

Moving Between Thought Worlds

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We've all had the experience when we're asleep of finding ourselves in a dream and, for a while, believing that what's happening in the dream is real. Then something alerts us that something is wrong with the dream, and finally to the fact that we're dreaming. Usually that's enough for us to wake up, to pull out of the dream.

That process is very similar to the way we create mental worlds and emotional states during our waking life, because our picture of the world around us is always partial. It's always stitched together out of bits and pieces of what we've encountered through the senses. We have a notion of what makes sense, and as long as it makes sense and seems to be real, we can stay stuck in that state of mind. Then something strikes us as incongruous, as not fitting in. We realize, "Oh, that was an imaginary world." That's when we pull out. But then we find ourselves in another world, which may be better, and may not.

The ability to recognize what's incongruous, what's wrong with a world: That's an important skill. Without it, we get stuck in states of mind—what the Buddha called *bhava*, or becoming—where we can suffer very intensely. We focus on certain things in the world around us, certain ideas about who we are in that world, and everything else gets filtered through that particular picture. Other people's actions, for example, get filtered in this way, so that someone acting with perfectly good intentions may seem to be evil, sneaky, unreliable. Or vice versa. They actually may be evil, sneaky, and unreliable, yet we see them as being perfectly reasonable, perfectly trustworthy. But because the mental world we inhabit has its own inner coherence, we think it's accurate and real.

So we have to watch out for this. In a healthy mind, it's easy to switch from one world to another, to recognize the incongruities so that one state of becoming can actually pull you out of a less healthy state of becoming. There's a certain fluidity. And the fluidity comes from your mindfulness, your ability to remember that you take on different identities and inhabit different worlds, and some are more useful than others. Some are more beneficial, less stressful than others. If you're skillful, you can adopt whichever state of becoming seems to be the healthiest at that particular time, given what you want to do in those particular circumstances. The people with real problems are those who can't get out. They get stuck in a particular thought world and everything gets interpreted in its light. They can really do themselves a lot of damage because there's no porousness between the different states of becoming. There's no connection—either you're in it, or you're out of it. The different identities you take on, the different worlds you inhabit, seem to be very radically separate.

Usually for people who are stuck in a very unhealthy state like that, their only hope seems to be some outside power. This is why so many programs dealing with addictions rely on the idea of an outside power. Addicts get stuck in a particular idea of who they are, the world they're in, what they're capable of, what they're not capable of. And given the definitions of their little worlds, they're helpless. They need somebody from outside to come in and straighten

them out. This comes from getting thoroughly trapped in a very fixed sense of who they are.

One of the purposes of the meditation is to get you out of the trap, so that you realize you have many different identities, you inhabit different worlds, and they can best be used as tools, realizing that no world that you inhabit is totally real or a totally accurate idea of where you are, in terms of your surroundings outside or what's going on inside.

William James made a lot of this point: that our idea of truth is pretty sketchy. How could you possibly know the total truth of the situation in which you're located? It would require a knowledge down to the sub-atomic particles and out to the edge of the universe—maybe even beyond the edge of the universe. That would be impossible. So to deal with possibilities, the mind lives by its sketches. Recognizing this fact is a useful step. "This sketch that I'm living with: Is it a useful sketch? Is it helpful?" It may have certain true details here and there, but you have to realize that no idea of your surroundings is going to be a totally adequate representation of what those surroundings are. The best you can do is ask if your sketch is adequate to your needs, your healthy needs, and in particular to your desire to put an end to suffering.

To learn how to pull yourself out of unhealthy worlds and into healthier ones first requires an understanding of how the mind creates these worlds, and then a development of the skills you need to move fluidly and beneficially between them.

Both of these skills are developed in meditation. In other words, you get hands-on experience in creating worlds by trying to create a world of concentration right here: inhabiting your body, staying with your breath, having a focal point. This is what these worlds are built around: a focal point based on a desire. In this case, you take the breath as your focal point, and your desire is to stay there as continually as possible. To help carry out that desire, you want to learn how to evaluate the breath and your concentration, to see how well you're doing.

For some people, this particular part is also difficult because they're adept at making negative judgments about themselves and poor at making positive ones. They start berating themselves for not being good meditators, for being hopeless. This is why it's useful to think about all beings, as we do before we meditate every time: "May all beings be happy." When you think seriously about all beings in the world, you realize that very few people out there really can get their minds concentrated, or even want to try. The fact that you're trying is a step in the right direction right there.

You can also think about all the people in the past who've meditated. It's not that everybody sat down and, as they say in Thailand, had it as easy as peeling a banana. Everybody has had to fight to get the mind to settle down. So if you find yourself having trouble, take heart that you're not the only one. Everybody has problems with the meditation at one point or another. Even the people who in this lifetime seem to be natural meditators: At some point in the past they were sure to have had difficulties because meditation goes against the grain.

So when you learn how to think in these ways, it's a lot easier to evaluate what you're doing objectively and not berate yourself when things go wrong. Look simply in terms of cause and effect, and take your idea of who you are out of the picture for the time being. Just focus on the mental states that can stay with

the breath, notice what distracts them, and see if you can be quick in coming back to the breath. When you do come back, don't berate yourself for having left. Take pride in the fact that you've caught yourself and have pulled yourself back in line. When you come back, try to come back in a way that's deft, skillful. Reward yourself with an especially satisfying breath, one that feels really, really good deep down inside. That gives you practice in slipping back into a skillful state of mind from an unskillful one, and doing it skillfully. It also develops your mindfulness.

Mindfulness is what creates the bridges between these different states. You remember that you were in one state and now you're in another. And the possibility of slipping back into another distracted state is always there, so you've got to keep on top of things to be alert for any signs of the mind preparing to slip away. It has its tricks. It has its slight moment of blanking out, after which you wake up in another world. But if you can use mindfulness as a bridge across that blanking out, it's a lot easier to direct the mind from one state of becoming into another when you want to. And it's a lot easier to stay in a state of becoming when you want to stay.

These are all very important skills because they also help in learning how to recognize when you're in an unhealthy state. You can ask yourself, "Is there suffering here?" That's the incongruity: We create mind states in order to enjoy them, but if they make us suffer, they're out of line with their reason for being.

Then you can ask, "Does there have to be this suffering?" And part of the mind will say, "Yes," but you have to learn how to question it. That's your only escape, recognizing that the suffering isn't necessary. It is possible to be in another state of mind that's less stressful. Just because a strong feeling or thought arises in the mind doesn't mean that you have to go with it, or that the feeling is genuinely you. Remember that "who you are" has to be put into quotation marks. You can make a sense of "who you are" around anything, and there are many potentials available in any given moment. So just because there's a feeling there, doesn't mean that it has to be the focal point of your sense of who you are, because many feelings that come into the mind are actually destructive.

This is why meditation is such an important skill in keeping the mind healthy. The mindfulness allows you to recognize when you've slipped from one state of *bhava* or becoming to another, one sense of who you are to another, one sense of what's going on in the world to another. And it also helps you to remember good standards for judging a particular state of mind. Even though a state of mind may have some features that are very true—you can verify it by looking at things outside that, yes, this situation really is difficult or whatever it is that you've focused on—but then you can ask yourself: "Do you have to suffer around this?" And the Buddha's answer is always, "No, you don't have to suffer." If you're suffering around a particular situation, you're not approaching it in a skillful way. There are others ways to approach it. We always have the potential not to suffer if we look for it.

So keep that in mind. And then learn how to use the skills of meditation to pull yourself out of an unskillful state and create a more skillful one in its place: one that's more beneficial, more useful, healthier. Some people will say that you're running away, but what are you running away from? You're running away from one created world into another created world—but a created world that's based on mindfulness and concentration, on your ability to discern the

causes of suffering. That's a much more useful world. It has potential. It can eventually lead you away from suffering entirely.

So whenever you find yourself in a situation that seems really difficult and you're just spinning around and around and around, try to look for that point of incongruity: Something's wrong here, something's not right. And what's wrong is that there's suffering that doesn't have to be. You can pull yourself out through that recognition. And you can use your mindfulness of the breath as your handle for getting out.

Back when I was with Ajaan Fuang, some of his students would get themselves into really strange states of mind through their concentration. And the handle out was always, "Where is your breath right now? Is it comfortable?" That would gradually pull them into the world of the breath. In other words, they'd come to inhabit the body from within.

In this way, you don't need an outside power. All you need is your own ability to recognize, "There's something wrong here and I can get out." This "something wrong" is the fact something is creating a burden on the mind that doesn't have to be there. To get out, you don't need an outside power. You just need to remember that you have the ability to create a different sense of who you are, and to create a different world to inhabit, one that's healthier.

The ultimate goal of the practice, of course, is to be able to get out of all these worlds entirely. That's what it really means to wake up. But in the meantime, you can have your little awakening when you wake up in the middle of one of your created worlds, and say, "Oh, this is suffering. It doesn't have to be here." And you look in the right place instead of placing the blame on other people in the past or in the present. The suffering doesn't come from them. The suffering comes from the way the mind thinks about things. It creates impossible situations and then burdens itself with them. It doesn't have to do that. Mindfulness, concentration, and discernment form the way out.

And those aren't just vague abstractions. Mindfulness is the ability to remember what you're doing as you move from one state of mind to another. Alertness is the ability to see, "I'm doing something that's causing suffering." And discernment is what sees that it doesn't have to be that way. There's an alternative.

So as we're sitting here, we're gaining practice in precisely the skills we need in order to keep our sanity. Just start exploring some of the mind's possibilities in terms of the different identities it can take on, and the different worlds it can inhabit. The meditation gives you a good, safe, healthy world to inhabit. Learn to appreciate this skill, because it's your lifeline. And make the most of your opportunity to master it.