

## *No Who or Where*

*February 16, 2021*

A poet once said that the universe is not made out of atoms; it's made out of stories. And that's true for each of us. Each of us lives in his or her own world, and the world is made up of a lot of stories: who did what to whom, where you've been, where you'd like to go—worlds and identities.

The Buddha puts all of this under the category of *becoming*, and it's our big problem. Becoming is based on desire—you want something—and then you develop an identity around that desire: the “you” who can bring that desire about, and the “you” who will benefit.

Then there's the world in which you have to act in order to bring that desire about. The world will change with the desire. If you want something to eat, certain parts of the house are relevant; other parts are not. If you want to sleep, another part of the house is relevant. At that point the kitchen is not relevant.

So we go through life creating worlds, creating identities, based on our desires. And the Buddha says that this is why we suffer.

So as you sit down to meditate, there will be the identity and the world that got you here: the story, or the part of the story, that says, “It would be a good thing to sit down right now and meditate,” and the part of the world that's relevant to that desire to meditate, that gets you here. Once you're here, though, you want to be able to put all that aside. Because as long as you're thinking in terms of identities and worlds—even if you'd like to destroy the identity, destroy the world—you're going to create more and more becoming. So when you can get out of those terms and just look at things as events—the events that would lead up to becoming if you followed them through—try to stop them simply at the level of events.

This is why the Buddha talks in terms of fabrication, because fabrication comes before becoming. You're engaged in fabrication right here. You've got the breath coming in, going out—bodily fabrication; the way you talk to yourself—verbal fabrication; perceptions and feelings—mental fabrications. And just leave them there. The question of who's doing them and where they're being done—that's the irrelevant part. The who and the where: Put that aside and just look at the events. Try to put them together in a skillful way, but keep it on the level of events as best you can.

This *is* a state of becoming that we're creating as we get the mind into concentration, but the more you can keep it at the level of events, it's a transparent becoming. You get to see the process as it's happening.

It enables you to see the process that happens when parts of the mind want to destroy the concentration and to create other states of becoming. You can see them form, but you don't go into them. That's the important part. You don't even think about "you" going in, as much as possible. Just, there's the state of "entering in"; you say, "No, don't enter in." You want to watch the process, so try to keep things on that level, before they turn into big issues.

When they talk about insight, it's a matter of seeing through these things. The mind likes to create these worlds, and it fools itself when it does. It's like children playing make-believe. You take on different roles—the cops, the robbers, the cowboys, the Indians—and you play in those roles. Then you drop them and you move on to something else. The problem is that there are some roles we take on that we take really seriously. We hold on to them even when they become unskillful. That's what you've got to watch out for. And you watch out for it by learning how to look at things as processes.

So, when you see a thought about the world appearing, remember: The Buddha said, "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." That's what the instructions on mindfulness are all about: looking at "the body in and of itself"—in other words, not in reference to whose body it is; "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world"—not being concerned about where it is. You're thinking more in terms of the qualities you bring to this: ardent, alert, and mindful—mindful to keep in mind just the different categories of events that are happening: breath coming in, breath going out... xx

This is why the Buddha puts so much emphasis on the processes of the mind, because he wants you to get really interested in these processes. How is it that the mind puts things together inside? Is it primarily passive, receiving things coming in from outside? Or is it going out looking for trouble? Primarily, it's looking for trouble. It wants things. It has some ideas about how it can get what it wants. That anticipation is what drives a lot of what we do. So we learn how to turn that anticipation into something more skillful: anticipate that by developing a state of concentration right here and looking at things in more impersonal terms, you're going to benefit.

This is one of the ironies in the Buddhist teachings. There's a point where he's talking to the monks, saying, "Let go of what is not yours"—he talks about the five aggregates—he says, "It will be for *your* long-term welfare and happiness." So he's going back and forth on the line there. On the one side there's a "you" who's

going to benefit, and the other side the question of “Who’s here?” gets put aside. As long as you need motivation, okay, think in terms of, “I’m here to meditate. I’m here to benefit from this.” But try to set your primary focus on, “What’s going on here? What are the processes? What are the steps?”

This is why the Buddha focuses so much on these steps. As for the world, he does have a *sketch* of a worldview, but it’s only a sketch. Even in the longest list of all the devas there are in the cosmos, it says, “these devas, and many others.” Because it’s not his purpose to give an entire account of the world. He discourages people from thinking about who they’ve been in the past, and who they might be in the future, in terms of past lifetimes, future lifetimes. You take the basic principle of rebirth as your working hypothesis, but you don’t want to take it any further than that—except for realizing that, if you’re not careful, you could get reborn in some pretty bad places; and that, when you’re dying, it’s not just a matter of giving up. There’s still work to be done at that point. But as for who you’ve been, as the Buddha said, that’s one of those questions that you just put aside.

So the “who” and the “where”: That’s what we’re trying to get away from, to just see what’s going on, in as clear a way as possible, in really, really basic terms. So if you see any of your personal issues coming up, try to depersonalize them as you’re sitting here. See each issue simply as a thought, a thought world appearing in the present moment.

Then think of the duties of the four noble truths. The four noble truths are not expressed in terms of, “Who’s suffering?” or where the suffering is. It’s just, “This is suffering, and this is its cause”: events. There’s also a path away from suffering. And each of these truths has a duty. The duty with regard to suffering or stress is to comprehend it; with regard to the cause, it’s to abandon it; cessation is to be realized; and that’s done by developing the path.

So when a thought comes up about a place or a story, ask yourself, “Where does this fit in that framework?” If you think in terms of the frameworks of becomings, it’s “Who did what to whom, where?” But in terms of this framework, it’s simply, “Is this stress or is it the cause of stress? Is it part of the path?” If it’s not part of the path, don’t develop it.

So you now have different imperatives, and they’re going to be a lot more effective in helping you than the imperatives you carry around with your stories. You’re learning to see in a new way, as you learn how to focus on events in and of themselves. That way, you undercut the cause of the problem, and that’s how it’s done. If you think in line with the terms that cause of the problem—becoming—saying, “I want to stop this becoming,” the Buddha says that leads to more

becoming. You've got to think in different terms, watch in different terms, talk to yourself about what's going on in different terms.

We spend *so* much time talking to ourselves, and for the most part it just compounds the problem. Learn to talk to yourself in new ways. In line with that chant we had just now: Be your own best friend. Point yourself to worthwhile things. Be sympathetic to your well-being. And then, get to work.