

Transparent Becoming

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The mind is used to wandering around. That's what the word *samsara* means. It's not a place; it's an activity. It's something you do. And for most of us, it's a matter of going from one desire to another desire. Then either you get what you want and then you say, "Okay, enough of that, let's move on to something else," or if you realize you won't get it, then you move on to something else to make up for the lack.

So the mind is on a constant move, creating what's called *bhava*, which literally means "becoming" or "being." It's better, I think, to translate it as "becoming," because the process is dynamic. It's not like Being, as a static metaphysical absolute. It's becoming something, going somewhere. You actually create the *where* through your focus on a particular desire, a particular craving. It's something we do all the time, both on the cosmic level, as we go from one life to the next, and also on the immediate level, as we're sitting here focusing on one object, losing interest, and then focusing on something else. And, in the focus, we create a world or a very particular experience of the world.

There's an allegory that the Buddha tells at one point in the Canon of how the cosmos goes through many cycles of expansion and contraction. When it contracts, the beings either go to the very highest heavens, which are not destroyed, or to the very lowest hells, which are not destroyed, either. Then, as the cosmos begins to expand again, some of the beings in the highest levels start coming down. They're born in this world, which, at the time, is not like the world we know it at present. The beings themselves are self-luminous; they glow, and they travel through space. And the world itself is nothing but water. It's like the story of Genesis with God brooding over the waters, but in this case, instead of brooding or creating a world the way God did, they create their own worlds. A film begins to form on the water, called savory earth. According to the description, it has the color of really good ghee or really good butter, and the taste of pure wild honey. One of the beings, simply out of curiosity or just plain wantonness, decides to check it out. So he takes his finger and tastes it, and it's so good that he immediately sets on it and starts gobbling it down. The other beings follow suit. As they do this, their craving becomes focused on the film of savory earth. And as they gobble the stuff down, they start losing their self-luminosity; they no longer glow. And as soon as they stop glowing, then the moon and the sun

appear, days and nights appear, along with seasons and the passage of years. It gets closer and closer to the world as we know it.

You can take the story as an allegory. This is what happens when you focus your craving on something. You change, and the world around you changes, too. You see this clearly with addictions. If you get addicted to a particular drug, all of a sudden everything in the world relates to that drug. As they say, when an alcoholic goes into a house, he pretty quickly knows where the alcohol is kept in the house. Other people walk into the same house and they would never know, because their craving is focused on something else. And as you get focused on a particular thing, your mind begins to narrow down, especially if its focus is on an unskillful kind of craving. So it's through your craving that you create a focus around which you have an experience of the world, you have an experience of yourself; you define yourself and the world through your craving: That's bhava.

And the thing about the mind is that it can move from one bhava to another, one becoming to another. You can also try to destroy bhava. Sometimes we hear about putting an end to further becoming, and we think that we have to destroy what we've got, and there are so many ways people do that: either through really self-destructive behavior, or through meditating and coming to the conclusion, "I'll have no desires, I'll have no wants at all, I'll just accept whatever comes." What happens is that they start creating a new self around the one who's just trying to be there, still, equanimous. In other words, in the desire to destroy one bhava, you create a new one. And the problem with the new self or the new bhava is that it's underground. You don't see it. Which is why the Buddha says that the desire for no becoming is also a cause for further becoming.

So he recommends another way out, which starts with creating a skillful kind of becoming, where the process of becoming is transparent. You can see what it is and how it happens. And that's what we're doing now as we meditate, as we develop a state of concentration in the mind. You've got that one focus on the breath. In the beginning, you need to have craving to do the practice properly. And for the craving to get activated here, you have to make the breath interesting. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath energy. When you start getting in touch with the way the energy moves around your body in relation to the way you breathe, in the relation to your reaction to events around you, it can get really fascinating.

This is why it's important, when you meditate, that you don't have too many hard-and-fast rules about how you're going to explore the energy in the body. You want to follow your interest, because otherwise the mind is not going to want to stay. If it feels tied down, it's going to start squirming, and it's going to find

another focal point for its craving. It'll want to create a different world, but a world that doesn't have the same clarity.

So you do what you can to keep the mind here. In some ways you can force it by being strict with it, not allowing it to go wandering off. But that kind of strict parenting, if it's not tempered with love and understanding, is going to create a problem child. You want to be more understanding, understand what your mind is interested in right now: What's alluring right now? What aspect of the energy in your body is interesting?

Or if you have trouble staying with the breath, what other themes do you need to think about right now that will help you get more settled down? Sometimes when you're feeling anxious or scattered, it's helpful just to think *buddho* in the mind—*bud-* with the in-breath, *dho* with the out—without paying too much attention to how the breathing feels. Just give the mind something to stay with. Or if you're feeling discouraged in the practice, think about other people who have had problems in the practice and yet were able to get through them and come out on the other side. If you're feeling lazy, you can think about death. It could come at any time. Are you ready to go? If not, get to work. If you find yourself pulled to lustful thoughts, you can think about what you've got inside your body, and what that other person has inside his or her body.

In other words, there are no hard-and-fast rules about what you should be focusing on. Or, even if you're focused on the breath, there are no hard-and-fast rules about where you should focus. This is a common theme in the forest tradition. Ajaan Mun didn't have an Ajaan Mun meditation technique, and he didn't create a lot of rules about how it had to be done. He'd give his students a topic and then send them off, leaving it up to them to figure out how they'd get their minds to settle down around that topic. With a lot of time out in the forest, you could experiment, find out what you found engaging, find out what helped you settle down—whether it was simply the desire to give the mind some rest and some peace, or if you had to convince it of the need to settle down by thinking about all the dismaying aspects of being stuck in this process of samsara. Whatever pulled you into the present and help to stay there, as long as it worked, it was Dhamma.

So this is the attitude you should bring to the present moment. Some people say, "You want to practice concentration? Well, try not to have craving, try not to be attached." But you've *got* to have craving; you've *got* to be attached if you're going to have that focal point where the mind is going to stay, and be willing to stay, be happy to stay, to get pleasure out of staying.

So try to take an interest in the breath. Give yourself reasons to stay. And when the mind gets bored, give it variations in the breath, variations in your focal point. There are lots of ways you can stay with the breathing, lots of ways you can conceive the breath process in the body. Some things we can learn from tai chi or Chinese teachings on chi, on how it's supposed to flow. And there are other things we can learn on our own. Experiment. Whatever you find congenial, whatever you find satisfying, if it helps the mind stay with the body in the present moment with a sense of well-being, that's Dhamma. And the more you bring your own ingenuity to the practice, the more it becomes your practice—not some foreign thing that's imposed on the mind, but a way of getting in touch with what's going on in your very own mind, and learning how to nudge it in skillful directions.

So learn to use your ingenuity, and use your powers of observation to see what works. Those were probably Ajaan Fuang's two most common instructions: Be observant. Use your ingenuity. Play with the breath, he would say. Play, not in a lazy, lackadaisical way, but the way a serious athlete would play at a particular sport, wanting to master it, wanting to do it well, up for the challenges that are presented by trying to learn from what's going on in the body right now, learn from what's going on in the mind right now. This way, you create a skillful form of bhava where the process of becoming becomes transparent, and that's what lays the foundation for you to really see, and to see through the process, so that you can ultimately get to something beyond.