

Meaning & Becoming

June 1, 2022

It happens every night when we fall asleep. Our attention begins to withdraw from the external senses and goes inside. A little world appears. We enter into the world, and then we're gone. We've fallen asleep and gone into a dream world. All kinds of worlds can appear. The process can be pretty random, going from one dream to the next. And there's very little continuity. Occasionally, there will be a dream that refers to a previous dream, or you'll have recurring dreams. But otherwise, it's all pretty random.

This, the *ajans* tell us, is how we go from one life to the next. We withdraw from this world, and another world will appear in the mind. Sometimes many worlds will appear, and we'll have a choice. Sometimes only one, and we slip right in. The process of that world appearing with a possibility for an identity for ourselves: That's becoming. Then entering into it: That's birth.

This makes you realize that rebirth is a pretty scary thing, because look how random your dreams are.

From the Buddha's description, rebirth is even more random. He says it's like throwing a stick up into the air. Sometimes it falls on this end, sometimes it falls on that end, sometimes it falls splat in the middle. And the possibilities for the different worlds we can be reborn in, the different identities we can take on, are more than many. Think about the animal kingdom: all the different kinds of animals there are. The Buddha said the mind's potentials for rebirth are more than that.

We start looking for meaning and significance in the different worlds we enter into, hoping to find shelter, hoping to find security. But remember that passage that we chanted just now: The world is swept away. Every world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge. You have nothing of your own, and we keep going to these worlds because we're slaves to craving.

We hope to invest in something that's going to give us some security or a sense of accomplishment. But look at people's lives. You grow up and then you start growing old. Your faculties get taken away one by one, sometimes more than just one by one. Sometimes they get taken away very quickly. Other times, it's over a long period of time. But things just begin to fall apart. That's the way it is with every world you could go to. This is why the Buddha says the best possibility is to get out, because otherwise as he says, the craving that leads to these processes of becoming is also the cause for suffering.

For becoming to exist, there has to be a kind of clinging. And everywhere there's clinging, there's going to be suffering. You're either clinging to the idea

of a sensual pleasure, or you simply like to fantasize about sensual pleasures and you cling to the fantasies. You cling to views. You cling to ideas about how you should and shouldn't act. You cling especially to your sense of who you are. That sense of who you are can keep changing. Like a hermit crab: It gets in the shell, the shell begins to break or something happens to it, it gets too small, and so the crab moves out to another one, and then another one, another one, another one. And then it dies. In the same way, the different identities you can take on are more than many, and they're all going to involve suffering.

So how do you get out? Well, you decide that, one, you *want* to get out. For a lot of people, that's a tall order right there. They just want to keep coming back. In the sutta where that passage we chanted comes from, there's a king talking to a monk, and the monk makes the king think about how everything he has, even though he's a king, is swept away. His physical strength gets swept away. He says that when he was young, he felt he had the super-human strength. But now he thinks of putting his foot one place, and it goes someplace else. Even though he's king, when he's sick, he can't order his courtiers to take some of the pain that he's feeling and share it among them to allow him to feel less pain. He has to feel the pain all alone. And even though he has great wealth, he can't take the great wealth with him when he dies.

So he's been reflecting on this: aging illness and death; inconstancy, stress, not-self. But then the monk asks him, "Suppose someone were to come along from the east and say that there's a kingdom to the east that you could conquer, and it's very wealthy but it's very weak. Would you go for it?" And in spite of his reflections just a few moments ago, he says, "Sure, I'd go for it." "How about a kingdom to the south?" "Sure." "West?" "Sure." "North?" "Sure." "Across the ocean?" "Sure. I'd go for that one too."

The mind is insatiable. And it's a slave to the craving that makes it insatiable. The Buddha pointed out once that if it rained gold coins, it won't be enough for one person's desires. If you had the Himalayan range turned into gold and then doubled it, it still wouldn't be enough for one person's desires. So, you have to realize: If you get out of the process, you're getting out of slavery.

So what gives meaning to life, what gives significance to life, is when you develop the qualities that lead to awakening. There's a list in the Canon. It doesn't come straight from the Buddha, although each of the qualities is found someplace in the Buddha's teachings, but the list itself came later. It includes generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. When you develop these qualities, they take you out. So, if you're looking for meaning and significance., it doesn't have anything to do with the relationships you develop, although if you want to find what the Buddha calls an admirable friend, someone to helps you develop

these qualities, that's very useful. But a lot of our relationships just go nowhere. As the Buddha said, you would have a hard time meeting up with someone who hadn't been your mother in some previous lifetime, or your father, or your sister, or your brother, or your son, or your daughter. You've had so many different relationships, and they've scattered out. You can come across a complete stranger and tell yourself, "Hey. This person was my mother sometime, but now you look how strange we are to one another." You begin to decide that maybe these relationships are meaningless, aside from what good we can develop, and what good we can help one another develop. But even then, we have to part ways.

When we part ways, there's a lot of sorrow. The tears you've shed over the loss of a mother, the Buddha said, are more than the water in the oceans. The tears you've shed over the loss of a father are more than the water of the oceans, and so on down with all those different relationships. Yet we keep coming back for more. The mind is looking for happiness, but it's looking in the wrong place. It's doing precisely the things that are going to cause more suffering.

So think again about those qualities. Those are where significance lies. Those are where meaning lies. We are creatures of meaning. You hear a story and you want to know what it means. What does it mean to say something "means"? Ultimately, it gets down to the fact that the mind is constantly creating things, constantly doing things, and it wants some guidance.

Think about the different kinds of fabrications that go into this process of becoming. They're the same fabrications that can be used to create a path. There's bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself with directed thought and evaluation; mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings. We turn these into states of becoming all the time. We do that very easily.

The process is very quick, as you've noticed when you fall asleep and enter a dream world. It's almost effortless. But we can take those same things and turn them into the path. Focus on the in-and-out breath. Direct your thoughts to the breath. Evaluate the breath. Use perceptions of the breath and body to help you settle down. Make the breath comfortable, and develop feelings of well-being. That's right concentration—part of the path.

In terms of the qualities called the perfections, that list I gave you just now, this comes under renunciation: looking for happiness in a way that's not involved with sensuality. Each of the factors of the noble path will involve some form of fabrication. So you take these processes: When you hold on to them and try to keep them, it causes suffering. But when you learn how to use them to get out, they form the path.

It's in following that path that you end this crazy paradox where in our search for happiness, we do precisely the things that lead to suffering. We can learn how to use our processes of the mind, the mind's ability to create all kinds of things, and we can create the path out.

The Buddha found this path. Many people have followed his instructions and they found the path, too. It's open to everybody. The Buddha didn't teach it only for Indians or only for members of his caste. He taught it for human beings and divine beings, anybody who's interested, who sees that the normal way of life, the normal way of taking on one becoming after another, is ultimately meaningless, with one exception: using the process of becoming to create the path so that you can go beyond becoming.

As it turns out, in our search for little homes to live in, as we go from one world to the next, we're obscuring precisely the quality that could be our true home. It can give security or, as the Buddha says, it gives refuge, gives shelter, something that doesn't die. It has no aging, no illness, no death, no sorrow. As we focus in that direction, that's what gives meaning to our lives. And when you get there, you realize you don't need meanings any more.

The ultimate happiness is that satisfying.