

The Right Place to Look

November 21, 2018

The Buddha defines the world as your six sense media: the external sense media that make contact at your internal ones, plus the feelings and awareness that arise through that contact. That's the world. And the Buddha adds that that's your old kamma. Try to see it simply in those terms. He also says that it's burning. So if we try to straighten out the world, we're working at the wrong place. It burns us because our greed, aversion, and delusion try to hold on to the results of our past kamma. And, of course, those results going to slip through our fingers. They often may not be what we want, but we can't go back and change our past kamma.

So the problem is not with the world. The problem is with our greed, aversion, and delusion. Now, this doesn't mean we don't try to change the world when we can. Our kamma is such that it does allow for some things to be changed for the better. But the real cause of the suffering in the world is not the world itself. It's the mind. This is why when the Buddha attacked the problem of suffering, he didn't attack the world. He attacked his own mind—"attacked" in the sense of focusing his attention there—and really tried to straighten things out inside. Sometimes we hear that the Buddha wanted to put a stop to all suffering, regardless of whether it was caused by things inside or outside. But as he said, the real cause for the suffering is your own craving and ignorance. That's not outside. It's inside.

So if you want to put an end to suffering in the world, you have to start here. This is why we're sitting here helping the world by focusing on our own bodies and minds right now because the suffering comes from within for everybody. You can't go out and erase other people's suffering. You can't make them skillful, which is what's required to put an end to suffering. It's something that each person has to develop for him or herself alone.

So here you are with yourself. As for the things you see out in the world, the potentials for all the harm that people do, a lot of those are in us as well. This is why we have to look inside and straighten things out here. There are a lot of things in the world that we lay claim to. If they ever get threatened and we don't have an alternative place to find our happiness, we're going to really hold on and fight back, which means that if we want to stop the fighting in the world, at least make sure that we don't go out and *start* fighting in the world.

We've find alternative sources for our happiness, so that if we lose something, we can at least have something else inside to hold onto. You've got the breath

here, for instance. You've got the sense of the body as you feel it from within. This is your territory. Nobody else can take this from you. Nobody else can even know it. This is yours. Totally. Your mind as you sense it from within: This is also your territory. So find some topic here in the body and the mind in the present moment where you can settle in and have a sense of well-being.

We work with the breath because it's the closest thing in our experience to the mind without being the mind itself. It's how we sense the body. If we didn't have any breath, we wouldn't sense the body at all. We work through the difficulties in the breath, one, because it gives us a good place to stay; and two, because it gives us hands-on experience with dealing with the processes of fabrication: how the mind fashions its experience. Sometimes it fashions things even before contact at the senses. It's already got certain intentions and ways of perceiving things that it's just waiting to apply to whatever comes up.

We also start with the breath because the movements of the mind are a lot more subtle than the movements of the breath. If you can't see the subtleties of the breath, it's going to be really hard to see the subtleties of the mind. So time spent working through the breath energies in the body is time well spent. You're developing your sensitivity to what you're doing right now.

Today in class, we came across a sutta where the Buddha's basically saying that the things you do are still your kamma regardless of whether you're doing them of your own accord or because other people get you to do them, and regardless of whether you're alert to your intention to do them or not. In all those cases, it's still your kamma. That's a scary thought. The mind is doing things, and you hardly even know what you're doing, but you're still going to have to pay for it down the line if it's done unskillfully. So you want to become really sensitive to what you're doing right now, starting with the subtleties of the breath or the subtleties of whatever other object of meditation you find easy, congenial, pleasant for the mind to stay with. Because it all comes down ultimately to seeing not only the object of your meditation, but also seeing how the mind relates to it.

There are people out there who say, "How can you take the breath as your object? When you die, you're going to have to leave the breath. And then you won't have anything at all." When we focus on the breath, it's not just for the breath. When the Buddha gives instructions on how to deal with the breath, he talks not only about bodily fabrication, which is the breath, but also about verbal fabrication, i.e., the way you talk to yourself: When you tell yourself to breathe in this way; breathe in that way. "Try this. Try that. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure. Breathe in a way that allows that sense of pleasure to spread.

Breathe in a way that steadies the mind.” You’re talking to yourself to do this. And you’ll see that as you focus on the breath.

And then there are the perceptions you hold in mind that help you stay with the breath. You’re supposed to get sensitive to those perceptions; get sensitive to the feelings that come from staying with the breath. Those perceptions and feelings are called mental fabrication. Then, when you’re sensitive to them, you notice which ones, when you focus on them, allow the mind to settle down.

So even though you’re focused mainly on the breath, ultimately you’ll find that you start seeing these other forms of fabrication as well. And that’s when you can really see the mind, as you watch it in action. Those same fabrications are the ones you’ll have to deal with as death comes and you’re leaving the body, so it’s good to get skilled at handling them skillfully well in advance. And breath meditation is an ideal way of doing that.

The same with contemplation of the parts of the body: In the beginning, you try to imagine the different parts, trying to get a sense, when you’re thinking about your lungs, where are your lungs right now? When you’re thinking about your kidneys, where are your kidneys right now? When you think about your bones, where are the different bones in your body right now? You’ll find after a while that it gets easier and easier to visualize these things and to notice that they’re really nothing to get attracted to. They have no real essence. And yet the mind can switch so quickly back to its old ways of seeing the body as attractive, as something you’ve really got to hold onto. The question is, why does it do that? What’s the shift in the perception? *Why* did you shift the perception? When you see that, you really see into the mind.

So here again, you’re learning about the way the mind relates to its topics, because the way the mind relates is where the causes of suffering are, not in the things out there. The causes lie in how the mind fashions things, how it prepares itself to take on contact, and then how it embroiders that contact once it’s there. These are the areas where the mind is the culprit, where it’s the one causing the suffering. It’s not the case that the world outside is causing suffering, even though the world may be burning. It’s burning with what? It’s burning with our passion, aversion, and delusion.

So the real work is done in here. Sometimes you may wonder, “Here I am working with problems in my breath energy. What does this have to do with the end of suffering and how does this help anybody except me?” Well, it has a lot to do with the end of suffering, because as you get more familiar with the breath, you’re going to get more familiar with your mind. And as you can work through your own ignorance, you’re going to be able to see where you’re doing things semi-

consciously that are actually harmful to yourself or other people. You can stop that harm, both for yourself and for everyone else. So when you're working with the breath, you're working right close to the source. This is where the real work gets done.