

The Train Trestle

December 30, 2016

Put aside the world outside for a while and focus on the world inside. What have you got here? You've got the body—particularly, you've got the breath—you've got feelings, and you've got the mind. You want to bring those all together in a way that's nourishing for all three.

Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Some aspects of the breathing will be more obvious than others. Focus on the areas that are most obvious, or the ones that you feel most sensitive to. There's a spot in the body that you usually use to mark it when the breath has come in enough, so that you know, "Now it's time for it to go out. Now it's gone out enough. It's time for it to come back in." Find that spot. If there's any tension or tightness around it, let it loosen up. This way, the breath immediately relates to feelings, which you begin to see don't just come and go on their own. You do things to induce them. There are certain limits to what you can do—this has to do with past kamma—but within the limits of what you've got here, you want to make the best use of the potentials you've got.

As for the mind, is it willing to stay here right now? Sometimes, if it's not staying, the problem is with the breath or with the feelings. Sometimes it's with the thoughts going on in the mind: things left over from the day. If you find a lot of left-over stuff, sort through it a bit. From the Buddha's point of view, think of what the Buddha would have to say about the issues that are coming up in your mind right now; how he might advise you to take a larger view; let them go. Then you're ready to get back with the breath.

What you're doing here is creating what's called a state of becoming. Becoming is a sense of a particular world of experience and your identity in that world. Right now, you're the meditator and the relevant world is the world of your body right here, together with your awareness of the body. This world is based on a desire: the desire to get the mind to settle down, to find some peace in the present moment. And based on that desire, you have to adjust things.

You adjust the breath. You adjust your thoughts. You adjust your feelings. All that's called fabrication. It's how we create our inner world. It's how we create our outer worlds as well. This is one of the reasons why getting the mind in a good state of concentration like this, with the proper understanding, is such a good laboratory. You look at the world outside and it seems pretty confusing. You say,

“How did I create this?” You didn’t create everything, but you created your experience of it.

And the problem is that worlds don’t just sit there. They move. And you don’t just sit there either. You move, too. You find that you can’t stay in a particular world, so you move on to another one, and then another one, because the mind is constantly trying to find someplace to stay in worlds that keep collapsing and falling apart. Sometimes it does this out of desperation, sometimes it’s feeling threatened, so it tends to piece things together pretty quickly, pretty haphazardly, not know what it’s doing. That’s why we find ourselves in situations that we can’t imagine why we got there or how we would have wanted to be there. We didn’t want to be there. Our desires were pointing someplace else, but they were confused. Confused and ignorant.

So we’re trying to learn how to do this process with more knowledge and more skill. At the same time, in creating in a sense of concentration like this, we give ourselves a place to step back out of other worlds. You notice this very clearly as you get distracted by something. You’re in another world. There’s kind of a blacking out, and suddenly you’re someplace else. But you can remind yourself, “I’m meditating.” You can pull yourself back. You’ve got another place to go: a place that’s more solid, that’s not collapsing around you all the time.

There is some impermanence here, some inconstancy. But relative to a lot of other things in life, this is pretty constant. It allows you to put down your guard a bit. And as the Buddha said, settle in here. Indulge in the pleasure of the concentration, because the mind needs that sense of pleasure. Otherwise, it’s going out looking for other things to wolf down. So allow the sense of pleasure to develop and let it spread throughout the whole body. See if you can get it to spread to places you haven’t been thinking about for a while, areas that you might tend to forget.

This is why it’s good to have a systematic way of going through the body with a checklist. But even those systems can miss some things. So cast your eye around and see what needs to be soothed in the body, energized in the body, or relaxed in the body, so that this becomes a good place to stay. You’re going to try to move into this world, and it’s like moving into a house. You want to make it a home, a place where you can feel at your ease. And while you’re doing this, you learn a lot about how the mind builds homes.

That was the Buddha’s image. After his awakening, he realized he had a house builder in his mind that kept on building new houses, new houses, again and again. It fashioned new houses, as the old houses collapsed, and moved into the new ones. But then the new ones collapsed too, so he had to build more. And

finally, on awakening, he realized he had reached a state that wasn't built and wasn't going to collapse. He didn't need the house builder anymore. This is a useful image to apply to your life. See how you're building houses. Are you building them on sand or are you building them on solid rock? What are they exposed to?

Some houses are exposed to more dangers than others. This is another one of the reasons why you want to have a good place inside, because it's a lot less exposed. At the same time, you can see more clearly this process of how you fabricate things. You see which thoughts, which feelings, and which physical sensations you tend to latch onto and what you create out of them. This way, you learn to do it with more knowledge, more finesse.

Think about samsara. An image that springs to mind is one of those cartoons where Bugs Bunny is in a train going over a big railroad trestle over a huge chasm. As the train goes along, the trestle's collapsing behind him. So he's got to keep going and going, going. Where samsara is different from this image is that in the cartoon, the part of the trestle ahead of him is already there, whereas when we're going through life, some of the things that we're going to be running into are already determined, but a lot of things are not. We're scrambling to build the train trestle ahead of us, hoping that it'll reach the other side. And all too often, we do it with greed, aversion, delusion, envy, jealousy: all kinds of unskillful mind states, along with that sense of being threatened by the collapse of things behind us. So we tend to do a shoddy job, which is why we find ourselves in worlds that we wouldn't like to be in.

So here, as we meditate, we have a chance to get a better sense of how the mind fabricates things. Again, it's not total world creation. In other words, you can't create something out of nothing. You've got raw material coming in from past kamma, which sometimes can place some pretty severe limitations on what you can do. But you always have the choice to do something skillful. That choice is always there. It's simply that we're latching onto other things that make us push the skillful alternative aside. If you give the mind a more solid place like this, you can do your work with clearer vision, a lot more patience, but at the same time, be more efficient in how you put together the right way to be in a particular world.

So even though there may be some situations where there are going to be a lot of sufferings, a lot of problems, you don't have to suffer. There may be a pain, but you don't have to suffer from the pain. And this puts you in a better position to help yourself—and other people too. Because if everything in your life is going up in flames and you try to help somebody else who's going up in flames, sometimes

you just add more fire to their. But if you're in a cool and a safe place, you can pull those other people out, to whatever extent they want to be pulled.

So this is not a selfish process. Our worlds intersect, so that the way you create your world, if it's done with skill, will have a good influence on other people. We're here to get to know this aspect of the mind that's building houses, building railroad trestles, so that we can have better and better places to move into until eventually we get to that part of the trestle where it reaches the other side. That's when we're safe. Until then, it's going to be collapsing behind us.

Even as we sit here meditating, things are collapsing behind us. Worlds we've been in the past, they're gone. We have to look at what world we're creating right now and what worlds they're going to lead to, on into the future. As the Buddha said, we're all on a path of one sort or another, and those paths have their different destinations. All too often, we don't realize what the destination is. Some people get themselves on the path to the lower destinations. They haven't chosen that destination, but the path they've chosen is going to take them there. It's out of ignorance that they're headed in that direction. This is why it's good to have the Dhamma to give us a clear sense of what paths there are in the world and what kinds of actions lead in what direction so we can choose wisely and construct something that'll take us to safety.