

Boxed Stories

June 9, 2015

In ancient India, they used to write novels that would go on for hundreds and hundreds of pages. The question is, how do you keep a story interesting that long? The answer is, you don't tell just one story. The authors of that time would have what are called boxed stories. In the course of the main story, one of the characters would start telling a story, and all of a sudden you would find yourself in that other story. Then in the course of that story, one of the characters would tell a story and you're in another box. It's like Russian dolls. Often you wouldn't get back to the main story until a couple hundred pages down the line.

When you think about it, the mind is very much like that. It has many contexts, many frames. You're in one, and all of a sudden you find yourself either backing off into a larger framework or focusing in on a smaller one. You're telling yourself one story: You're meditating, and you're a meditator right now. The story of your meditation is that you're staying with the breath. Then all of a sudden you find yourself in another story entirely, in New Jersey someplace or on the other side of the world. From there you may go into another story someplace else. You've lost your framework for this story.

It's frustrating, but we can learn how to turn that to our advantage.

This is one of the reasons why we practice mindfulness. Instead of getting lost in the labyrinth of boxed stories, mindfulness is like the string that leads you out. You know the story about the man who went into the labyrinth with the minotaur, and he was able to get out because he carried a ball of string, leaving a trail of string that enabled him to get out of the maze. So in this maze of stories that you create for yourself, always remind yourself that whatever comes up, you can get out of it. If you're meditating alone and suddenly find yourself someplace else, just back up a bit and get back to the breath. Get back to your framework of being a meditator aware right at the breath.

The Buddha gives four frameworks, but they all connect with the breath. The Buddha himself makes this point. He says that when you're working with the breath properly, you get all four frames of reference: body, feelings, mind, mental qualities. They're all connected to the breath because after all, they're all right here. When you're with the breath, the fact that you're attentive to the breath and alert to the breath creates a feeling of pleasure. When you're with the breath, you're mindful. The mind is getting a little bit more steady. That's a quality of the mind. There are also the mental qualities of equanimity or concentration, or whatever good mental qualities you're working on. They're all right here.

Ajaan Lee makes the same point as well: You want all frames of reference to be right present here at the breath. It's simply that one framework takes precedence, and you see all the

other ones in relationship to that. For instance, when you breathe in a certain way, and a certain pleasant feeling comes up, ask yourself: “How is that related to the breath?” That gets you back to the breath as your main frame of reference. Or there’s a mental state of clarity, or lack of clarity: How does that relate to the breath? This way, you keep things all connected in one space. But if you find yourself someplace else, in another box, mindfulness is the string that reminds you, “Okay, you’re in another box. Now get back.”

Then you find that there’s another box that starts commenting on what a miserable meditator you are. You can’t even stay with the breath for more than five breaths. Well, put that in a box and step back from it. Remind yourself that training the mind takes time. It’s a complex phenomenon. It’s not going to just do what it’s told right away. You have to use sensitivity. You have to use patience. You have to use persistence. But if you find yourself in a bad box, always remember there’s a better box. You can take yourself out of that.

Then you can use this knowledge in other parts of your life as well, especially with addictions of different kinds. There’s a part of the mind that, when certain feelings come up in the body, immediately says, “Okay, you need a hit of pleasure right now, and the only way you’re going to get that is if you do this thing.” But you know it’s unskillful. Well, put yourself in another box. Question those voices. Remind yourself that the mind goes for physical pleasure because there’s pain in your sense of what’s called form, i.e., in the way you sense the body from within.

Often when you’re tempted to go for, say, a drug or something, there’s going to be a particular type of feeling in the body, and the mind immediately interprets it in one way: You need the drug. Well, pull away from that interpretation. Ask yourself, “What is the feeling right now? Where is there the tightness or the tension or the sense of lack? Can you breathe in a way that compensates for that?” Another part of the mind will say, “Oh, you have to gain a whole state of jhana before you can do that.” Well, you don’t.

Just be in the sense of the body as you feel it from within, and see what you can do to make it as comfortable as possible, through the way you breathe, through the way you focus. Or just relax certain muscles in different parts of the body—the backs of the hands, the tops of the feet—and see if that pattern of relaxation can connect into different parts of the body. If there’s a feeling of lack, how can you breathe in a way that feels full? In other words, learn how to tackle the different boxes you get yourself into by creating another box: a bigger box, that can look into these things.

And remember the Buddha’s analysis on how these boxes get created to begin with: the three kinds of fabrication. There’s the way you breathe, the way you’re talking to yourself about the issue, and then there are the perceptions and feelings that underlie it. So to pull yourself out of a particular box, remind yourself, “Okay, there’s a way I’m breathing here that’s aggravating this, and I’m talking to myself in a particular way. Can I change the way I breathe? Can I argue with those voices?” Like the voices that say, “Hey you’re going to give in anyhow in five

minutes, so why don't you give in now and get it over with?" You can argue. You can say, "I don't know about five minutes from now, but right now I'm going to take care of right now. I'm responsible for right now. Five minutes down the line, I'll be responsible for myself five minutes down the line, but right now I'm responsible for me right now."

Then you learn how to stick with it. In other words, you learn how to argue with the voices. Don't immediately give in. Remember that they're just voices. They're just a kind of fabrication. There's a jerry-rigged quality to them, an unreality to them. You can make them real if you want to, but why would you want to?

Then there are the perceptions underlying them. Particularly the one that says, "If you don't give in to this temptation, it's just going to build and build and build and then it's going to explode." Well, the perception of its building up: That, too, is a fabrication. Learn how to question it.

So this ability to see these boxes as fabricated, and the realization that you can create a more skillful box to encompass a less skillful box, or get you out of the unskillful box: That's an important ability in the practice.

In addition to mindfulness, it's useful to have a sense of humor. You can laugh at some of the dialogs or monologs that go on inside some of the boxes. That gets you out. In fact, it's one of the most effective ways of getting you out.

So even though, as you're meditating, you find it frustrating to be in the box of right mindfulness and then suddenly you find yourself in another box, and it seems very easy to slip from one to the other, just remember: The mind is very adept at that. But you can learn how to use this to your advantage. Just because you're stuck in a bad box doesn't mean you have to stay there. You're not really stuck. Learn how to step out of it. See it as a kind of fabrication. It's dependent on the certain way you breathe, and think, evaluate things, and particularly on your perceptions. You can learn how to question these things, see them as fabrications. That's how you can think outside of the box.