Worlds in the Mind

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The mind is always creating worlds for itself. It comes up with a desire and then checks out where in the world that desire can be fulfilled, and in what kind of world. What are the things in the world outside that would help? What are the things in the world outside that would get in the way? And even before we’ve actually gone outside, we’ve also created a world in the mind. We’ve worked out how we can attain that desire and who we are in that world. We do this all the time. The Buddha’s insight was that these little worlds we create in the mind turn into big worlds. In other words, the process by which you create an imaginary world in the mind is also the same process by which you move from this life to the next one. It’s how you got here to begin with. Another insight was that, as we saw with the beings of the world as they die and then are reborn, in line with their karma and their karma is determined by their views. And so these become-ings that they take on are shaped by actions and views. And then you apply that insight inside the mind. Actions are intentions. Intentions are happening where and when. They’re happening right here, right now. Views are ways of paying attention. Views are what you have to take into consideration and what you have to do to get what you want. And you discover that all these become-ings are inherently suffering. The question is, how do you get out? You discover that by trying to destroy these become-ings, you just took on a new become-ing. Part of the path was to just let things come to be, and then you don’t create a new become-ing out of them. But part of the path is creating a become-ing, the become-ing of concentration. You have to have a view and an intention. The view is that it’s worthwhile getting the mind to settle down. And the intention is that that’s what you want to do. The two go together. In the beginning it’s going to be difficult because it’s a become-ing that you’re not used to doing. You’re not used to making. You’re so adept at making other become-ings. The mind tends to slip off very easily into whatever its obsessions are, whatever its old loops are, like an old movie that loops back again and again and again. We go for those because it’s easy. And whether we like them or not, there’s a part of the mind that just goes for what’s easy and it rebels against developing new habits. The older you get, the harder it gets. But it still can be done. And the way out is looking at those intentions and looking at those acts of attention, what you’re paying attention to. If you find yourself in a bad world, you have to ask yourself, “What was the intention that got me in here to begin with? And what was I paying attention to? And what am I paying attention to now?” One of the important right views you develop here is seeing that you are playing a role in creating these things. It’s not like we’re simply passive observers. We’re lying on our backs and letting things come over us. There’s a part of the mind that’s looking for something. And you can take advantage of that. On the one hand, you can look for what it is that the mind was looking for that got itself into this alternative world. And what can we look for to get out? One of the ways we look to get out is to look at the processes of the mind as it shapes things. This is why we get the mind still, as still as we can. So you can see, when the mind goes out, how does it go out? Why does it go out? What sparked it? What encourages it? It may be an old habit. But then you have lots of old habits. Why did you choose this particular old habit right now? And you don’t have to trace it back to your childhood. You just ask yourself, “What right now got me into this?” It’s like having a drawer full of knives. Some of the knives are new, some of the knives are old. Some of the knives are heirlooms from your parents and grandparents. And the question is not where the knife came from, but why are you picking out this knife right now? And why do you keep that particular set of knives? The Buddha is offering you some new knives that can cut through a lot of the unskillful worlds that you create for yourself by getting you more and more sensitive to what you’re doing right now. So that’s the view, that’s the attention. And then there has to be the intention. Not only the intention to get out, but the intention to say, “I’ll do what is necessary to really understand this.” Because that’s the only way you’re going to get past suffering. By understanding it, comprehending it, seeing where it comes from, seeing what it is in there that you’re clinging to. And part of it is you cling to the desire that started that particular world. And then you start clinging to your sense of self in that world. The idea of abandoning that particular state is that you feel like you’re going to destroy yourself. This is why it’s really useful to have a sense of the mind as a committee of selves. So the self in that particular unskillful world is not the only one you’ve got. There are other selves that you can develop. Again, some of them are like knives you picked up from who knows when. They’re good for cutting some things, but not for others. Some are all rusty. Use them, and you’re going to get infected. Try to use the Buddhist knives, the self that can be competent and confident that there is a way out, and has some patience. All too often, you have to be patient. Often there are techniques that work really well, but when they don’t work right away, we throw them out. And then we’ve lost the way out. Remember, you’re trying to see what are the feelings and perceptions and fabrications. And it’s good to think of them in those terms. It helps to depersonalize the whole thing. They go into that particular world in the mind. And can you shape them in a new way? Shape them into concentration. Because it’s the same raw material. It’s simply that you fix it in a different way. Again, it’s like being in the kitchen. There are all kinds of things you can make out of eggs, say. You can make them rubbery, and you can make them pretty nasty. But you can also make good things out of eggs. It’s simply that the problem isn’t with the eggs. The problem is with how you put them together, and what you put together with them. And this is what you want to look for as you’re creating these states in the mind. So look at your views about these things, these states of the mind in which you get trapped. There are steps by which you get in them, and there are steps by which you get out. It’s kind of like being in a dream. There are ways that you can wake yourself up in the middle of a bad dream. And the bad dream may go for a while. But part of you knows this is just a dream. Hold on to that part. Because that’s what gets you out of those worlds. So you can create a sense of the observer that’s not participating in these things. It’s another member of the committee, a new member. That you’re trying to develop as much as you can. That’s your way of stepping out. You can step back into concentration. So try to get really adept at your concentration. It, too, is a state of becoming. And eventually you’ll have to learn how to get past it. But don’t be too quick to take it apart. It’s your lifesaver. It gets the door out of some bad worlds back into a good world. So work on this skill as much as you can.

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