

Surveying the World

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Sometimes it seems like the Buddha had all the fun. In his meditation, he got to survey the world—the whole world. As for us, he tells us when we meditate: Focus on your breath. We don't get to move around that much. We don't get to expand our horizons. We have to *narrow* our horizons.

But those two facts are connected, because when the Buddha surveyed the world, he surveyed it several times. In the first two times, the lesson kept coming back: Look into your present moment. Look into what the mind is doing right here, right now—because that's going to solve the problem you see when you survey the world.

The first time he surveyed it, he saw the world as being like a stream that was drying up. There were fish in the stream, fighting one another over the water. They were all going to die anyhow. It all seemed pointless.

Then he looked around. He said that every place he could look for happiness, somebody had already laid claim to it. If he was going to find his happiness outside, he'd have to fight somebody off, just like the fish. So he looked inside. He saw that there was an arrow in the heart. If you could pull that arrow out, then you'd be free from the suffering.

So the problem is not with the world. The problem is in the heart.

On the night of his awakening, when he surveyed the world again, he had already seen his previous births, going up and down on all sorts of levels. The question was: Was there a pattern? He saw that there was a pattern. All beings pass away and then are reborn in line with their karma. Their karma depends on their views, and their views depend on who they listen to. He also saw the complex way karma worked itself out. It wasn't the case that if you did something this lifetime, it would automatically lead to a certain type of rebirth. What you did was put into your karmic mix. Then, at the moment of rebirth, there were some choices you were going to make that could change your immediate course. So the final upshot of that second survey of the world was: Look at the mind in the present moment, because that's where the important choices are being made.

After his awakening, he surveyed the world again, this time with the eye of an awakened one. He saw beings on fire with the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. But his fires were out. So his relationship to the world was very different this time around. Now he was free. The first time around, there was a sense of terror—*samvega*—because he was trapped in this world. But after his awakening,

he was freed—totally free, to the point where, if he had decided not to teach, he still wouldn't be in debt to anybody. He didn't owe anybody anything. So if he had decided not to teach, nobody could do anything about it.

But as we know, Sahampati Brahma got upset. Here the Buddha had been devoting all that time and energy to developing the perfections to be a teaching Buddha, and now he was going to change his mind. So Sahampati came down and pleaded with the Buddha: "Please teach. There will be those who can understand." So the Buddha surveyed the world again, this time with an eye to see if there was anybody who would respond to his teaching. He saw that there was, which is why he decided to teach, even though it was going to involve a lot of difficulties.

You read the story of his life, even just the section in the Vinaya, and you see all the problems that the monks and nuns created for him—and those were the people who were supposedly his disciples. On top of that, he had to deal with sectarians of other kinds. Here he was, offering them a path to the end of suffering, and they didn't like it. They would attack him. That's the way it is with the human world. There's a lot of ingratitude. But there are people who will benefit from the Dharma. So it's up to us to decide which category we're going to be in, and to take to heart the lessons he learned. With every survey of the world, his focus had to come back into the present moment each time.

So ask yourself: Do you have that arrow in your heart that the Buddha was talking about, the arrow that keeps you running after things that you're going to have to fight for? Kurt Vonnegut could imagine a world in which beings didn't have to feed off of one another, didn't have to compete with one another. But that was just in his imagination. The world we have is one where there's going to be competition. There's going to be struggle, because we all engage in the type of thinking that the Buddha called *papañca*. It's a hard word to translate, but basically it's the kind of thinking that starts with, "I am the thinker." You've taken on an identity, and once you've taken on an identity as a being, you have to feed.

Where are you going to feed? You're going to feed in the world. And guess what? There are other beings out there, feeding in the same world. There's bound to be conflict. So as you take on an identity in that way, you're putting yourself in a position where you have to get into conflict, all because of the way you think.

The trick is to learn how to think in ways that don't involve an identity and don't involve a world. Where are you going to do that? Again, right here in the present moment. As you sit here meditating, you can look at things in terms of "you" as a meditator, successful or not successful. Or you can simply think, "Here are some events: events in the body, in terms of the four properties; events in the mind, in terms of the five aggregates. And what can be done with these things?"

Try to use good perceptions of the breath. They give you an anchor. Then you apply acts of attention and intention. As they stick here, they pay careful attention to what's going on, and you can create a state of concentration. If you can stay on this level, then when you see thoughts that would go out into the world again, you put them aside. Try to stay just on this level of events happening right here, right now. You're doing this to clear the decks, because eventually you'll want to see how those thoughts form—the ones that pull you away, that want to go back to more *papañca*. And from a still mind, you can see what motivates them: the arrow that the Buddha talked about.

So as you're here right now, any thoughts of who you are and what world you're in—just put them aside. You might think of a picture of the globe, covered with one of those “cancel” symbols, the circle with the line through it. No worlds. Just events. That's how you learn to take these things apart, because once those worlds are formed, you either want to maintain them or you want to destroy them. In either case, you're going to have passion for the maintenance or passion for the destruction, and that passion will create more becoming and more becoming. Whereas if you just look at the events that would lead up to becoming, if there has to be a becoming, let it be the becoming of concentration, where you're focused on your inner world, where there's not the conflict, aside from your own inner conflict. But at least you don't have to fight other people off. And you get to see what's going on simply in terms of events.

Learn how to survey this inner world in these terms, and the Buddha promises that you'll be able to get out of that sense of entrapment in the outer world—so that someday, you, too, can survey the world with a sense of being freed from it. If you have something to offer to the world at that point, fine. It's a free gift. But even if you don't, you've still accomplished a great deal.