

What's Real

February 28, 2018

When I was in Brazil this past month, I led a retreat, and because there were too many people on the retreat even for group interviews, we had a question box. People would write questions on slips of paper and stick them in the box. One day I happened to mention something about the psychic powers that come with meditation, and I mentioned devas, I think, as well. So the next day I got a question in the box: “I don’t want to hear anything about this supernatural stuff. I don’t want to believe in anything that I can’t see with my own eyes.” That was the question. And then right next to it was another question: “Why is it that teachers in Western Buddhism are so afraid of talking about the supernatural side of the tradition?”

The answer to the second question, of course, was the first question. In a form of Buddhism that’s very sensitive to market forces, teachers tend to shy away from issues that would stir up the militant materialists. But the answer to the first question is a bit more complex. As I said that afternoon, how do you know that what seems to be the natural world really is real? We don’t have any proof that there really is a world out there, that other beings really exist. What we do know, though, is that we suffer. Some people have the kamma to experience only a natural world; other people have the kamma to experience a lot of supernatural things. But both kinds of people suffer, and this is what Buddhism is all about: teaching us how to not suffer.

The problem is not with the worlds out there. It’s what’s in our minds. The world may be real, it may not be real—this is another issue that came up during the retreat. Apparently, at an earlier retreat, the teacher had taught that reality is actually an illusion. Well, the Buddha never went that far. He didn’t say that the world doesn’t exist. But the world is not the problem. The problem is inside. The suffering we create for ourselves is real, and the way we create it is real. Even though we may be operating under illusions, the suffering we create *from* our illusions is real. And the way we can solve that problem is also real.

There’s a passage in the Canon where one of the Buddha’s disciples, Ven. Gavampati, reports that he heard this directly from the Buddha: Suffering is real, not otherwise than it seems. The cause of suffering is real, not otherwise than it seems. The cessation and the path to cessation are real, not otherwise than what they seem.

So these are the realities we have to focus on. I was talking this evening to someone who was saying, “Living in the monastery, you must have it easy. No TV, no Internet, nothing to stir up your defilements,” and in some ways that’s true. We’re not constantly bombarded by the images meant to incite greed, aversion, delusion, lust, fear, whatever, that the media are churning out. But if we didn’t have the germs for those things in our minds, the media wouldn’t be able to do anything to us. Even when you’re sitting perfectly alone with your eyes closed,

those germs can get into action. You can fantasize about all kinds of things—and create all kinds of suffering for yourself from your fantasies.

So when the world seems too much with us, we have to remind ourselves that our *defilements* are too much with us. That's the real problem. This is why we meditate. This is why we look inside.

The Dhammapada begins with two verses that start, “The mind is the forerunner of all things that are experienced.” That's a very anti-materialist statement right there. The mind is not just on the receiving end. It's not just what they call an epiphenomenon of physical things. The mind is the major force in shaping your experience. This is why we have to train the mind, so that it's not going to create suffering for itself, not going to create worlds of becoming.

Just because these worlds are created doesn't mean that they're illusory, but it does mean they're fabricated. And everything that's fabricated, as the Buddha said, is stressful. The solution ultimately will be not to fabricate anything, but in the meantime we have to fabricate a path, because you can't take nibbana and use it as a tool to gain nibbana. We take these things that we normally do—bodily fabrication, or the breath; verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation, i.e., the way you talk to yourself; and then mental fabrication, your feelings and perceptions: We take these things and turn them into our path. When we engage in these fabrications out of ignorance, they're going to cause suffering. But when we fabricate with knowledge, understanding the processes, they become part of the path to the end of suffering.

This focus on process is important. The issue about the reality of the world out there is the same as all the different theories we have about what's going on outside. Are they true? Are they not true? Even if they are true, we can hold onto them in a way that causes us to suffer. Even if they're false, we can hold onto them in a way that causes us to really suffer. The truth or lack of truth in the theories is not the issue. The suffering's the issue.

When the Buddha analyzes why people have theories about the self, why they have theories about the world, the issue is not trying to figure out who's right and who's wrong about what kind of self there is or what kind of world there is, and whether self or world exist or not. The issue is, when we engage in this kind of activity, what happens as a result? Where does it come from? Where does it lead? Does it cause suffering? We look at the processes of how we create suffering for ourselves, and we realize that these processes are real. If we bring knowledge to them, understand them, we can take those processes and turn them into the path.

So when you're sitting here focusing on bodily fabrication, i.e., the breath, and you're directing your thoughts and evaluating the breath, that's verbal fabrication. Then there are the perceptions of the breath. How do you perceive the breath? Is it just a little bit of air coming in and out of the nose? How about thinking of the body as a big sponge with the breath coming in and out of the pores from all directions? What does that perception do to the way you feel the breath? What kind of sense of ease does it create?

Or, instead of thinking of the breath as something you have to pull in from outside, remember that the breath is energy, and the energy doesn't come from outside. It comes from

within. The air comes from outside, but the movement of energy in the body that brings the air in is actually something that starts inside, from what Ajaan Lee calls the resting spots of the breath. These include the area right above the navel, the spot right at the end of the breastbone, the middle of the chest, or the base of the throat. There are all kinds of places in the body from which the breath can radiate, and when you can hold that perception in mind, what does that do? Look at the process, look at the results, because those things are real.

So, regardless of what your experiences are with the world outside—whether they all fall in line with the rules of materialism or in line with other more supernatural principles—remember that you can suffer from them regardless. You see faith healers and they do amazing things, and there are a lot of uncanny things that happen in the world, but we can still suffer from those uncanny things. Even faith healers can still suffer. There's a pride that comes from knowing, "I'm in touch with devas. I'm in touch with other supernatural things." But there's also a pride that comes from materialism: "I'm hard-headed and not gullible." These forms of pride are really misplaced and both can make you suffer. And as long as you're making yourself suffer, there's work to be done.

Fortunately, the Buddha has a path for us *all*, regardless of what our experience of the world may be, or how we may conceive ourselves—as long as we conceive ourselves as capable of following the path. He has a path for getting us out of the suffering that those other views can entail. That's why his Dhamma is a gift to the entire world of all beings, and it's up to us to decide whether we want to put ourselves within the net of those "all beings" by choosing to put the Dhamma into practice.