

Your Sketches vs. the Buddha's

March 30, 2022

Luang Loong, a senior monk I knew in Bangkok, had many duties. One of them was as an advisor to a school for novices upcountry. He told me one time of novice at the school who had a special talent. If you put three dots on a piece of paper, he could connect the dots with one line—he wouldn't take the pen off the paper—to draw a picture of you including all the dots. His likenesses apparently were very good. There was even one time when a princess was invited to the school. They decided to set up a tent for her with a piece of paper on an easel. She was told that she could put three dots anywhere on the piece of paper, and the novice would draw a picture of her based on those dots. So she put them in some fairly impossible spots. But sure enough, the novice did a good job.

You think about how clever it is, but you begin to realize: This is how your mind creates its pictures of reality all the time. It gets a few dots—little facts here and there—and then it can connect them in all kinds of ways. Our problem is that after we've connected the dots in that way, we take the lines to be real. We forget where they came from. Sometimes, our ways of thinking can drive us crazy, but we're convinced of their reality. If the Buddha were to come along and say, "There are other ways you could connect the dots," or "Maybe the dots are irrelevant," we would tend to resist—because our reality is our reality.

But you have to remember: It's just a sketch. It's a cartoon. The Buddha's offering us another sketch. We may complain that parts of our paper that are black are white in his piece of paper. And vice versa. But you have to ask yourself, "What's the sketch good for?" In his case, he said there's a way of looking at things that helps free you, whereas your way of looking at things, even though there may be some truth to those dots, actually ties you down. So it's up to you to decide which sketch you're going to take.

Both are sketches: yours and his. The Buddha's not saying that the sketch he's going to have you adopt is the total picture of reality. After all, with the three perceptions, saying how things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self: Things they do have their pleasant side. You can focus on certain aspects of them and see that they follow certain patterns of behavior that are constant. But if you focus on that, what happens? You get attached to these things, whereas if you look at them as being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you have to arrive at the value judgment: It's not worth it.

So as a way of prying yourself loose from your old way of looking at things, the Buddha first has you look at the fact that it's causing you to suffer. Then he has you do something called guarding the truth, where you ask yourself, "Where did I get these ideas? Where did they come from? Why did I adopt them? What purpose did it serve? And do I really want to continue serving that purpose?" Sometimes the old sketch supports a very unhealthy sense of self. And it can also be very limiting.

So remember, his teachings are not just an attempt to depict reality. There are lots of different ways of depicting reality, all of which have their truth. But if your depiction is tying you down, making you miserable, why stick with it?

In some cases, it's a lack of imagination. You can't imagine yourself thinking or acting in other ways. The thinking and acting get into your breath and affect the way your body feels, which gives them more seeming reality. So one way of dealing with these pictures of reality is to go back and look at your breath. Breathe in a different way. And as you're breathing in a different way, can you look at the body in a different way?

When you read Ajaan Lee's instructions on breath meditation, the sections about the breath energy going through the different parts of the body are really fascinating. But they tend to overshadow another part that's equally important, which is the rhythm of your breathing. Is this a good time to be taking long breathing, or short breathing? Or in long, out short; in short, out long? And how long, how short? Sometimes you might want to forget about the breath in the different parts of the body. Just focus on the length of the breathing, the rhythm of the breathing. See if it can get you out of a vicious cycle where the sense of your body confirms your sketch of the world around you, the sketch that limits what you can do with the body. Try to find some opening for prying things loose.

You may object that the Buddha's sketch is also just a sketch. There are a lot of questions he leaves unanswered. And there's a lot of Buddhist scholarship over the centuries that tried to fill in all the answers to the questions the Buddha didn't ask. But that was pretty wrong-headed. There are reasons why he didn't ask those questions. When we look back at some of the questions that he refused to answer in the Canon, they strike us as quaint. But you have to stop and think: What are *your* questions?—the ones that you're demanding answers for that really don't require answers. Are they going to pull you astray? Ask yourself what purpose these questions serve.

The point of all our sketches is that they're meant to serve a purpose. To make another analogy, they're like maps. Maps are sketches. If a map had all the details

of everything in a particular place, you wouldn't be able to use it. It would be filled with too much clutter. What you want is a map that serves your purpose.

Here again, you can draw all kinds of maps of a particular area. In some cases, you want to draw a map about the different geological layers. In other cases, you want to draw a map of the vegetation; in other cases, a map about the roads, or about the distribution of animals. The same place, but the drawings would all be very different. And as long as they're serving the purpose they're intended for, they're all perfectly good.

But then there are maps that are full of misinformation. Take that Thomas Brothers map that shows McNally Road connecting to Lilac Road. It's hard to tell why they did that. They may have been misinformed. Some people say that the map makers occasionally put mistakes in the map intentionally so that they can trace who's copying their maps without getting permission. At any rate, the map shows a connection that doesn't exist. When the GPS systems came in, they adopted the Thomas map. And try as we might to tell them that No, those two roads do not connect, that the map misdirects a lot of people based on that mistake, they went back and looked at the Thomas Brothers map, and they said, "No, it's perfectly fine." It still causes a lot of trouble for people trying to come to the monastery. So there are good maps and there are bad maps. And even the good maps differ, because they serve different purposes.

What the Buddha's offering is a map that can show you the way out of this wandering on. If you learn how to imagine yourself in that picture of reality, and learn how to let go of some of the things you hold on to very dearly that are very different from the map, then you find that you benefit. So look at your thoughts. Look at your ways of thinking. Look at your ways of breathing, where you say, "It's got to be this way," because it's in your map. If it's causing you to suffer, throw out the map.

Try the Buddha's map. A lot of people have used it and found that it works. Of course, even his maps have their variations. You look at the suttas, and some suttas say that mindfulness comes before discernment. Others say that discernment comes before mindfulness. There's a little bit of variation here and there, but both variations are right.

So when we're looking at the Canon, we're looking at the Buddha's sketchbook. Try to find a sketch that seems to correspond best to what's going on in your mind, and don't be surprised if some details are missing: things that played a huge role in your old maps but are not in the Buddha's map at all, because he says those issues don't matter. Try to give him the benefit of the doubt.