

The Door of the Cage (2)

June 14, 2020

When you're getting discouraged in the practice, the Buddha recommends three ways of thinking. One is called the self as a governing principle. The second is the world as a governing principle. And the third is the Dhamma as a governing principle.

The self as a governing principle means you reflect on the fact that you started out on this practice because you wanted to put an end to suffering, the implication being that if you gave up on the practice, you'd be giving up on the idea that there could be an end of suffering. Is that an idea you'd like to give up on? The self that wants to put an end to suffering—isn't that a self you'd like to identify with?

The world as a governing principle is reminding yourself that there are beings in the world, either human beings or devas, who can read people's minds. And they might be reading your mind right now. What would they be thinking? "Here's someone who started out well, but now has gone astray." Thinking about that should give rise to a sense of shame, a healthy sense of shame. These beings have your well-being in mind and they're disappointed.

Now, those two reflections depend ultimately, though, on the Dhamma as a governing principle. You reflect on the fact that this is really an excellent Dhamma. It gets you to do good things: to be virtuous, to be generous, to develop powers of mindfulness, concentration, discernment—things that are good for you and for the people around you, noble qualities of mind, qualities that enoble you as a person. And if you practice this Dhamma, people who wish you well would be happy for you.

Now, with those first two ways of thinking, notice what the Buddha's doing. Self, world: These are the basic terms of becoming—the act of taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. The Buddha's asking you to define world and self in ways that are actually for your own benefit. When you're thinking of giving up or getting discouraged, you're not thinking about the beings out there who are reading your mind. You're thinking about other aspects of the world. And you're not thinking about yourself as the self who wanted to put an end to suffering. Another self has taken over inside.

The Buddha's reminding you here that you have the choice as to what kind of world you want to inhabit, what kind of self you want to assume, what kind of self you want to identify with. And he's giving you a world and a self that are

appropriate for skillful action. That's the Dhamma—and Dhamma there is the pivot around which everything else revolves.

So as you reflect on the fact that you do have the choice of what kind of world you want to inhabit, what kind of self you want to identify with, he's helping you to step back from the sense of self that was going to give up, from the sense of a world in which it would make sense to give up. He's reminding you that you have better choices.

He's also giving you some beginning insight into the fact that your sense of your self is an activity. It's something you've created. Even the sense of the world is something you've created. You've chosen which aspects of the world outside you're going to identify as important. So you want to learn how to identify these things in ways that are conducive to the practice.

And not only is the Buddha having you reframe your sense of becoming so that it's appropriate for the practice. He's also getting you to engage in a skillful way in the process of clinging.

We've noted before that there are four kinds of clinging: clinging to sensuality, clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, and clinging to doctrines of the self. Clinging to sensuality has to do with your desires and plans for sensual pleasures. Clinging to views has to do with your sense of how the world is structured, how it works, and what's important in the world. Clinging to habits and practices is your sense of things you should do. And clinging to doctrines of the self is clinging to your identity: who you are, who's going to be able to master what should be done to find happiness, who's going to figure out the world in a way that finds happiness, and then is going to enjoy that happiness. And, as I said last night, the Buddha has you focus on clinging to habits and practices as a way out of clinging to views and a sense of self.

Now of those four types of clinging, clinging to sensuality has no role on the path. Spending your time thinking about sensual pleasures is not going to get you anywhere.

But there are skillful views that you cling to provisionally, skillful ideas as to what you should do—habits and practices, the precepts, the practice of concentration, the development of discernment—that you hold to provisionally, and a sense of self that feels competent to undertake the path and that will actually benefit from all this.

And, as I've said, clinging to habits and practices is the pivot. It gets you out, because not only do you develop views about the world that are conducive to make you want to practice, and views about yourself that make you want to practice and feel that you're competent to do it, but as you get more and more

focused on what you’re doing, you begin to turn around and realize the world you inhabit is a combination of old karma and new karma. Your sense of who you are is a type of karma as well. This helps loosen up attachments to unskillful views about the world—that no matter how real they may seem, you do have the choice to look at other aspects of reality that give you more encouragement to practice, give you more reason to practice.

And same with the various selves that you could be identifying with: Do you really want to identify with the self that likes to get discouraged, that wants to give up? That voice inside that says, “I can’t do this”: Do you really want to believe that? You have the choice, even though that voice may offer all sorts of evidence, proof that you can’t do it. You have to remember that it’s cherry-picking the evidence.

There are other reasons for believing that you can do this, as Ajaan Mun liked to remind his students. Here they were, at the bottom of the social ladder in Thailand, told again and again and again that they’d get nowhere, that they had to be stuck where they were on the social ladder. He said, ‘No, there’s a way out, and you’re capable of doing it. You’ve got the 32 parts of the body. You’ve got a mind, and you can develop the determination to get out. You’ve got it within you to practice.’

The same with the world: Even though there’s a lot there in the world that’s pretty discouraging, seems pretty hopeless—and there may be a lot of things in the world that would lure you away in spite of the general hopelessness of things outside, many of them, of course, being sensual pleasures—there are also aspects of the world that would want to encourage you, those people who can read your minds, who would wish you well, the people who teach the Dhamma who wish you well.

That should give you impetus to practice. And it gives you insight into the fact that your sense of the world can be strategic. Your sense of your self and not-self can be strategic, too, because, after all, self is a strategy for finding happiness. Not-self is a strategy for finding happiness. These are things we do all the time—identifying with some things, dis-identifying with others, because something in us sees it to our advantage.

The Buddha’s simply asking us to be more systematic, more purposeful in how we use these strategies, to realize that they are strategies, to hold on to the ones that are useful, and to let go of the ones that are not. In this way, you hold on to your sense of self that wants to do concentration. You hold on to the sense of the world in which it makes sense to be doing concentration and developing

discernment, and to let go of anything that gets in the way of those practices, to dis-identify with any obstacles to the practice.

Ultimately, you get to the point where the Buddha says you're simply seeing things arising and passing away at the senses. You get to the point where even the idea of the existence or non-existence of the world doesn't really occur to you. As things pass away, the idea of existence doesn't occur to you. As you see things arising, the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to you. And the same, of course, would apply to concepts of self: thoughts of their existence or non-existence hold no interest. There's only one duty at that point, and that's to let go.

That's how you focus on your actions, your habits, and your practices, to deconstruct your sense of the world, to deconstruct your sense of self in a skillful way, in a way that's conducive to the practice, until you don't need these assumptions anymore because you've found something much better, something that lies beyond becoming.

So that's the Buddha's strategy. And it's a strategy that he wants us to adopt. Remind yourself that there are beings in the world who would be happy to see you adopt that strategy. Those are the people who really matter. That's the world that really matters. And the part of you that wants to put an end to suffering, that self would also be happy if you practiced. That matters, too. So listen to them, because they have your true well-being in mind.