Do You Want to Escape Becoming?

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We go through the world looking for happiness using a process that the Buddha calls becoming, in which we take on an identity in a particular world of experience as a means for satisfying our desires. The world in each case could either be the world in your mind or the world outside. But the world is defined by whether it’s relevant or irrelevant to your desire. Things that are irrelevant are just outside of the world, in that particular case of becoming. And then there are the things that either help you attain your desire or get in the way. And then there’s you in that world. There’s you as the producer who can bring about the desired result, and the consumer who’s going to enjoy it. We go through many become-ings in the course of the day, and as the Buddha pointed out, it’s these little become-ings in the mind that shape the big become-ings outside. And that the craving that leads to becoming is the cause for suffering. And here that goes against the grain for us, because after all, this is our way of finding happiness. But he says, “No, there’s another way of finding happiness that doesn’t involve becoming, and it’s a much greater happiness. But first we’ve got to wean ourselves off of this kind of becoming.” The problem is, if you simply try to destroy it, or even have the view that it would be a cool thing to put an end to becoming, you want to see it happen. As soon as you cling to that idea, that craving for non-becoming, that creates a new becoming. Because you’re thinking in the same terms–self in a world. In the same way, let’s say, atheism is defined by the type of theism that it denies. If you really want to free yourself from theism, you’d have to think in terms that are unrelated to it at all. And it’s the same way with becoming. You’ve got to look at things in a different way, without self or world. It takes a while for the mind to get used to that idea. We come to the practice and we have some questions about who’s going to benefit from this. And the Buddha will answer those questions up to a point. He says, “You will.” You say, “Who’s me? Who am I?” He says, “Don’t ask.” “Where am I going to do this?” “Well, you do it here. Define here.” He says, “Don’t define here. Just do it.” That’s the way to solve that problem of not falling for a craving for becoming. He says it’s to see things as they have come to be and have dispassion for them. In other words, look at the processes simply as events in the mind, and look at them in such a way that you realize that they couldn’t produce any really lasting happiness. And that way you don’t give rise to any new becomings. And the becomings that are there already just fall away. They can’t last forever, just so they’ll fall away on their own. And that way you maneuver your way through that difficult passage. But getting used to thinking in those terms is a hard thing, even when you practice the right mindfulness. Looking at the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, that’s looking at things as they have come to be. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, you try to cut away all reference to the world outside. But you find in the details of the instructions, there’s still a sense of “me” in there. That’s when you see that a particular hindrance has arisen within you or has passed away from within you, or a factor of awakening has come within you. You’re creating a state of concentration, and there still is a sense of “you” in there, in the world. In this case, it’s the world of the body as you feel it from within. But you want to get more and more used to it, this world, because the state of becoming is useful in many ways. It helps you see other states of becoming as they arise. And you can see the gears in the gears in the creation of this one, too. It’s like one of those computers that was covered with clear plastic so you could see all the innards. You really look at your concentrated mind and get used to mastering the processes. You see things as processes coming and going, and it puts you in a good position to get beyond becoming. You look at the state of consciousness, concentration as composed of aggregates that are nourished by fabrication of various kinds, acts of intention and attention of various kinds, contact of various kinds. So you get to see it as it has come to be. There’s a good place to look at things in that particular way, from that particular point of view. But the mind keeps hanging on. What is this self that’s doing this? What is the world in which it’s doing it? So you’ve got to learn how to shake yourself away from those ways of looking at things. It’s interesting that the Buddha is teaching us how to put an end to suffering and find the ultimate happiness through training the mind. Of those terms, the training is defined very much in detail. But what suffering is, the Buddha gives some indications, but he doesn’t sit down and give you a definition. It’s the same with happiness. He doesn’t define it. The mind he doesn’t define. He says, simply look at the activities on the mental level. Just look at them as activities. As for the mind in which all this is happening, just put that question aside. What is suffering? Your attitude toward suffering, or what constitutes suffering or stress, however you want to translate dukkha, will develop as you practice. And the same with your appreciation of what constitutes happiness. That’s going to change. And your idea of what the mind is is going to change, too. This is probably why the Buddha didn’t want to nail down these terms. In fact, the Buddha himself had a nice response. Someone asked him one time, “What is the mind?” And he said, “The mind isn’t ‘is’ anything.” In other words, it’s not the sort of thing that you define. Just try to notice what’s going on in the mind, what’s going on in the body, and try to see where you’re causing stress. And if you can let it go and maintain your concentration, okay, you’ve learned something good about the mind. If you let it go and your mind loses concentration, you’re not ready for this analysis. But the important thing is you learn to look at things as events and then evaluate them. Are they worth it? This is where the Buddha has you do that analysis of watching their origination, in other words, their origin, and then see how they pass away. They come and they go, all dependent on conditions which are very unstable. And then look for their lure. Why do you go over these things? What’s the appeal? And then look at the drawbacks. And that’s how you give rise to dispassion. So you might want to look at your old ways of thinking about yourself and the world in which you live, and ask yourself, “What’s the allure of hanging on to them?” Keep on asking those questions. And part of you says, “Well, you feel secure. You know where you are in the world.” When the Buddha says, “Any notion of where you are in the world or in any world is going to involve suffering. Don’t you want out?” And so he tries to focus your attention on what you’re doing. Watch the action and watch the result. This is the way he teaches everything from the very beginning, before he teaches the Four Noble Truths. He doesn’t give a list of definitions. He talks about activities. He talks about the kind of activities that are good, for what you might say, good both for the heart and the mind. Things like generosity, virtue, goodwill. He has you master these as skills because they’re activities that are good to look at. In the beginning, you do them because, as he says, they will lead to happiness down the line. But then as you get more and more familiar with them, you find that you enjoy them for themselves. And that allows you to look at them in and of themselves. So when the time comes to develop concentration, you develop the same habit. You learn to look at the processes leading up to concentration in and of themselves. The Buddha says there’s a sense of joy. There’s a sense of rapture, even. There’s a sense of pleasure that gives rise to concentration. You can see all this as part of a cause-and-effect relationship. And so when you do have to think about yourself, you can think about yourself as being capable. When you meet up with obstacles in the path, you have that sense, “Well, there is some goodness to you someplace.” So the obstacles are not the final word. It gets you more and more used to looking at things as they have come to be. And that’s when you’re looking at things rightly for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. Now, if you wanted to, you’d go back and think in terms of worlds and selves. Because we do create beings, and obviously there is a world out there. But if thinking in those terms is going to make you suffer, why bother? As I was saying this afternoon, the Buddha really was a genius. He focused on how to get out, and it means not answering a lot of questions that people usually bring, because the questions themselves are going to reinforce becoming. When you see a question and realize that they’re part of the problem, then it’s a lot easier to let them go. And as you know, when you’re engaged in good actions, it makes it a lot easier to look at them in and of themselves. So when you develop this passion, it’s not out of hatred or self-recrimination. It’s out of maturity. Seeing that these things have been good, but they lead to something better. So look at what you’re doing and try to do it well. And the basic principle of the practice is right there. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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