

The World of Conviction

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One of the mind's habits is to create states of becoming, involving both the world outside and your own inner world, the world of the mind. You start with a desire and then, based on that desire, you take on an identity in a specific world of experience. If you have a desire for pizza, the "you" in that world is going to be both the "you" that's going to enjoy the pizza when you get it and the "you" that can get the pizza. You have the skills, or you have the wherewithal, to get it for yourself. That's a self as producer. The one who's going to taste the pizza, that's the self as consumer.

As for the world: Once you've focused on that desire, everything in the world that's relevant to that desire actually forms the world in that becoming. Whatever is either going to help you get the pizza or get in the way of getting the pizza forms the foreground. Everything else falls into the background. Everything else in your own personal identity that's irrelevant to that desire at that point falls into the background, too.

Then when you move on to another desire, there's another becoming with another you and a different world. The mind's doing this all the time.

And then on the larger scale, there's the "you" here as a human being, along with the world outside that you're inhabiting as a human being: That's also a kind of becoming. One of the Buddha's main insights was that these two are connected. The identity that you have as a human being right now is based on a lot of the becomings you had in the past in your mind.

And, as the Buddha said, this process of becoming entails suffering, because that desire, when you cling to it, is going to be uncertain. It's going to be unstable. So anything built around that, anything that gathers around that, will have to be unstable as well. This is why clinging lies at the essence of suffering.

But it also turns out that you need to develop certain becomings in order to practice. The "you" who's here meditating, the inner world of your mind that you're inhabiting right now, along the world of the breath, should be prominent, and other things should fall in the background. The concentration you're aiming at, too, is a kind of becoming. In fact, you actually see the process of becoming very clearly as you try to meditate because, as you often discover, when you're trying to stay with the breath, all of a sudden you find yourself off in some other place in a different world. That's because a different desire took over. A new you formed around that, a new world formed around that, and took you off.

So you keep trying to re-establish yourself here—not only as you're meditating, but also as you go through the world and keep trying to practice. The you as a meditator is something you want to encourage, something you want to nourish: the you that can do this.

The Canon encourages that kind of thinking, “Other people can do this. Why can’t I?” The Buddha also encourages you to remember that you’ve embarked on this practice because you want to get past suffering. That’s the skillful you as a producer. If you find yourself wanting to leave this practice, or to slack off, you have to ask yourself, “Well, don’t you really love yourself? Don’t you really care about yourself?” This is called the self as a governing principle. It’s the skillful self as a consumer.

So these are forms of self-ing, or I-making and my-making in the Buddha’s terms, that are actually helpful on the path.

But there’s also the process of world-making. What kind of world can you inhabit that’s going to be helpful for the path? Here at the monastery, we have the context of the monastery. But when you leave, you’ve got to take a world with you.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha talks about the five strengths or the five faculties. These are qualities that nourish the mind and nourish the kind of becoming that you want as a practitioner as you go through the world.

Both lists—the strengths and the faculties—begin with conviction: conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, that he really was awakened through his own efforts. If you hold onto that conviction, it creates a different world around you. You see things through that lens, and they’re going to look different from what they would if you lived in a world where no one had ever awakened through his own efforts.

What does it mean to have conviction in the Buddha’s awakening? Well, it comes down to conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really do make a difference. They can make such a huge difference that they can actually put an end to suffering. And you can do this on your own. After all, the Buddha did it on his own. Even though he said that the whole of the holy life lies in having admirable friends, the admirable friends are there simply to point out the way and to give good advice, to set good examples. But the actual work is something *you* have to do. You have to do it on your own. And you can.

This is the message of the Buddha’s awakening. And you notice, if you look through Buddhist history, that when people try to change the Dhamma—especially into forms that said, “You can’t do this on your own. You need some outside power to come and help you”—they would also change the story of the Buddha’s awakening.

There’s one version where, as the Bodhisatta’s sitting under the tree, he doesn’t gain awakening there. He gets spirited up to the Pure Abodes, where he gets surrounded by Buddhas of the past who beam awakening into his head. Then he comes back down. In other words, in that version, he didn’t do it on his own. There’s another version where he actually was awakened before he left home. He was having tantric sex in the palace and, through tantric sex, he appealed to the Buddhas of the past who shared their awakening with him. Then he went out and sat under the Bodhi tree as a show for people who might be inspired by that kind of thing.

So, you can see how important the story of the Buddha's awakening is in creating the world in which you practice.

Recently, I was reading a secular Buddhist version of the Buddha's life, in which there actually was no awakening. The Buddha was just a well-meaning sort of guy who thought about things a lot, and was very sensitive, and finally he decided that each of us has to be true to ourselves and find a path, our own path, for ourselves. Nobody else can tell us what the path should be. But unfortunately, he was not a good teacher, and the monks took his teachings and distorted them, telling us that there was an awakening, and a specific truth to the awakening, and that there was a path that worked for everybody.

What kind of world would that be, if nobody ever really gained awakening? A pretty hopeless world. If you really are serious about putting an end to suffering, conviction in the original story of the Buddha's awakening creates a new world around you. You see your life as an opportunity to develop the qualities that he developed.

In the Canon, they talk about being heedful, ardent, and resolute. When you believe that the Buddha really did gain awakening through these qualities, it encourages you to develop those qualities in your life as well: heedful to take care in what you do; ardent to give rise to what's good in any circumstance; resolute so that you're not going to be swayed by other people's opinions. This is especially important as we live here in this land of wrong view, where truth gets turned into truthiness, the virtues are called into question, and everybody says, "Well, just find your own way and go for the immediate hit." And they accuse Buddhism of being pessimistic. The Buddha's actually saying, "Look. Through your efforts, you can gain true happiness. You can put an end to all suffering. And human beings can do this."

That's the other message of the Buddha's awakening: that it is possible for us to touch a deathless dimension within the mind. The path can take us there. Sometimes you hear the question, "How can a human being, which is a conditioned being, know something unconditioned?" That wasn't the Buddha's approach. Instead of trying to define what a human being is, and from that, what a human being can know, his approach was to begin with, "What can a human being know?" And then, after that, if you want, you can define what a human being is. But he found that by defining yourself in any way you're placing limitations on yourself. So why bother trying to define yourself?

But if you focus on developing a sense of yourself that is capable, that can take responsibility for your actions, that can learn from mistakes—simple things like that, which involve a quality of integrity: That kind of self can actually take you to the point where you don't need it anymore. Because, after all, why do we create a sense of self in our becomings? Because we want happiness based on our desires, and we need a sense of the self as producer and self as consumer to achieve what we want. But when you get to a point where there's a happiness that doesn't require any conditions, you don't have to create any sense of self around it. That's why the Buddha gave the teaching on not-self. But to get to the point where you apply not-self to everything, you have to learn how to create a good self, a skillful sense of self and, at

the same time, have a skillful sense of the world around you, a world in which awakening is possible.

Now this is a matter of conviction. You're not going to know the truth of the Buddha's awakening until you find awakening yourself. But faith in awakening before that point is not the kind of faith where you're being asked to believe anything unreasonable. It's a reasonable working hypothesis, which helps get you on the path, keeps you on the path, and leaves the possibility of awakening open. If you take that other working hypothesis—that nobody ever has really gained awakening, that it's all just a bunch of made-up stuff—that closes all the doors.

So you have to decide, which kind of person do you want to be? And which kind of world do you want to live in? You do have the choice. You can create an environment for your practice in this way, based on your conviction. You may find that you'll be living in a world that's different from the worlds of the people around you, but we're already living in a world different from theirs, the world of our own becomings. The question is, do you want to follow their worlds, with their limited possibilities? Or do you want to live in the world of the Buddha, in which the possibilities are open and you're capable? The choice is yours.

And since we're already creating worlds of becoming and selves of becoming over and over again, and suffering from that, why not create a becoming that leaves the potential open to get beyond becoming? It gives a new meaning to your self-ing and it gives a new meaning to the world-ing that you do. It leaves open the possibility that there are other dimensions of the mind aside from the worlds we keep creating for ourselves. There's a dimension that's *lokuttara*, above worlds, a dimension that's unfabricated, ultimate happiness, ultimate truth, ultimate freedom.

Conviction in the Buddha's awakening leaves that dimension a possibility. A world without that awakening closes that possibility off. So remember that you're making the choice all the time: What kind of world are you going to live in? And what kind of person are you going to be in that world? Don't let other people make that choice for you. Listen to the part of your heart that says, "I want true happiness. I want to do it in a way that's harmless and wise." And you find that conviction in the Buddha's awakening helps you achieve that desire.