

Worlds

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September 6, 2003

We all carry whole worlds in our heads, whole worlds in our bodies.

I once saw a cartoon of a meditator being taken over by her thoughts. In the first panel she's sitting very quietly. Then the word *think* appears in her head. Then another *think* gets added onto her neck, and then another one in her chest, and finally, by the end of the cartoon, the words *think think think think think* blot out her entire body.

That's the way it is with us: Our bodies are filled with thoughts. We ordinarily think of thoughts as filling the mind, but they also take place in the body as well. The mind is what does the thinking, but parts of the body get involved in the process. This is how we carry those whole worlds around. You sit here with your body, and all of the sudden it turns into someplace else. It's all happening right here in the mind and body in the present moment, but in the course of the process the body and mind get turned into another world and another time.

You can compare it to the control keys on computer keyboards. If you ordinarily push a P or a Q you get a P or a Q on the screen. But if you push the control button and then push the P or the Q, they're not P's and Q's anymore. You get something else. The machine prints or it quits. All of the sudden the key does something else, for it's in a different context.

The same with the mind and the body in the present moment: You press your inner control key and all of a sudden you've got another world. It's not just the body sitting here breathing. It's Thailand or Europe, New York or Texas. In addition to the worlds we intentionally carry around, there are also lots of unintentional ones that come blowing through our minds. Those come because of the force of our old actions. As those storms come blowing through, sometimes the best thing you can do is simply hold onto the breath. Just as you would batten down for a storm, you just lie low and try to hold tight to the breath for dear life as the winds blow through. You hang onto the breath as tenaciously as you can. Even though it doesn't fill your awareness, it at least gives you a corner where you're still in the context of the present moment.

In the *Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness*, you're told at the first stage to subdue greed and distress with regard to the world: *vineyya loke abhijjha-domanassam*. In other words, you may not be able to stop these various worlds from happening in the present moment, but you can work at subduing any greed or distress with regard to them as they come through. In other words, try to be as

equanimous as possible, as uninvolved as possible in the process. Stay with the breath as much as you consciously can.

As you keep this up, after a while the storms begin to calm down. Then, if you're holding onto the breath consistently enough, you can begin to see things a bit more precisely. You see more and more how much you're conspiring with those various worlds coming in. But the initial principle is that whatever conscious decisions you're making, make sure they're decisions to stay with the breath. At the very least, don't get involved in other things that come along, even if they're filling your body and mind. This helps establish a beachhead in the present. Without that beachhead you simply get blown around. Even though this standpoint may ultimately be a fabrication, it's a useful one.

In the beginning you hardly notice that it's a fabrication. You just notice that it's a place where you stand still, where you take your stance and try to stay as solid as possible, as uninvolved as possible, so that your frame of reference doesn't shift – so that you don't find yourself suddenly in Las Vegas or Pattaya. You're right here. Those other worlds are coming through, but they're coming through *right here*. And you do your best, even though you may get involved a little bit, to make sure you feel no greed or distress with regard to the worlds coming through. In other words, you don't get involved with any narratives that would pull you in even further. You don't let these things get you upset. Sometimes this requires just standing still with the breath. Other times it requires reflecting on those various worlds: What do they give you? What do they hold for you? How real are they?

There's a passage where Ven. Ratthapala is talking to a king who wants to know why Ven. Ratthapala ordained. After all, his family is wealthy, his parents are still alive, he himself is young and healthy. Why would anyone who's not obviously suffering want to ordain? Ven. Ratthapala says he considered that "All worlds are swept away; they don't endure." That's his way of expressing the principle of inconstancy and impermanence. "They offer no shelter; there's no one in charge." No one can protect you from the suffering of those worlds. That's the principle of stress and pain. "The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on, leaving everything behind." That's the principle of not-self: There's nothing you can really hold onto in any of these worlds. No matter how much you grasp at them, they just slip right through your fingers like water. Finally, "All worlds are insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving." No matter how good they get, they're still not good enough for the mind. Once the mind develops a sense of desire for these things, it's never fulfilled.

The *Dhammapada* contains a verse where the Buddha says that even if it rained gold coins we still wouldn't have enough for our sensual desires, because all the things they could buy keep slipping away, slipping away. They're impermanent, unstable, stressful, not-self. They offer no real protection, nothing you can really hold onto. Reflecting on this makes it easier to let go of these worlds as they come roaring through. If you sense any temptation to get

ensnared in a particular world, if it seems interesting or intriguing, just reflect on this: No matter how good it gets, it's never good enough. At the same time, it can cause a lot of suffering, not only for you but also for the people around you. You sit here with a mind capable of creating these worlds, but they require a body as their staging ground. And just keeping this human body alive: Think of how much other people have to suffer so that you have enough food, shelter, clothing, and medicine to keep going. And then what do you do? You use this body to entertain yourself, as a staging ground for your private worlds. How selfish and thoughtless can you get?

So these worlds that you're building: You're building not only on your own suffering, but also on the suffering of others. When you think about this, it sets you wondering: Can you develop the skill where you don't have to build these worlds and still be happy? Can you find a happiness that doesn't depend on the body?

The first step, as I just said, is learning how not to get involved in the worlds coming through the mind. Try to establish this frame of reference right here, at the body in and of itself. Even though the breath might not fill all your awareness right from the very beginning, even though these various worlds may keep barging in, you at least lay claim to a corner of your awareness and *hold on*. The basic principle is that you don't get involved with anything else but the breath. You just stay right here.

Then, as you stay here with more consistency, you find that this frame of reference begins to fill more of your awareness. This "in-and-of-itself" frame of reference becomes more and more predominant as you develop an interest in the breath. It's not just a matter of in-and-out. There are all kinds of variations in the flow of breath energy coursing through the body. As you explore them, you find that you're learning not only about the breath but also about the mind. You begin to see the mind a lot more clearly as you're staying with the breath and you get more absorbed in this frame of reference: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities in and of themselves, all present right here at the breath. This is what helps keep you anchored. More and more, this fills your awareness. When the body fills your awareness and your awareness fills the body without all those other worlds coming in, when you finally get a sense of seclusion where you're not involved in those things: That's when you can settle down in Right Concentration. This gives you a stronger and stronger frame of reference right here.

Then you look into the process where this frame of reference gets switched. What's the control key that turns a simple P into a print command? What's the switch in your frame of reference that turns the process of fabrication in the body and mind into another world? You have to be quick to catch these things as they happen. The more quickly you notice this process of fabrication — before it starts forming a world, when it's just a little stirring in the mind — the better.

Here the first step is learning simply how to notice it and dissolve it away, notice it and dissolve it away. Make it your sport. As soon as there's any stirring that could turn in to a world, as soon as you're aware of its happening, just zap it. Breathe right through it. Release whatever tension there may be around it, in whatever part of the body it may show itself, because whenever a thought shows itself in the mind, there's going to be a corresponding tension in the body. When you're consistently with the breath, you can see this clearly. And you keep zapping that tension with the breath to dissolve it away, zapping it to dissolve it away.

It's like shooting rubber ducks in an arcade. Nothing really gets harmed. They're not real ducks that you're shooting. Just try to get really good as a marksman. The Buddha compares this to someone who's really good at firing arrows, who can pierce great masses, and can fire arrows in rapid succession. In other words, once you gain a sense of being established in the body in and of itself, or in feelings in and of themselves, you want to shoot down the process of fabrication as quickly as you can. As soon as it switches from the "in-and-of-itself" to another frame of reference, shoot it down.

Gradually you get quicker and quicker and you begin to see more and more how you've been involved in the process. There are points where you make a decision: "Am I going to let what I've got here shift into another frame of reference?" And there's that curiosity: "What's this thought going to do? What's that thought going to do?" You're always hoping for something to provide satisfaction, to provide entertainment, but if you keep in mind the fact that these things never can provide enough satisfaction no matter how great a world they create, you can just shoot them down.

There's the example that Ven. Rathapala gave of the king who controls a really large, prosperous territory. Word comes that there's another territory to the east that he could conquer and rule as well. So he sends troops to conquer it. Then he's told of another territory to the west. If he wants, he could probably send over his army and defeat that one, too. So he goes over to the west and just keeps expanding, expanding his territory until he's got everything—east, west, north, south—on this side of the ocean. Then someone tells him of another territory that he could conquer on the other side of the ocean, so he decides to go ahead and do that.

That's the way it is with the mind: There's never a sense of enough. These worlds we create never provide satisfaction. When you reflect on that, it's easier to give yourself over to the process of shooting them down, shooting them down. Any distraction that comes up and could disturb your concentration, just shoot it down as soon as you realize it's happening. The breath is very useful in this process. As your awareness begins to fill the body, you get more and more sensitive to obscure places in the body where thoughts can land on the body or take different sensations in the body as their basis. The more completely your frame of reference fills the body, the more quickly you can see these things.

You can shoot them down, shoot them down, and then you begin to see: What are the raw materials that these worlds are created from? Well, there's not much: just a little stirring here, a stirring there, and *you* connect them up. *You* stitch them together. To what purpose, to what end? You begin to realize that there's nothing there of any real satisfaction. The worlds you create offer no satisfaction; the things you create them from are all very ephemeral. They offer nothing really solid that you can hold onto. It's like building a house out of frozen meat. It's bound to melt and start stinking up the place.

Realizing this gets you more and more firmly established in your frames of reference in the present: the body in and of itself, feelings, mind, mental qualities, all in and of themselves. Before these things can turn into anything more elaborate, you keep them really cleaned out, cleared out, as uncomplicated as possible.

Ultimately your gaze will turn on the basic building blocks themselves. Even this present frame of reference: That's a kind of becoming, too. There's an element of fabrication, an element of creation in here as well. But before you start taking this apart, you've got to get it really solid as a basis for taking other, more obvious things apart.

Most people, when they practice, are in too much of a hurry. They get a little bit of concentration and they say, "Okay, the next step is discernment." So they abandon their concentration and destroy it before it's really had a chance to do its work. We like to figure things out too much in advance. After all, we think we're clever; it would take less energy, take less time if we could move on as fast as possible. But some things you just can't rush.

The analogy the Buddha gives is of a woman who's pregnant. She asks her husband to take a monkey and dye it so that when the child is born it will have a little monkey to play with. The husband wants to know what color to dye it, depending on whether it's a boy or a girl, so the wife tears open her womb right there – and of course that kills the child. Some things you can't rush. The same with training the mind: You've got to get it really solidly established, really centered here on the breath. Don't worry about the next step, where it's going to go.

When you settle down with the breath, you do need to remember that this is not the ultimate – it's just a temporary resting spot – but at the same time you need to try to make it as good and as comfortable as possible, as solid as possible. Only then can it provide you with a framework from which you can see other things that are subtle and refined. Try to inhabit this world as continuously as you can – the world of the present moment, the world where things are kept simple: body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves, before they get turned into something else with the control key that transforms your frame of reference. Keep this frame of reference as consistent as possible so that you can see the other movements of the mind, understand how they happen, how things come about, how they arise, stay, how they pass away.

Try to keep this spot as solid as possible so you can see those other subtle movements in the mind. That, you find, will cut away a lot of the suffering that goes along with those things. Without this solid foundation you just get swept away. The world gets swept away — *you get swept away along with it*. The world offers no shelter — *you've lost your shelter here in the present moment*. These worlds have nothing of their own — *well, you have nothing of your own in the present moment, because you keep destroying it, abandoning your frame of reference, to go running after shadows*. These worlds are a slave to craving — *you're the slave*. So do your best to establish a good solid state right here in the present moment, at whatever level you can manage, whether it's simply the level of not getting involved in greed and sorrow for the worlds that come blowing through your mind, or the level of being more and more independent from them.

Ultimately you want to get to the point where you're totally independent of any world. *Anissato viharati na ca kinci loke upadiyati*, as they say in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. You dwell independent, not attached to anything in the world. That's the direction you want to go, where you're not attached to any world at all.

So, whether it's simply the level of withstanding the worlds that seem to be totally beyond your control, or you're getting more and more sovereign and independent: Whatever level you're at, do your best to stay as solid as possible, as uninvolved as possible. Don't get upset because you're not totally uninvolved. Work at whatever level you find yourself, because the work of the practice does build on your earlier, more faltering steps to make something more solid and secure. It's a path where you can make progress, even if it's just step by step.

A lot of people say, "I don't want that. I want sudden Awakening." Well, some things can happen suddenly, but no understanding, no skill comes with sudden things that happen haphazardly in the mind. We're working on a skill here, the skill of learning to stay centered, keeping this frame of reference, not shifting to others. Just that skill in and of itself can cut through a lot of suffering.

So as you meditate, try to keep your nose down. Try to keep as close to the ground as possible. As always, the people who stay close to the ground are the ones who don't get blown away. The people who keep their nose down get to sniff interesting things, get to find out interesting things that everybody else tends to overlook.