want to have in them? Are these the worlds in which I want to find my happiness?” Now, you don’t want this contemplation to get you distraught. The purpose is to get you more firmly in the concentration and more firmly determined that you’re going to develop your skills as a meditator. Because you look around outside and the only hope is what you can do inside. The extent to which you’re still hoping for help outside, that’s what makes these contemplations upsetting. But then you realize you’ve got to depend on yourself. And this is where a strong sense of self is actually helpful. You yourself, as a meditator, this is the becoming where you are more secure. It’s a world of sorts, but it’s a lot more secure than those worlds out there. You look at the news and it’s hard to believe some of the things that are going on right now. That should make you even more determined. You’ve got to find happiness. You’ve got to find it inside. If you’re going to do it, you’ve got to do it now. It’s not going to get easier as you get older. So the Buddha has you attack the sense of becoming either through looking at the various selves you take or looking at the various worlds that you hope to inhabit or you think you’re inhabiting. One way or another, you should get a sense of dispassion that allows you to get more firmly in this world, the world of yourself as a meditator, here inhabiting your body. So as you start taking this particular world apart, you’re not concerned about missing out on other worlds out there. You realize that you’ve just got to go deeper inside to find what you’re really looking for. The happiness that you can depend on, it’s there. The possibility is there when it becomes an actuality, or when it becomes an actuality for you. There’s nothing that can take it away. And you realize that all the effort that goes into the practice is more than worth it, because there’s nothing in the world or the worlds that can compare.

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