

The Buddha's Map

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The Buddha once compared consciousness to a magic show. It can make things appear and disappear, but none of them have any substance. You can think about something you did thirty years ago, and all of a sudden it gets you all worked up. And then in five minutes' time, you drop that and go to something else. What seemed so important five minutes ago is suddenly nothing.

They've done studies of how magicians work, and they've found that a magician's basic trick is to take advantage of something that the mind does. I mentioned it this morning. We don't live in touch with reality. We live in touch with our cartoon ideas about reality—our perceptions. Those the Buddha compared to mirages. They bear some resemblance to something someplace. But when you get close to them, they disappear again.

The magician will get you to be interested in one sketch. He leaves false clues all around. And you begin to stitch the false clues together, creating a sketch in your mind, thinking that you've caught him. In the meantime, he slips something into the blank spaces in your cartoon idea. That's how he surprises you.

Now, if our cartoon ideas were simply entertainment, there would be no problem. But we make our decisions in life based on them. It's from our cartoon-perceptions that we decide what to do and say and think, and if our cartoons are distortions, we can create a lot of trouble. Every cartoon distorts to some extent, but some distort more than others. What the Buddha's offering us is some understanding of how the mind creates its cartoons, and how it can use its cartoons in a skillful way to arrive at something that's not a cartoon—something that's a reality. It's not a perception, it's not consciousness. It's not any of these insubstantial things the Buddha talks about.

All the aggregates, he says, are empty of any essential worth. He compares the body to a lump of foam on a river. You may have seen them sometimes in a forest. Tree sap gets mixed with the water, and it turns into a lump. Bubbles come through it, and the lump of foam can travel down the river quite a ways. But there's nothing there, no substance.

Feelings are like the little circles that appear on the surface of water when rain falls. They appear and they're gone. Perception is like mirages. Fabrications are like a banana plant. You peel away the layers of the banana plant looking for the core inside, but there's no core. Consciousness is the magic show.

When the Buddha teaches, he has to use these aggregates, so the views he's offering us—the perceptions he recommends that we adopt—are just a sketch. After all, everything we do has to depend on a perception of some kind. We can't comprehend all the sensory input that's coming in at any one moment. The Buddha wants us to try a cartoon sketch that's potentially very useful. He says, "Focus here. See these things as important. What the mind is doing right now to fabricate its experience: Focus there. Make that your cartoon." When you do, it leads you to something much more substantial than any of these things, something that's not an aggregate, something that's not a cartoon. But we need the Buddha's cartoons to get there.

I once heard someone was saying that what the Buddha offers us is a map to the Dhamma. And as we all know, maps are not a really accurate description of reality. They point out certain things and hide others. So there's no way you can say that any one map of Dhamma is any more correct than other map of Dhamma. That's what the person said, but it shows a real misunderstanding of the Dhamma—and of maps. Different maps have different purposes. Some maps are accurate as far as their purpose is concerned, and some are not. In fact, you *want* a map to highlight certain things and to hide others. Otherwise, if there's too much information on the map, it's useless. It's like a map to a fire escape in a hotel. What you want is an accurate depiction of where you are, where the fire escape is, and the way to get there. That's all you need to know about the hotel. You don't need to know the structure. You don't need to know all the other rooms. But you do want a map that takes you to the right door.

It's right there that we can say that there are accurate maps of the Dhamma and inaccurate maps of the Dhamma. There are correct and incorrect maps of the Dhamma. After all, some of them will take you to a door that opens up and there's a solid wall. You can't get out. Others will take you to a door, you open it up, and there's a sheer drop, where you'll fall five or six stories. So the Buddha offers us an accurate map of how to get to the fire escape. That, in fact, is what the Dhamma is. It's a map to the fire escape.

Essentially, it's a map of how we put things together, and how we can learn how to take them apart. For instance, he teaches us how to put virtue, concentration, and discernment together. These are all things that we have put together. Our intention to observe the precepts is something we put together. The precepts themselves are sketches. But they're very useful sketches. If they were too complex, too detailed, they'd be hard to hold to, because they'd be hard to remember. The times when you're tempted to break the precepts are when hormones burning in your ears. You need to remember: no killing, period, no

stealing, no illicit sex, no lying. You need something simple at those times. So those are a useful sketch.

The same with concentration: The Buddha says to focus on the breath. His sixteen steps: They don't tell you much. We're lucky we have Ajaan Lee to flesh out some of the details, but even his instructions leave a lot for us to explore. He gives us just a sketch. As he once said, the ways of the mind are more than many—so many that you could never put them in a book. But he does give us a book, which is a brief sketch of what the basic principles are. So we focus on the breath and ignore a lot of other things right now. The important part of the sketch is to try to be aware of the breath as a whole-body process. Get a sense of your awareness as a whole-body field, not confined to any one point.

You may have one point that's more prominent than any of the others. But you do want to spread your awareness around from that point, because you'll be observing the mind. You'll be looking for new things in the mind. It's like going out in the forest. If you're searching for something in the forest, trackers advise you to develop what they call "scatter vision," where you try to take in the whole visual field all at once. At the same time, though, there'll be little clues that you're looking for. If you're looking for mushrooms, there are certain things you look for. Whatever the plant you're looking for, there will be certain things that you want to take note of.

Even in that enlarged frame of vision, there are going to be things you're going to ignore, because when you're focused on the breath, what else are you looking for? You're looking for anything that will take you away from the breath. See it as a disturbance. Because you've made up your mind you don't want to go there, that makes it a lot easier to see these disturbances simply as little becomings forming in the mind. And you can watch the process. As you try to nip the becomings in the bud, you see more and more clearly the stages by which the mind creates a state of becoming. This is where the concentration shades into discernment.

Here again, the Buddha has you focus on certain things. What is it about the becoming that attracts you? What's the allure? As the Buddha said, all the aggregates have their allure. They all have their pleasant side. If they didn't have their pleasant side, we wouldn't be attached to them. But for the sake of letting them go, you don't focus on what you like about them. You focus primarily on what their drawbacks are—and in particular, the drawbacks of getting attached to them—and that's where you bring in the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self. You do something called *anupassana*, where you make up your mind to focus on one theme, and then you follow it through. It's like having a large tapestry with a red thread going through it, and you're going to follow just the red thread.

So here again, it's a sketch. You're not looking at the whole tapestry. You want to see where the red thread goes, because it'll take you to someplace important. Following these perceptions take you to a direct experience in the mind that is not a state of becoming and is not made up of aggregates. That's where you can put all the sketches aside.

So focus on the points that the Buddha said are really important to focus on, because he's the opposite of a magician. He's not trying to deceive you. He's pointing you to what's actually going on in the sense of how you're creating suffering and how you can put an end to what you're doing. His sketch directs your attention right there. Our problem is that we want to go off and sketch other things.

So pay attention to the Buddha's sketches, and then look inside to see what those sketches are pointing to. Sketch a path for yourself. Think of his teachings as a map, and then look at what you have inside yourself that corresponds to the markings on the map. Don't worry about the blank spaces. Focus on the markings, because they're designed to take you to someplace special—a place where, once you've arrived there, you won't need maps anymore, because you've got the real thing.