

Look after the Source

June 10, 2017

There's a process that the Buddha calls becoming. You start with a desire, something you'd like to get. And then around that desire, there's a world and there's also a self, the identity you take in that world. As you enter into that identity, that's called becoming. You enter into the world and the identity at the same time.

The identity here has two parts. There's the consumer that wants to taste the results of gaining what you desired, and there's the producer who's going to find what you desire. It has the means and the skills to do that. We create becomings around every desire we have, which means we've got a huge pile of them. And we go from one to another—in some cases easily, and in other cases, not so easily. Some of the worlds and some of those identities are stickier than others.

As the Buddha said, all these processes of becoming are marked with suffering. It's an inevitable part of whatever becoming you get involved in—whatever the world, whatever the identity. And the “world” here can either be the world of your imagination, or it can be the world outside. Even with the world outside, there's one sense in which we're in the same world and another sense in which we're in very different worlds.

Your desires will determine what you find of interest. The things not related to that desire—either in the sense of not conducing to the desire or not getting in the way of the desire, things that are simply irrelevant—fall into the background. Years back, my older brother came for a visit. He's alcoholic. As we were driving through Valley Center, he immediately picked up on all the places in Valley Center where alcohol could be purchased, something I'd never noticed: the same world, but different worlds.

Now, as we practice, we try to take advantage of this fact that you can create another world. Here you're creating the world and the identity of a meditator. At the moment, you want your world to be just the range of your body. The self in here is the self who wants to meditate, who wants to get the mind to settle down and gain some clarity inside. You want to nurture that desire, because without it, there's no getting out. The question is: Why do you want to get out? Because all becomings involve some stress and some suffering.

You look at the world, the world around us. It looks like it has potentials for all kinds of good things, but also look at the other potentials. We live in a world that's being swept away, that does not endure, offers no shelter, and there's no one

in charge. It's a world where we really have nothing of our own. There's nothing that you can hold on to in the world and say, "This is mine; I can take it with me." And yet, we keep coming back, a slave to craving. One of the reflections the Buddha has you engage in is seeing that any world is not worth going into. But for that not to be totally depressing, you have to develop the world of a meditator.

You realize that this is your responsibility inside, getting this internal world in good shape because whatever you're going to offer as a gift to the world outside has to come from something good inside. That's why we try to get the mind with the breath—get it to be centered, get it to be still—because the mind with that sense of well-being inside is much more likely to be wise, generous, virtuous. All the good qualities that we associate with people who are good for the world have to come from here.

They say that Theravada is selfish, that we're looking after only our own good. It's not true. It's just that where we focus our efforts to create good has to start inside. You don't sacrifice your well-being for the well-being of others, in the sense of true well-being. You've got to create well-being inside. If there's no well-being inside, then good things can't come out.

So we work on developing this center in here. For the time being, you want all your other identities and all your other worlds and all your other desires just to fade away into the background. You've got to strengthen this one right here. This is your world right now. Don't let the media or anybody else tell you otherwise. Don't let anything come in, aside from your own determination that you want to find true happiness, a happiness that's solid, that's blameless and harms nobody. And the more solid the happiness is inside, the more you have to offer outside.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has only one person, the one each is responsible for—and that's ourselves—because you can't be responsible for other people's actions. You can't be responsible for the world. You can give to the world, you can try to be harmless in your engagement with the world, but you have to remember: This world, like all other worlds, is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge. There's no one up there saying that the ultimate plan for this world is going to be a good thing, so just bear with the technical difficulties for the time being.

The nature of worlds is that they fall apart. And you give what you can to the other people who are also struggling in this world. That's your perfection of generosity. You try to be harmless: That's your perfection of virtue. And that's where you should focus your attention: on the good qualities you're developing, both because they'll lead to your true happiness, and also because a mind that's imbued with these good qualities is going to come up with words and actions that

are more conducive to well-being all around. Still, the focus has to be in here. You have to focus on the source, and the source is your own mind.

The intentions that could go into creating any kind of becoming: You want to make sure they create good becomings inside. The state of having the mind in concentration is one of the most stable becomings you can create. It has a deep sense of well-being. You focus on the breath and try to be on good terms with the breath. Learn how to read the needs of the body with regard to the breath: Does the body need short breathing right now? Does it need long breathing? Deep, shallow, heavy or light, expansive, or more focused? That's something you can play with, something you can adjust.

You have a large measure of control here. So learn how to exercise your control: one, where you can have the most impact and two, where you can have the best impact. It's right here. We tend to define ourselves in terms of the world outside, but for the time being, drop those definitions. Right now, you're just the awareness with the breath. You're the observer and the doer with regard to getting the mind to settle down. Those are good identities to have for the time being.

As for the impact they'll have outside, save that for later. Work on the source right now. Make sure you get the source in good shape. As for the effects outside, everything runs on karma—your karma and the karma of the people around you. We have a big mix. We have old karma; we have new karma. We have bad things we've done in the past and good things we've done in the past. We have our skill and lack of skill at the moment in how we handle these things. And it's our present karma, the new karma, that really makes all the difference.

When bad things happen in the world, you can take them as an opportunity either to suffer or to not suffer. The skill lies in not suffering. You're protecting the source, the state of your mind. The less you're suffering inside, the more you'll have to offer outside. When you're not suffering, you're not clinging, even to the good you do outside. It's pure giving, giving, giving. It's like setting little boats out on the river. You've got good things in the boats. You don't know to whom they'll go necessarily. You have some ideas of who's downstream, but not any total knowledge. But you send out good things. And there's goodness in sending out the good things.

As for where those little boats will land and what little gift they'll have in there for somebody else, you know it's a good gift, but you don't know who or where the recipients necessarily are. But you can trust that if your intentions are skillful, the results are going to be good.

That requires that you be very observant inside, which is why we have to meditate—not just to be still, but also to see clearly. When an intention comes up,

which direction is it going? Is it going toward true happiness or away? Is it going toward the end of suffering, or is it going toward piling up more suffering?

This, too, is something you observe over time, as you get more and more familiar with watching your intentions. For the most part, many of us just ride with whatever intention comes up, and we're not all that selective in what we go for. As you get wiser, you become more and more selective, and the meditation puts you in a better place to see really clearly aspects of your intentions that may not be as skillful as you thought they were. You get more refined in how you create your own internal becomings and the contributions you give to the becomings outside—the worlds and the other selves in those worlds—because you're looking after the source.

There are all too many teachings that place the source of the world out there: somebody else with a plan for the world. But one of the Buddha's realizations is that the world has no one particular person in charge. There are just lots of beings occupying the same dimensions, each of them trying to feed and each trying to find happiness. But there's no plan to which you have to sacrifice your well-being.

For most people, the idea there's nobody in charge is scary. But you have to see it as liberating: You have the right to look for true happiness. And it's not a selfish thing. If the happiness is really true, it's going to have a good impact that radiates out. So the source isn't out there. The source is in here. This is your responsibility.

As the Buddha said, a sign of wisdom is realizing where your responsibilities lie and where your responsibilities don't lie. The source, the mind's desire for happiness, is where your true responsibilities lie. You want to make sure that that desire is aimed in the right direction, toward a happiness that's harmless and blameless, a happiness that's true. As long as you stick with those intentions, you can trust that the ripple effect going out from them will be good for everybody touched by those ripples.

So right here is where your responsibility lies. Make sure you don't lose focus.