

With Reference to the World

July 13, 2006

The body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves: Notice the “in and of itself” or “in and of themselves” here. That’s the important point of what we’re trying to focus on.

Take the body, for instance. Just try to be with the sensation of the body you’ve got right here, right now, without referring it to anything else. The problem is that we have a tendency to refer to the world in lots of different ways. When we refer to the world, we start getting lost in the world. You’d think you are sitting here just by yourself focusing on the breath, but you bring lots of worlds with you. We have this weird ability, as soon as there’s little stirring in this body/mind complex we’ve got here, that we can switch into an entirely different world. It can be world of the past, a world of the future, someplace far away. It’s like function keys on a computer. You can type a Q or an S, and it comes out just a Q or a S, but if you press the function key, all of a sudden the Q becomes quit, the S becomes save. The same key does entirely different things.

It’s the same with the sensations in the body. There is little stirring in the breath, and the mind latches on to it. It doesn’t look at it simply as a stirring in the breath, it becomes the basis for a thought-world and turns into something totally different.

So one of our tasks as meditators is to learn how not to switch over into the world in that way. We have to learn ways of keeping ourselves with the body, with the breath, in and of itself.

As the Buddha said in the basic formula for right mindfulness, staying with our frame of reference involves subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. It’s not simply the case that these thought-worlds arise. Lots of emotions, lots of reactions arise along with them. That’s what gets us involved in them. We want something; we get upset about something: Those are the two main reactions, both of them based on delusion.

One of the ways not to get involved in the world is to reflect on how the Buddha defined the world simply as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. In other words, he says, don’t assume that there’s a reality out there, and don’t assume there’s no reality out there. Just notice: Exactly how do you know about the world, where did you pick up this information about the

world? It's just through your senses. And you know how unreliable your senses can be.

So think about that the next time you get involved in a particular narrative that pulls you away, especially when it has to do with the past. Remind yourself: What did you learn this narrative from? From some pretty unreliable sources, things that just come and go. That thought helps to dissolve a lot of the narratives and a lot of the reactions you have around that world.

Another way is to reflect on that thought-world in terms of the passage we chanted just now: *The world is swept away*. Whatever thought-world you might see in the mind is not going to last very long. And the world outside is not going to last very long, either. It keeps changing, changing, changing all the time.

The world offers no shelter. There is no one in charge. The world contains aging and illnesses, which are all pretty random. There's no one designing what's going on in the world. There's no designer saying, "We're going to have a big huge worldwide universal life narrative that's all going to come to a really nice conclusion." It's shaped by lots of individual people, trying to find their way, guided by ignorance. That's what creates the world we've experienced: everybody looking for happiness, and mostly looking for happiness in very unskillful ways. So there's no guarantee that it's going to come to a nice end or a good end, or that it's going to go in a good direction.

After all, look at human life. Whoever designed the human body, if there was a designer, was pretty malicious. Just as you begin to grow up, just as soon as you can function, then it starts aging on you. Everything can so easily fall apart, can so easily malfunction, even if you live relatively healthy life. I just was recalling that today is my father's birthday. He lived to be 87. And for 80 years, his body worked very well. But then in his last seven years, everything just broke down, and his ending was pretty miserable. He developed Parkinson's disease, and it morphed into Parkinson's dementia. What kind of compassionate intelligence would design that to be the pattern of human life? There is really nobody in charge out there.

So these thought-worlds you create, even if they were to come true, would all basically break down.

The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. This is the teaching on not-self. No matter what you amass as your material goods, your intelligence, all the things you tend to identify with, you have to leave them. This applies to the world outside, the physical world, the world of this lifetime, and also to all the thought-worlds inside. You can create wonderful thought-

worlds, but they all leave. And whatever you thought you might have had as a possession within that thought-world that you can hold on to, it goes, too.

Finally, these worlds are all *insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving*. There's never enough. They come from craving to begin with, and craving determines the way they're going to go. The image in the texts is of a king who's ruling over a prosperous land. You'd think he'd be happy and content. But someone comes from the east and says, "There's a kingdom off to the east that's also prosperous and wealthy. Given your forces, you could easily defeat the king there and take that kingdom as yours." What does the king do? He wants to send his army out to defeat that kingdom. Then someone comes from the south with the same news, so the king wants to go out to conquer the south. The west. The north. Finally, someone comes from across the ocean and says there's a prosperous kingdom on the other side of the ocean, and the king says he'd be ready to send his army over there, too.

That was 2,600 years ago. Things haven't changed. There's never a sense of enough. Yet people keep trying to amass piles of stuff, in spite of the fact that it's all swept away. There's no one in charge. You have nothing of your own in these worlds.

So reflect on this when the mind starts getting involved in thought-worlds, especially thoughts of the past. There's really nothing you can do about the past. There is so much that we would like to go back and change, but no matter how much you run the movies of the past over and over again, they never change. If you were alive in '63, you might remember how they kept running the film of Kennedy's assassination over and over again. There was a fascination in watching it happen over and over again, thinking, "Maybe this time he'll miss." But he never missed. Or September 11: "Maybe this time the planes will miss." Well, they never missed. No matter how much you rerun the movies of the past, you can't change them.

So you should come to the point where you realize that you get nothing out of that process, and that it's better to come back to the present, here with the breath in and of itself. Learn to appreciate this quality you've got right here. There's energy flowing in and around the body all the time. There's an energy that stays in the body all the time. Actually, it's the energy in the body that creates the in-and-out ibreath. We often focus on the breath as something coming in from the outside, but basically it's the movement of energy inside the body.

And there are lots of ways you can relate to it. You can ignore it and just let it run on its own. Or you can let it be pushed around by all these thought-worlds you're trying to create. Or you can give it a chance to be healthy, nourishing.

Learn to explore it. See what good it can do for the body. Explore different ways of focusing on the breath. You can think of the breath, as I said, as something coming in and out, or as something that's simply there in the body like a solid energy. It radiates out from different centers in the body, such as the center of the diaphragm or the center of the chest. Allow it to feel full and nourishing, and see what that does. You'll find that it gives the mind a lot better food than those worlds it was creating for itself.

So develop an interest in the present moment. Develop an interest in the breath in and of itself. Learn to explore it, to see what advantages you can get from this energy that you've been ignoring all along. This is one way of helping to pull you out of those worlds: worlds of the past, worlds of the future, outside worlds in the present. You realize you've been feeding on them, and the food was pretty bad. It's better to feed on what you've got right here right now. If you learn how to develop it, you can get lots of nourishment that you wouldn't have imagined otherwise. The problem is that you have this field here, the soil is good, you've got everything you need to plant plants, but you don't plant any plants here. You go plant them off in somebody else's field. Or you plant them in an imaginary field or a remembered field or an anticipated field. Any farmer who would try to do that would get into trouble with the neighbors—either that, or would have nothing at all to show for his efforts.

Take the field you've got. It's a good field. Learn how to cultivate it. If you're going to inhabit a world, inhabit the world of the body in and of itself, the breath in and of itself. This way, you can pull yourself out of those other worlds. Develop a sense of seclusion here. It's not a seclusion where you're feeling cut off from all the things you need. Everything you need is right here. So learn how to enjoy being alone right here, with the potentials of the present moment.

Otherwise you've got crowd in your head all the time: all those thoughts of the past, all those thoughts of the future, and your companion—craving—whispering into your ear. Learn how to get secluded from them. Have some time to really be alone, have some real solitude, along with a sense of fullness that you can develop from the breath. That way, you really get to be here, to enjoy being here, having a sense of belonging here, because you really pay attention to what's here and the potentials of what's here. Learn how to cultivate right here, so that it becomes a field where you can eat all you need from the produce you create.