

Opening Your World

March 23, 2016

We each live in our own world. All of us here are sitting in the same room or we're sitting out on the patio. But each of us has his or her own world. And meditation is designed to take care of any problems in that world from the inside. Because there *are* problems inside. There's stress, there's suffering of one kind or another.

This is probably the Buddha's greatest gift: teaching us how to take care of that problem from within. Sometimes you hear that Theravada's the selfish branch of Buddhism where people are concerned only with their own sufferings. But how are you going to take care of anyone else's sufferings if you can't take care of your own? And in taking care of theirs, ultimately it comes down to your teaching them how to take care of their sufferings. And for that, you first have to be able to take care of yours.

This is why the Buddha's teaching is such a great gift. It gives us the tools to take care of the problem from within. And it's a great kindness. Teaching other people how to take care of their problems from within is not a selfish thing. But it begins here.

I was back East recently and someone was commenting how impossible it is for people to communicate with one another—that we each have our own worlds and have our own ways of understanding things and we're pretty impervious to other people's understandings. And that's true up to a point.

As the Buddha noted, though, when there's suffering, the immediate reaction is twofold: One is a sense of bewilderment; and the second is, "Is there someone who knows one way or another to put an end to this suffering?" That's when we start looking outside. It's because of suffering that we're open to other people's advice.

This may be why the Buddha focused on the problem of suffering as *the* main focus of his teaching. It's when you know that there's suffering or stress inside: That's when you're willing to look outside and gain lessons from others. This is what makes us teachable.

After all, the Buddha didn't say he came to save all beings from suffering. He said he came to teach those who can be taught.

Now, the next step beyond that immediate reaction is the wise step where you realize that it's going to depend on your actions to make a difference. It starts with that question that the Buddha says lies at the beginning of discernment, "What,

when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” or “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” You realize that your actions are the problem, and maybe you can change your actions. If you couldn’t change your actions, there’d be no purpose in asking the question.

When we can ask that question, that’s when we’re ready to listen to what the Buddha has to say. When we sense that there’s stress or suffering and that our actions lie at the root of the problem and that we can change them: That’s the beginning of the way out.

What is the way out that the Buddha offers? Well, he helps us understand how we create suffering and he gives us tools for developing good qualities that help in abandoning the unskillful qualities that are getting in the way.

Some of these tools are very simple, like focusing on the breath—focusing on the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease and well-being. Without that ease and well-being, it’s hard to resist the temptation to keep going back to unskillful behavior.

There are basically four kinds of actions: Those that you like to do and you know will give good results. Those that you don’t like to do and will give bad results. Those two are not a problem at all. The ones that are problems are the ones that you like to do but they will give bad results, or those that you don’t like to do but they’ll give good results. Those are the difficult ones.

You have to learn how to talk yourself out of doing the things that you like to do but will give bad results. And talk yourself into doing things that will give good results even though you don’t like to do them.

Of course there’s another category altogether, the ones where you’re not really sure about the results. Those are the ones where you simply have to learn by trial and error.

But the other two are the real problems because there’s a lot of discussion in the mind’s committee around these things. There are the deniers, denying that anything is wrong. And the naysayers, saying that you don’t have the ability to make any changes. You’ve got to deal with those.

So when you feel impelled to go out on a particular line of thinking or a particular activity, it requires the ability to stay with the breath to give yourself an anchor, so that you have a sense of well-being right now. You can ask yourself, “Why am I going out there? Why do I need that? I’ve got pleasure right here.”

Sometimes just the realization that you can create a sense of well-being in the body and in the mind simply by the way you breathe can give you the confidence that you *can* change your ways and you *do* have something good right here.

But there are other times, though, when you really have to argue the case. The

mind will say, “I need something more than just pleasure. I have certain needs that have to be met.” This is where you want the mind to be really clear about what those needs are, and not accept its first explanations as to what they are.

It has the ways of presenting the case that it knows are acceptable—or instead the mind, it’s different committee members who have these tactics. They know that this particular argument will sound okay. But it may not be the real reason why that part of the mind wants to do that. So we have to question the first level and sometimes the second level to see what’s going on here.

And you have to learn how to counter all the arguments that say, “Well, you can’t change your ways, so don’t bother trying.” You counter them partly with the skills that you develop as a meditator and partly with questioning the values that underlie the mind’s need to keep going out, going out, going out.

Remember the Buddha’s analysis. It’s because there’s a sense of dis-ease inside that our attention goes out to begin with. We’re looking for a way to counteract that. And often the going out is a way of diverting your attention from the real problem.

To realize that gives you a different frame of values right there. You see that the problems are not outside. And the solution doesn’t lie outside. The problems lie inside, and the solutions are in here, too.

This is why the image of the committee is a good one to hold in mind. If you feel weak in the face of your old habits and there’s just one “you” in there, then you feel there’s no way out except to get some help from outside. But if you realize there are the weak members of the mind and there are the stronger members, skillful members and unskillful members, you see that you just have to strengthen the skillful ones, and not identify with the ones that keep going out.

This is why we meditate: both to learn the techniques for getting a sense of well-being right now, and also to be quick to observe what’s actually going on in the mind.

And to change the committee discussion, keeping in mind the point that there is suffering, there is something wrong, and it’s caused by your actions. That’s what allows the new members of the committee to come in. That gives them a lot of strength right there.

Because it keeps turning our attention back: What is it about the mind that keeps wanting to flow out, flow out? Why does it need to relate to things outside? Why does it need to have this particular activity or this way of thinking as its crutch? What’s the need inside? Where’s the lack? What’s the thirst?

Because as we all know, that thirst is not going to be satisfied by the way we normally look for things.

Think about the chant we had just now about the four Dhamma summaries: The world is swept away, it does not endure; it offers no shelter, there's no one in charge; it has nothing of its own.

Why do we keep coming back for these things? Because of the craving. We're a slave to cravings. We keep going back to things that are not going to satisfy the craving.

So once we realize that our old ways of satisfying the craving are not working, we have to look inside for alternative ways.

Always keep that in mind. As the mind gets tempted to move out, move out, remind yourself that the problem is not out there. It's not going to be solved out there. The problem is in here. And the solution lies in here.

We work on the skills that we need in order to strengthen the good members inside so that the problem does get solved. Then we use the same approach with the next problem and the next one. Just keep at it until there are no more problems left.

That's the good news: that there does come a point where the problems are gone. Suffering does end. But this is the only way it's going to be ended.

If people tell you that this is a selfish way of practice, you can tell them, "Well, this is the only way practice can be done."

Instead of dealing in grandiose notions of going out to save people, you work on the problem that you're creating for yourself here inside. In doing that, you're taking a burden off the world as well.

So there's nothing selfish about this practice. It deals with the problem where the problem is caused, and it solves the problem from within. There's no other way the problem's going to get solved.

The Buddha taught this path to human beings. We're human beings. This is a path that human beings have the abilities to solve. The problem is a problem that we have the abilities to solve simply if we develop the good side in the mind, the stronger sides in the mind. That's something we can all do.

When Ajaan Mun was giving Dhamma talks, he was talking to a group of people, mainly children of peasants, who had been told that they were pretty incompetent and at the bottom rung of the society in Thailand. But he kept reminding them, "All you need to do this path is a human body, a human mind, which you've all got. You're not crazy. So you've got what it takes."

That same message works for all of us. There's a part of the mind that's very discouraging, but we shouldn't let it have the main voice in the committee. After all, it's part of the problem.

So learn to look for the voices that are part of the solution and strengthen

them, both through your techniques as a meditator and through your understanding of how to get around the arguments of the side of the mind that's trying to pull you down.