

Staying Grounded

November 26, 2020

Last year we visited a beach in Oregon. There was a couple playing with bubbles. They had a hoop more than a foot in diameter that they placed in some soap solution, and then they held it up to the wind. Enormous multicolored bubbles would come out—ten, fifteen feet long—and then they'd disappear. Then the couple would make another one, and then another one, all the time fascinated with the bubbles.

Our thought worlds are like that: Our bodies like the hoop, and there's a little film. Some wind comes in, blowing in from who knows where—craving—and the film of our thoughts takes on shape. And then try to live in the thoughts.

The problem is that they're like bubbles. They can only last for so long, and then they disintegrate. But then we make more and we make more. And unlike the couple with their bubble maker, we never get tired of our thoughts.

Our opinions about a lot of things are no more substantial than the bubbles. There are so many theories now, say, about the election that just happened. Does anyone really know what happened? No, and yet people have very strong opinions, and who knows what's going to happen as a result of their strong and clashing opinions.

But if you can see them as being like the bubbles, and see that the bubbles are not the issue, that's not the important thing—it's the hoop, the body we've got here, breathing, with all the different elements of earth, water, wind, and fire: If you can learn how to stay there and not go following any breezes of craving that come through, you're going to be a lot safer. At the very least, you're not going to cause yourself a lot of delusion, greed, or aversion. And you're less likely to get involved in any struggles and conflicts that go around these things.

Conflict, the Buddha said, comes from the thought process he calls *papañca*. It's a hard term to translate. Some people like *proliferation*, but the issue not so much the proliferation of many thoughts, it's the *type* of thoughts: the thoughts that start with the conceit, "I am"—as in "I am the thinker"—and from that self-view, all the issues about that thinker and the thinker's needs begin to spread out. It's because of that kind of thinking, and thinking in those terms, that we get involved in conflict.

I tend to translate the *papañca* as *objectification*. You turn yourself into an object first, and then you look for other objects outside. You look for things to feed on, because after all, as you become the thinker, you're a being. Wherever there's the attachment of a being, then the being has to feed in order to keep that identification going. And where you feed, either in terms of physical food or mental food, other people are also trying to feed.

It's as if we're all on the beach with our hoops making bubbles. If the bubbles interact, they tend to burst. Some of them destroy other ones. So you want to keep your hoop out of the bubble solution. If bubbles do form, you don't have to follow them.

After all, the Buddha doesn't say not to think at all, just don't go inhabiting your thought worlds. Try to gain some control over your thoughts. And especially watch out for the thoughts that tend to get involved in conflict—the thoughts that begin with, “I am the thinker.”

So, what kind of thoughts would not get involved in conflict? How about thoughts about, “Where is there stress? What's causing the stress? And what can be done to put an end to that cause?”

Think in those terms, and you're on the path, engaged in what the Buddha calls appropriate attention. You're asking the right questions, and you're framing them in the right way, so that you can get some useful answers.

But if you're not sure about your thinking, head back to the hoop—this body right here—and learn how to inhabit it thoroughly. Learn how to be in the feet, be in the hands, be in the head, be in the torso, be in all parts of the body. A lot of us—because the eyes are up in the head, and a lot of the sensory organs are in the head—tend to think of ourselves as being in the head, and then from the head we look at the other parts of the body. But that's unstable. Your position would be a lot more stable if you were aware of the hand in the hand, if you were in the arm aware of the arm, in the shoulder aware in the shoulder: All the different parts of the body—be in them.

When you can thoroughly inhabit the body like this, then you're a lot more grounded in the present moment. Any winds that come along tend not to create bubbles. So get to know this territory really well, inhabit it thoroughly, and use the Buddha's analysis of its different kinds of elements. That helps you see where there's an imbalance.

In the West, our vocabulary for describing the body as it's felt from within is really impoverished, but we can borrow the Buddha's vocabulary: earth, the solid

or heavy parts; water, the liquid parts, the cool parts; fire, of course, would be the warm parts; wind is the different ways in which energy flows through the body—primarily the in-and-out breath, but also the other winds in the different parts of the body.

Learn to think in these terms so that when you try to settle down in the body and things don't seem quite right, you can ask yourself, "What's out of balance?" You want the body to be like Goldilocks' porridge: not too hot, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light—a place where it feels really good to stay, where it feels natural to stay, where you feel like you've really come back home.

When you're grounded like this, you get a better sense of when is an appropriate time to think, and when is an appropriate time not to think, what are good issues to have opinions about and what are the issues where you know that you don't really know, and so there's no need for an opinion. That, for me, was one of the more liberating parts about going over to Thailand and staying with Ajaan Fuang: realizing there were a lot of issues that I didn't need to have an opinion about anymore.

I'd been raised in an environment where you were supposed to have an opinion about everything, any topic that came up. You were supposed to have an opinion ready, and if you didn't, you were looked down on.

But over there, studying with Ajaan Fuang, having opinions about things where you didn't really know was not regarded as a virtue at all. And I think that's wise. You can avoid a lot of problems that way. It gives the mind more time to be by itself, to be with the body, and not get blown around.

So try to keep the mind grounded in both senses of the term, like the teenager who's been traveling around too much and getting into trouble. You've got to ground the teenager. And then, also be grounded in the sense of feeling really solid, at home, at ease—stable. That's the kind of quality we're trying to develop.

You want a stable mind, and the body is the foundation in which that mind can rest. So do your best to get familiar here. As for the bubbles that may come up, either yours or other people's, you just let them blow past. Don't try to get into them. You're a lot safer that way.