

Stepping Out of Truth Games

January 1, 2018

We're all sitting in the same room, but each of us is in a different world. We're each trying to make a world of concentration in which you're fully aware of your body as you feel it from within. You're trying to make that the center of your attention, and that's the center of your desire right now: to get the mind stay here. The problem is that the mind has lots of other worlds at its disposal, because it has lots of other desires.

This is the process the Buddha calls becoming, where, based on a particular desire, you take on a particular identity around that desire. And there's a relevant world around that desire as well. They all go together. And the fact that we have so many different world, so many different desires can work against us. Like right now, the desire for thinking about tomorrow's meal or tomorrow's activities comes up and can eat away at your world of concentration. Or your memory of what somebody close to you did recently overcomes the mind. Or sleepiness, any of the hindrances, will eat away at your world of concentration and replace it with a different one. Those are things you have to fight for the time being.

But the fact that you have so many different worlds can also work to your advantage when you learn how to move smoothly through them, choosing your worlds instead of just being subject to whatever comes by. That's a skill. And your ability to shift from one frame of reference to another frame of reference is going to come in handy. So the ability to watch the process of changing from one frame to another is an important skill to develop in the meditation, because when you get into concentration you should have a sense that nothing in the world outside right now matters. All that matters is your ability to stay with the breath. Any thinking that's related to the world outside, you want to put that aside. And any *ways* of thinking coming from the world outside: Put those aside as well.

We carry lots of assumptions into the meditation about who we are, where we are, what we're doing here, and why we're here. Those assumptions are good for getting us here, but once you're here you don't need them anymore. Take the simple assumption that you're facing forward, that your eyes are facing forward

right now. What direction is your *mind* facing? The mind doesn't have a direction. When you're dealing with the body, the mind takes on the directions related to the body. But as for its awareness right here in the present moment centered on the breath, you don't need to have a sense of what's in front and what's in back. They all should be the same. The same with any other really basic perceptions that we tend to hold on to: You want to learn how to put them aside when you need to put them aside, and then take them back on again only when you need to.

The skill here is having that part in the back of the mind that can look at different worlds that you have at your disposal and see when you have to take on their assumptions and when you don't. The ajaans in Thailand talk about this quite a lot: "Letting go of convention," they call it. You use conventions for when they're useful and then you put them aside. Like right now your name is irrelevant, your gender is irrelevant, all kinds of things that are related to the world outside are irrelevant. Those conventions are useful in certain worlds but not in the world of your concentration. Even the Buddha's analysis of what's going on here in terms of fabrication and becoming: these are conventions, too. There's only one thing that's not a convention, and that's release.

So while we're working at the practice, we're moving from one set of conventions to another set, a more useful set, but it's good while you're here to let go of all the conventions not related to the breath right now. And be as thoroughgoing as you can in letting them go, because your ability to step outside of those conventions allows you to look back at them when you return with a different perspective. Your ability to step out allows you to play with those conventions a lot more skillfully.

I think I've told you about a dream I had about Ajaan Fuang when I first went to stay with him. He had a closet. He walked into the closet and came out wearing a hat, a cowboy hat. Then he walked in, came out, and was wearing another hat. I forget how many different kinds of hats, but he kept going into the closet and coming out wearing a different kind of hat. I looked inside the closet and, sure enough, it was filled with hats. And the next day I got to see him wearing different hats. I was there for kathin, my very first kathin, and all of a sudden he was a carpenter putting together bamboo sheds. Instead of having tents that you could

put up like the tents we put up here, they'd put bamboo frames and then cover them with leaves, and that would be your booth. And so he was in charge of the construction of those.

He had other hats as well. From him I learned how to cook *khao laam*, which is a sweet in Thailand. You'd take bamboo sections, stuff them with sticky rice, sugar, coconut milk and black beans, and then you'd grill them over charcoal. His skill was in knowing how to grill the *khao laam* over charcoal. I learned that from him. Of course, what it meant was that when the *khao laam* was made, I never got to eat it because I'd help fix it. We made it for the lay visitors who came to work at the monastery.

I learned lots of different skills from him. He was very good at taking off hats and putting hats back on again. He could be very quick about changing his role in any situation, because he was good at stepping out of roles. And the ability to step out of roles allows you to see what the conventions are: When they're useful to hold on to and when you can put them aside.

There are problems when you go into concentration and you don't want to leave, because things in the other worlds that you're experiencing outside are so unpleasant. That's when attachment to concentration becomes a problem. If you can learn how to face up to unpleasantness and not take it quite so seriously, then you can switch back and forth. You're in a better position to see when something is skillful and when it's not. Some things may be true for one particular world, but you don't have to carry that truth around with you all the time. You can let it go while you're here, and then you pick it back up again. This is what the Buddha said in terms of his speech: He would say things that were only true, and beneficial, and timely and right for that particular desire, right for that particular world at that particular time.

That principle applies not only to speech but also to your thoughts inside: when it's useful to hold onto a particular truth and when to put it aside. You learn this by stepping back from these things and looking at them from the outside. Which is why when you're practicing concentration, especially at the very beginning: When thoughts come up, the first rule of thumb is that you don't go with them—no matter how fascinating they are, no matter how important they

are, no matter how true and insightful they may seem. You've got to learn to step out of that truth.

This is a useful skill, not only at the very beginning. You want to learn it because it's so opposite to the mind's usual knee-jerk reaction. An idea comes up and you latch onto it. Truth comes up and you latch onto it even more firmly. Now, that truth may be true for some things but not necessarily for others. But if you hold on to it—"This is going to be true all the way across the board"—you're going to get into trouble. You have to learn how to step back from all your beliefs. Anything that would pull you out of the concentration now, you've got to drop it. No matter how true it may be, it's not true for your concentration. It's not beneficial, it's not timely. Then, when the time comes to wear those truths again, the same way you'd wear a set of clothes, you can wear them with a sense of ease and not feel like you're bound by a straitjacket.

So when anything comes up in the meditation, step back. This ability to step back will be especially important when insights start arising. Sometimes you have an insight that seems psychologically important and you'll latch onto it. But, maybe it's not true all the way across the board. Ajaan Lee's good rule of thumb was that when something comes up, you ask yourself, "To what extent is the opposite true?" That's one way of stepping back. Upasika Kee would recommend that when something comes up, see what your mind does immediately in the moment after it comes up. See what defilement rushes in to lay claim to it. You step back, step back.

Some of the worst insights are the ones that fit in with your ideas derived from what you've read in books about the kind of insights you're *supposed* to have. One of the worst things I've seen recently is the statement in a book to the effect that stream entry is when you realize that there is no self. That's a bad case of what are called the corruptions of insight. But because you've read it in books it's very easy to hold onto it, which corrupts the insight. So whatever realizations come up, you have to ask yourself to what extent it's true, to what extent it's useful, and to what extent it's not. And, is this the right time for that?

So the ability to step out of different worlds is a really useful one, because your ability to step out of the world of California on the first day of January in 2018 will help you get into concentration. Your ability to step out of your world, your

identity, who you are, will help you get into concentration and help save you from all kinds of unskillful attachments—or even the normally skillful attachments at times when they’re not useful and not timely.

This ability to step back is your safeguard. So keep practicing at it until you get good at it, because it will enable you to use conventions when they’re useful and put them aside easily when they’re not. And mastering that skill, you get closer and closer to the release that’s beyond conventions, which is where all this is aimed. The Buddha said that release is the essence of everything that we’re doing, it’s the taste of everything we’re doing. In other words, the real pleasure that you get out of the practice comes when you get that sense of freedom.

So when thoughts come up that aren’t related to being simply being awareness with breath, you’re going to have to put them aside. As you put them aside, a lot of your assumptions will start coming up, and you have to put them aside as well—things you never really thought you would think, but you are actually thinking or feeling.

This is one of the ways in which a lot of unconscious stuff gets dug up. It’s not just phobias and other psychological problems. This includes things that you in your normal, everyday life hold onto and think, “This is really true.” And those ideas may be useful to hold onto—they’re not unhealthy—when you’re dealing with things outside, but in terms of the concentration, you’ve got to let it go.

The thing with conventions is that they’re a kind of game, just as language is a kind of game—a game you play for a serious purpose, but there are times you have to step out of the game. Right now we’re playing the game of concentration. Pay attention to the things that are relevant only to this game. Digging out all the irrelevant things can be very revealing and will enable you to step back into those conventions, when you need to, with a lot more skill.