

## *Bigger than the World*

*September 29, 2014*

We live in a world where there are lots of influences around us: people, places. Of course, we were the ones who wanted to come here.

I think I've told you the story about the nurse who was a victim of a lot of gossip in her workplace. One day when she was feeling especially oppressed by all this, she came to meditate with Ajaan Fuang. She had a vision in her meditation of being in a hall of mirrors: looking in one direction and seeing herself reflected back, back, back, back, back; looking in the other direction and seeing herself reflected back, back, back, back. The vision hinted that she'd probably been the victim of this sort of suffering many, many lifetimes. It made her feel even more oppressed. So she left meditation and talked to Ajaan Fuang about this, hoping that she'd get some comfort from him. Instead, he said, "Well, you were the one who wanted to be born as a human being in the first place." It was like a slap in the face.

But that's the case. Each of us wanted to be here, whether we knew it or not. We created the causes, the opportunity came, and here we are. We wanted to get into this world, and then we found out that it wasn't quite what we thought it would be. We didn't look at the fine print.

So what are you going to do? You can think of better worlds where you'd like to go, and if you create the causes, you go there. But there are going to be problems in those worlds, too.

Think about that reflection we have so often: "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, an heir to my karma." In the sutta where that reflection comes from, the Buddha doesn't have you stop there. Think that *all* beings are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, they're the heirs of *their* karma.

In other words, you look at the whole universe and all the many different levels, and you can see that there's no really safe place. Sometimes, when we think that, we go off in the other direction: We want to obliterate ourselves. But it turns out that the desire for obliteration sends you to another place in the universe that's not safe, either.

So what are you going to do? The Buddha offers a path that's the middle way between just looking for another place to go and trying to obliterate yourself. The heart of the path is learning how to be right here, looking at things not in terms of being a person or being obliterated, but as activities: just the awareness of the

breath here in the body. For the time being while you're here, any other thoughts are irrelevant.

Ajaan Lee makes the distinction between being with the Dhamma and being with the world. Any thoughts where you can recognize, "This is me at this point in time, in this location, with this world with its past, with its possible future": Those are all thoughts of the world. You want to replace them with thoughts of the Dhamma: in other words, thoughts of being mindful, being alert, being ardent here in the practice; staying with the breath, getting really interested in the breath, the fact that you've got this breath here, right here, right now.

This is why, when we practice mindfulness, it's the body in and of itself, without any reference to the world. So what have you got here in this body in and of itself? You've got the sensation of the body sitting here, the body as you feel it from within. Try to inhabit it fully.

This is your place. It may have been invaded in the past, but you can reclaim it. If there are certain parts of the body that you feel uncomfortable with, find the ones that you *are* comfortable with. Sometimes there's a lot of tension in the torso, in the chest, or in the stomach, which tends to be related to a lot of emotional stuff. Get away from there for a while.

Go to the hands and the feet. Allow the back of each hand to relax; allow the top of each foot to relax. Think of the blood flowing there and filling all the blood vessels. Then, as those parts of the body get full, think of that sense of fullness creeping up the arms, creeping up the legs, working back into the center.

Or you can think of your head. The muscles of the head are often used as markers for our thoughts. But just be sensitive to: Where do you feel the blood flowing in your head right now? How is it flowing around the eyes? Does it feel good around the eyes? How about in the ears? In your cheeks? In your jaw? Down around all the teeth? Just be with the head in and of itself.

Then allow the hands and the feet and the head all to connect. Learn how to be present with this. xx

The expression "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world" means any thought that's going to pull you out of this. When you don't think about yourself being in this world, and you're inhabiting the present like this without any thoughts with reference to the world, you get closer to where the Buddha was on the night of his awakening. We hear about how he awakened to dependent co-arising, and it sounds awfully complex. But he was describing what it's like to be here, and how things happen when you don't put events in the context of the world or in the context of who you are right now, and instead just

see that there are these processes, and they're leading to other processes. Some of them lead to suffering and some of them lead away. You don't want the suffering.

It is okay to have some preferences here. If you didn't have preferences, you wouldn't be meditating. But you want to look at these things as processes so as to get out of the stories. You can see that there's the breath, there are the thoughts around the breath, and there are the perceptions around the breath. Keep everything at that level as much as you can.

You'll begin to see how thoughts of worlds come up and thoughts of who you are come up. But instead of making those thoughts the context, you make this sense of just being right here, aware right here, as the context. In that way, the thoughts about who you are and the world that you inhabit or the worlds that you *might* inhabit seem to be like little bubbles. As long as you don't get into the bubbles, you can be bigger than they are. You can stand outside them.

Sometimes some thought bubbles come up and you realize, "Okay, these are things I have to be responsible for. These are the things I have to think about." But the next question is, is this the proper time and place for them? While you're sitting here meditating, no, or at least not now. You might save them to the very last part of the meditation. If they're something really important in your life that you've got to contemplate, put them at the end of the meditation period. Meanwhile, allow the mind some time to be in this other zone, the zone where you're not in a world, where you're not in your self. You're here with events in and of themselves, right here, present in the body.

The Thai ajaans talk a lot about this. They say, "When you're sitting here like this, are you a woman or are you a man?" "Woman" and "man" are irrelevant right now. Whatever's irrelevant to the breath, let it go. Any part of your identity that's irrelevant to what you're doing right here, right now, let it go. Just let it pass, pass, pass. You want to establish this as your default mode, as your context, so that you can see these processes of becoming as they happen. You can see how the mind gets into them and takes them on, like putting on a suit of clothes. But you also realize that you don't have to. There's a skill in not taking these things on. In fact, it's one of the first skills you want to learn as you meditate.

It's like when they teach Thai boxing. The very first skill they teach you is how to retreat, how to back out of a clench, how to back away from your opponent without exposing yourself—in other words, backing away in a way that you're protected. In the same way, this mode of just being here with the breath, inhabiting your body in the present moment: That's how you back out, that's how you keep yourself protected.

You want to be on familiar terms with this space. You want to be at home here, so it really does become *your* space. In that way, any other influence that may come past doesn't get a chance to come in. You don't get carried away by thought worlds. You don't get carried away by all the bubbles that the mind blows or that other people blow past you.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image. He says it's like being in a house where there's only one chair and you're sitting in the chair. Other things may come in—people may come in, go out—but as long as you're sitting in the chair, you're the only one who gets to sit down. Everybody else has to stand. People don't like standing, so after a while they'll leave. You're in a position of strength when you're here.

And as you're here, the issues of the world get small. Issues of the past, all your narratives, get small as well. You can be bigger than they are. This is why, when we practice concentration, we try to fill the body with our awareness, fill the body with breath.

Try to be sensitive to any peculiar habits you may have around what you do when you breathe in or what you do when you breathe out. One of the big mistakes we make as we work with the breath is that we have some cartoon ideas of what we should be feeling as the breath comes in; what we should be feeling as the breath goes out. We then create those feelings and, as a result, add a lot of unnecessary tension to the breathing process.

So think of the breath as not disturbing anything at all, but as nourishing things: nourishing things, but not disturbing. This is your space. Try to make it your home. In this way, you have a home wherever you go. And keep remembering that while you're here, this is the middle way.

And where does the middle way lead from here? It just leads deeper and deeper in here, more and more solidly in here. This is the place where everything you're going to need to know, everything you're going to want to know, is going to appear—if you look carefully enough.

So get as familiar as you can with this area. We don't get away from the world by running outside the world. We come in, because we find out that all the worlds we inhabited in the past have all come from in here. So you want to get to know this spot really well. To figure out what's going on—and to gain freedom from what's going on—see things as they've come to be, and don't make anything more out of them.