

Surveying the World

August 31, 2020

The texts tell us that the Buddha surveyed the world many times during his career, and the results depended on whether it was before, during, or after his awakening. Before his awakening, he looked at the world and realized that he was looking for happiness in the world, yet what did the world have to offer?

He said it was like a number of fish in a diminishing stream, fighting one another over their last bit of water. Everywhere he looked, everything was already laid claim to. And it pained his heart. But he realized the pain wasn't just sorrow, it was because he wanted something out of the world: That was the *arrow* in his heart—and that was the arrow he would have to pull out.

But he had to figure the way out. It took him a long time, but on the night of his awakening, again he surveyed the world. After seeing that he himself had been reborn many times, he wanted to figure out why. What was the mechanism, what caused this to happen? If he could see the cause, then maybe he could put an end to it.

So he directed his thoughts to the passing away and the re-arising of beings throughout the cosmos, and he saw that their re-arising was based on their actions, and their actions were based on their views. The actions, of course, were intentions. So, in the third watch of his night, he looked at his intentions, to see whether there was an intention and there were views that could lead to the end of this incessant cycle. And he discovered that there were. That's how he pulled out the arrow.

After his awakening, he surveyed the world again. At this point, he didn't want anything out of the world. He surveyed it simply to see what he'd escaped from: beings running around *on fire*. Passion, aversion, and delusion were burning their hearts.

At that point, his response was compassion. That's how he began to think that maybe he might teach. This is a point in his life that the commentaries get all upset about, because after all, he was going to become the Buddha anyhow, right? He was going to teach, but after his awakening he began to realize how difficult it was going to be.

You look at the remainder of his life and you can see that it was full of difficulties in trying to get the Dhamma and Vinaya established. Here he had been working so hard to find something of real value, and he was offering it for free, but there were a lot of people who wouldn't take it. Not only that, they would attack him. But then he realized that there would be people who would benefit, who would be willing to listen and to put into practice what he was teaching. So for them he taught.

The important thing was that he didn't want anything out of the world at that point. As he said later, if you're a good teacher, then when people follow your teachings, you're satisfied but

you don't let that satisfaction overcome your mind. When you teach people and they *don't* follow the teachings, of course you're not going to be satisfied, but by the same token you don't let dissatisfaction overcome your mind. You teach because you know it's a good thing to teach. And it's there for whoever will take it.

So the lesson we can learn from this is that when we look at the world and we feel sorrow over the way the world is going, we have to ask ourselves, "What can we do for the world?" The best thing we can do for the world is to find that solid center inside that the Buddha found, so that we, too, can be in a position where we don't want anything out of the world. Then we can offer things of value totally out of compassion. But before we can reach that point, we have to develop a solid center in terms of concentration—which may not be totally solid, it doesn't get rid of all our desires with regard to the world; after all we need to eat, we need to have food, clothing, shelter, medicine, in order to practice—but we realize that the real problem, the arrow in the heart, is right here. We're the ones who shot ourselves with the arrow, so we're going to have to pull it out.

So the best response to all the trouble in the world is to find a solid place in your heart: one, so that you won't have to suffer as the world suffers—you'll have your own independent source of well-being; that's for your own good, and for the good of others—and, two, so that you'll be in a better position to figure out what you can do that would actually be helpful to the world.

After all, think of the Buddha: He may have had ideas about how to teach the Dhamma before his awakening, but it wasn't until he had actually gained his awakening that he really knew that this was how he had to teach. He knew that he had something of value, and he knew how he had found it, so that determined what and how he was going to teach it.

The fact that he wasn't going to get upset about people who disagreed with him, people who listened to him and then went off someplace else: That was what enabled him to stick with it. Because it can get discouraging: You teach people to go east, and they go west. You teach people something good, and they just toss it away. But the Buddha knew that he had something of real value, so the opinions of the world didn't have any meaning to him.

We've got to learn how to develop our minds so that we can have that kind of solidity if we really want to be helpful to the world. Otherwise, we just become one more voice in the clamor, one more person trying to lay claim to things that everybody else would like to lay claim to. That doesn't solve the problem at all.

The solution to the problem lies inside—in the qualities you develop in the heart and mind. This is the basic message of the Buddha's teachings on noble treasures, and what the tradition later worked up into the list of the ten perfections.

Despite the ups and downs of the world, there's something of solid value that you can build into the mind that's not wiped away by the things that wipe away the treasures, the accomplishments, or the powers of the world.

You see people abusing the power they have in the world. I remember listening to a lawyer one time who'd argued a lot of cases in front of the Supreme Court, and he'd seen the change in the court: At first it seemed to be going in one direction, the direction he wanted it to go, but then, as they changed the members of the court, it started going in the other direction. He felt that his whole career had been a waste. Well, if you measure your worth as a person in terms of the effect you can have on the world, you're setting yourself up for a fall. But if you measure the worth of your life in terms of the qualities you can build into the mind, then you're operating on your own territory.

And it's not a selfish quest. The more solidity you can develop inside, the more things of solid worth you can have to offer to people who are interested—and that's the most a human being can do for anyone else.

So as you survey the world, look into your heart. Try to find where that arrow is—the arrow that leads to the sorrow, the frustration, or whatever you feel as you look at the world—and remember it's the arrow that has to be pulled out. The problem in the heart is what has to be solved. But because it is in your own heart, it's something you *can* solve. That's the Buddha's message.

We have that message because he didn't let the world get him discouraged. He maintained the solidity of his heart all the way to the end, the end of what we could see of him.

Of course there was no end to that solidity. That's what makes it so good.