

Where the Mind & Body Meet

January 1, 2022

When you're focused on the breath, you're focused where the mind and the body meet. It's through the breath that the mind is aware of the body, aware of having a body, and it's through the breath that the mind exerts influence in the body; it can get the body to move around. And right here is where the Buddha said that we do the work of the four noble truths. Or in one formulation he says that it's where we find the world, the origination of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path to the cessation of the world.

There's a sutta where a deva comes to see the Buddha and asks him, "Is it possible by traveling to reach the end of the universe, where there is no birth, aging, death or rebirth?" And the Buddha says, no, it's not possible to reach there by traveling.

The deva then says that in a previous lifetime he had been a seer. His name was Rohitassa, and he was a sky-walker. His stride was as far as the east sea is from the west—east and west of course, being relative to India. His speed was like an archer shooting a light arrow across the shadow of a palm tree; in other words, very fast.

With that speed and that stride, he decided to see if he could reach the end of the universe by traveling. He strode across the universe for a hundred years, aside from the time set aside for resting, eating, et cetera, but he died before reaching the end. The Buddha went on to say, still it's not possible to put an end to suffering without finding the end of the cosmos, yet here it is: right here in the body.

Here he's treating the word, *loka*—which is either cosmos, world, universe—as equivalent to *dukkha*: suffering and stress. It's right here in this body with its perception and intellect that you can see these things. The world, of course, is the world of the senses as it's sensed right here: Sights, sounds, tastes, tactile sensations all make contact right here. It's through the contact that we know about them.

But we're not simply on the receiving end. The origination of the world, the Buddha said, lies inside as well. Remember his teaching that all phenomena are rooted in desire. That's the origination of the aggregates, the origination of the sense spheres. They come from the fact that we relish them, we welcome them. In other words, they're out there, but the fact that we relish them and go out looking for them, want them—that's the origination of our experience

of them. So it all comes from within the mind, right here.

As for the path to the cessation of the world, of course, that's the meditation we're doing right now. There's a passage where the Buddha asks, "What one thing gives rise to four things? What four things fulfill seven things, and what seven things fulfill two things?" The one thing is mindfulness of breathing—which basically comes down to filling the body with your awareness, being aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out with a sense of ease, rapture, on to equanimity, with the mind fully present right here, gladdened, concentrated, released. That kind of awareness is the path. And that fulfills the four establishings of mindfulness, which fulfill the seven factors for awakening; the seven factors for awakening, when they're done with seclusion—in other words, the seclusion of concentration—dispassion, cessation, and letting go, lead to clear knowledge and release.

Now, from our point of view right now, the important thing is that all of this is rooted in full-body awareness at ease, as we try to develop a sense of the breath flowing unimpeded throughout the body. I've heard some people say that this state of awareness is a state of awakening, but it's not really. It's the path.

As long as you're still aware of the six senses, you haven't gotten to the cessation of the world. But it's through developing the path that you get there. You'll notice thoughts come up, and the mind, if you're not careful, loses its full-body frame of reference and shrinks down to a size smaller than the thought to get inside the thought. Then it goes up and down as the thought goes up and down.

You have to remind yourself that you have a place where you can step out and just be aware of the whole body. You're not finding your pleasure in those small thoughts. You're finding your pleasure in something larger and more spacious.

As the Buddha said, this is a pleasant abiding. Even when the mind gets to equanimity, he said this kind of equanimity is pleasant in a very subtle way because it's equanimity combined with knowledge, awareness. So you develop this concentration because that's the duty with regard to the path: It's to be developed. You get better and better at maintaining this full-body awareness, with a sense of ease.

This is why we engage in directed thought and evaluation: to make sure that the mind settles down. It's not putting too much pressure on the body, not too little pressure on the body. Any areas of tension or tightness can gradually be relaxed.

This becomes more and more a really pleasant place to be, a good place to step out, and

you get a very clear sense that this is your home. This is where you want to settle in. There's still desire here, of course: the desire to stay. That counts as a form of craving—a craving that involves some stress, so there's some stress in the path, but it's good.

It's a craving for becoming, becoming a form, the sense of the body as felt from within. It becomes a craving for the formless when you get into states of concentration that are more formless with a sense of space, a sense of simply being conscious of consciousness. Those, too, are types of becoming, and they're fabricated. As long as the concentration feels really good, the fact that it's fabricated doesn't bother you. But as you get more sensitive, there comes a point where you say, "Wouldn't it be better if there was something that was not fabricated?" That's when the mind begins to move on.

But again, it moves on in a way that you don't go someplace else. As the Buddha said, cessation is touched right here at the body, seen with the body. In other words, the opening to that dimension is something that's going to be experienced right where you're experiencing the body right now, the difference being that it's not at the body, and it's not someplace else, either. There's no location. None of the physical elements have a footing there.

This relates to another story about the extent of the universe. There was a monk one time who was meditating and was able to gain vision of devas. So he asked them, "How far do the four great elements go? The elements of earth, water wind and fire? Where do they end?" The devas said, "We don't know, but there are devas who are higher than us. Maybe they know."

So he meditates some more. He sees some devas that are higher up, and he asks them the same question. And they say, "We don't know either." This goes on after many, many stages of being sent up the deva bureaucracy until finally some of the devas say, "Well we don't know, but there is the Great Brahmā, and he will sometimes appear in a flash of light."

So the monk meditates, and sure enough the Great Brahmā appears in a flash of light together with his adoring retinue. The monk asks him, "How far do the four great elements go?" And the Great Brahmā says, "I am the Great Brahmā—knower of all, seer of all, creator of all that has been and will be."

Now, if this were the Book of Job, the monk would have said, "Oh, I understand," but it's not. It's the Pali Canon. The monk says, "That's not what I asked you. I didn't ask you if you were the Great Brahmā, creator of all, I asked you how far do the four elements go?" And the Great Brahmā says, "I am the Great Brahmā knower of all, seer of all, creator of all," et cetera, et cetera, three times.

Then he pulls the monk aside and says, “Look. I don’t know, but if I admitted to that ignorance before my adoring retinue, they’d be very disappointed. You go down and ask the Buddha.” So the monk goes down, asks the Buddha. And the Buddha gives a simile

He says it’s like a land-sighting crow. In those days, when sailors went off out into the ocean, when they wanted to know if they were near land, they would set loose a crow. If the crow flew away and never came back, they figured he’d found a place on land. They would know to go in that direction. But if he came back, it was a sign that there was no land in sight.

So the monk had gone like the land-sighting crow to the east, the west, north, south, but didn’t find any land, so he had to come back. Which is, of course, a simile for the answer that the Buddha’s going to give. He says, “You asked the wrong question. The question should be, ‘Where do the four great elements find no footing?’ And that’s in consciousness without a surface.”

That consciousness—the consciousness of nibbāna, where there is no awareness of any of the elements, or any of the cosmos at all: The cosmos doesn’t impinge on that. But it’s the ultimate happiness. It’s something other, but it is to be found by fully inhabiting your body, right here, right now, and getting very clear about the perceptions in the body and the intellect, what it’s doing.

And the perceptions and the intellect and the body they all meet right here at the breath. So every time your thoughts go casting out for something else to get away from here, remind yourself that you’re like that crow. There’s really nothing out there of real substance. The message of all the images of these suttas is that you can extend your thoughts out to the end of the universe, and not reach an end, not reach satisfaction.

But if you stay right here, you understand the universe, you understand how your engagement with the universe has arisen, and you understand how you can find true happiness by putting an end to that engagement. It’s all to be found right here.