

Worlds Inside & Out

October 17, 2006

The classic phrase for establishing mindfulness in the body is that you “stay focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.”

That last phrase is interesting: “putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” They don’t have definite or indefinite articles, they don’t have an “a” or a “the” in Pali. So this could mean a world, any world, the world outside, the worlds in your mind.

And as you’ve probably noticed, these are the things that pull you out of any solid or continuous awareness of the breath.

Stay focused on the breath: That’s what the Buddha’s telling you. Just stay there. Watch it. Keep on watching it. See what happens.

But we don’t. We stay for a while and then we’re off someplace else. And then we’re back again.

It’s like coming in on one of those long, continuing stories on TV. You can miss some important parts of the action: You go out to the kitchen, get something out of the refrigerator, you come back to the TV, only to find that one of the main characters is dead. Or the story is off someplace else and you don’t recognize what happened in your absence.

That’s the way it is with the breath. Things can happen in the breath, things can happen with the mind in the present moment, but you’re off someplace else. Then you come back and you don’t know where you are in the story. You’re not mindful, you’re not alert, you’re not ardent.

There are two skillful ways of dealing with this. One is to create a sense of real ease, well-being in the body through the breath so that you get more and more inclined to stay. The other is to look at these worlds in the mind to see what you get out of them. In other words, get yourself tired of this continual habit of wandering off.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. Before he was able to settle down and really look at the present moment, he went through two other kinds of knowledge. The first was recollection of his past lives. The other was seeing the whole pattern of death and rebirth throughout the universe. Seeing that was enough to get him really tired of these patterns over and over and over again.

It was because he had that larger view that he was then able to focus on the

present moment. He'd also picked up some interesting lessons from that larger view: learning about the power of intention, the power of views.

So those were the things he focused on when he focused on the present moment. What were his intentions? What was his understanding of how there was suffering and how there might be an end of suffering?

But another important part of what he learned was just that sense of, "Had he had enough?"

So even though you may not be able to remember past lives or to see all the beings in the universe dying and being reborn, still you can look at the worlds in your mind.

Try to step back from them and ask yourself, "Exactly how much have I gotten out of them?" You've gotten some things out of them. If you hadn't gotten anything out of this process, you would have dropped it a long time ago.

But the various thoughts that go through your mind, the various little worlds that you create: How many of them are really useful? How many of them come bubbling up and you decide to taste them, "What does this one taste like? What does that one taste like?"

Try to step back and look at these processes in a way that gives you a sense of *samvega*, of having had enough, of wanting to get out of the whole process.

Understand their allure but also try to understand their drawbacks. If you focus on just one or the other, it's not enough to really get past them. If you look at nothing but their drawbacks, you don't get down to the point of why you keep going for them. If you look at nothing but their allure, you spend your time bubbling up more worlds.

But when you balance the two, you begin to see there's not much there.

They're like movies. Think of the movies going through your mind. If these were put up on the screen, how many of them would you actually pay to see? And can you imagine Anthony Lane reviewing them? How many of them are re-runs? How much lasting pleasure do you get out of them? The pleasure that you got out of last night's thoughts: Where is it now?

So try to develop a sense of world weariness, i.e., of having had enough of your mental worlds. Instead, stand in this world of being in the body, being with the breath.

The word "breath" here: In Thai they use the word *lom*, which covers the in-and-out breath, the sense of breath energy through the body, the animating sense of energy that lets you know where your arms are, where your legs are, where your feet, where your hands are. That's *lom* as well.

So try to be in touch with these various levels of breath. There's the in-and-out

breath, there's the flowing breath that goes through the nerves and the blood vessels, and then there's the still breath. It doesn't move at all. It just stays right there, filling the body.

It's good to remind yourself of that. All too often, when we deal with the breath, we have childish cartoon ideas of what the breathing process is. As soon as you're told, "Breathe in, breathe out," you get that little cartoon character in your body doing the breathing. It creates a little box around the breath. You hold your body in a certain way because of that cartoon idea.

So it's good to loosen up that conception. Remind yourself that there's already breath energy flowing all through the body, all the time. There's the potential for a fullness in that energy here all the time. Exactly how do you balance your awareness of the present so that you can tap into that sense of fullness? Then how do you maintain it?

These are the skills of staying focused on the breath, staying focused on the body in and of itself. You're not going to pull yourself away from your old habits of creating little thought-worlds unless you give yourself a much nicer, bigger, more expansive, more comfortable, more gratifying world right here in the present moment.

This is how mindfulness gets established. You give it a foundation. This is your frame of reference, just the body—not the body in the world, just body in and of itself. It's another world, it's another dwelling, which they actually call *vihara-dhamma*, a dwelling for the mind. It's the trailer you take along the noble eightfold path, so that you always have a home while you're on the path.

Eventually, of course, you'll have to let go of this home, but in the meantime it's a good home to be with, because it helps you see those other little homes that you've been creating. It puts you in a good position to watch the whole process. How does a thought-world begin? What's the discussion, what's the back-and-forth that goes on in the mind before you decide, "Yes, I'm going to go with this"?

How do you create tension in the breath energy that allows that thought-world to take hold—its little footpad. How much of the process is intentional?

When the mind is really still, very solid right here in the present moment, you can see these things.

It may sound paradoxical. You have to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world so that you can get the mind into good states of concentration. But you can't really understand those worlds until you have the mind in concentration.

What this means is that you work on these processes, developing a sense of home, a sense of belonging right here in the present moment with the breath, at

the same time learning to let go of those other worlds. These two sides of the practice help each other along.

This is why when the Buddha taught mindfulness and concentration, he didn't teach them as radically separate or different practices. Right mindfulness leads seamlessly into right concentration. So as you're working with the breath here, you're working on both.