

The World Does Not Endure

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We often have that juxtaposition in the evening chant, *“The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. It’s insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.”* That’s one contemplation.

And then we chant, *“May I be happy.”*

At first glance, it may feel hopeless. Everything changes so much. Where are we going to be able to base our happiness? But it’s precisely because we want happiness in spite of the world, the way the world is, that we’ve come to meditate.

We’re going to look inside, because as the Buddha pointed out, there’s a potential here for finding true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t change on you, happiness that causes no harm to anyone at all. So, you have that first set of chants to remind ourselves of the reality: There are so many things you try to do in the world and they just get washed away.

So you come to look inside, but the problem is the mind tends to go back and look outside again. So, we have that chant every night before the meditation to remind ourselves that this is what you’re going to find if you go out thinking about the world. It gets swept away. We do this because, as the Buddha said, if you want to get the mind into concentration, there are two things you’ve got to do. One is to keep focused on what he calls the body in and of itself: the body as you have it right here, and not the body in the world. You’re not concerned with how it looks. You’re not concerned with how strong it is, how young it is. You’re concerned just with, “What is it like having a body right here, right now?”

The other thing you’ve got to do is to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. To keep the mind on one topic, you have to remind yourself that there’s nothing out there in the world that’s really worthy of greed or worthy of distress. That’s why we have these contemplations. If you leave right here, where are you? You’re back in the world. Is that really where you want to be? In the four noble truths, as the Buddha explains, the world is not the problem, and it’s not the solution to the problem. The problem is the suffering we have in our minds, and that, he says, comes from within.

We hear the four noble truths so many times, over and over again, that we lose sight of how radical they are. The Buddha’s basically saying the things that you hold on to most dearly are suffering, and the reason you hold on is because of craving. That’s the cause for suffering. You can’t blame your suffering on situations outside. As he points out, if the mind is trained, you can be with any

situation outside and not suffer. If it's not trained, then no matter how good things are outside, you're going to be suffering still.

In the third noble truth, the Buddha says that there is a dimension that's not fabricated at all. It's something you can experience if you train the mind. I know a lot of people who find that hard to believe. "After all," they say, "we're conditioned beings and all we can know are conditions. We can't know anything unconditioned." They start out by defining what you are, whereas the Buddha pointed out that if you define yourself, you limit yourself. You say, "I'm a person, and people are like this and that, and they have these powers. They don't have those powers." You haven't really explored the powers that you have and yet you've already placed limits on them.

The Buddha's approach was the other way around. Experiment to see: What can a human being do? And for the time being, bracket any ideas of who you are, what you self is, and see: How can the mind be trained? What can the trained mind do? He found that the mind can train itself to gain something unfabricated. Then, he turned around and looked at, "Well, what kind of idea of self is going to be conducive to that?" He never formulated a theory of self so much. But he did say in a few sketches that you are capable of doing this, and if you really have concern for yourself, you'll *want* to do this. It's not really a self-theory, it's more like a self-sketch, just enough sense of yourself that, okay, this is going to be a good and worthwhile thing to do.

Finally, in the fourth noble truth, the Buddha says there is a path of practice to take you to that dimension. In the centuries afterwards, people raised the question, "If that dimension is not fabricated, how can a fabricated path of practice take you there?" The solution they arrived at was that, as the Buddha said, this is a path. He didn't say that the path causes the deathless. But it is a path, and the path will take you there, in the same way that the road to the Grand Canyon doesn't cause the Grand Canyon, but if you follow the road, you get there.

So, each of the four noble truths is pretty radical. They challenge a lot of our preconceived notions about ourselves. I was teaching a group of people about karma one time. And this was a group of people who had been to many Buddhist retreats. After the end of the talk, one woman came up and said, "This makes me think that maybe my life has not been pre-ordained by my DNA." I said, "That's right. The teaching on karma is that you shape your life. You have it within your power to shape your life."

The mind is not just a result of physical events. As the Buddha said in the very first verse in the Dhammapada, the mind is the forerunner of all things. All things are achieved through the mind. It's the mind that comes first.

That's the opposite of what a lot of people think nowadays.

So the four noble truths are radical. They ask that you make some assumptions about what human beings are capable of doing, and also some assumptions about where you should look for the causes of your suffering. I know a lot of people who would prefer to blame their suffering on conditions outside. Again, the Buddha said that's not where you're going to solve the problem, because how can you solve the problem by making conditions outside perfect? Is that how you're going to put an end to suffering? When has the world ever been perfect? When is it going to be perfect? It resists perfection. But we *can* make up our minds that we want to find perfection inside. That's a choice we can make, and we can carry it through.

When you think in these terms, it gives you a reason to want to stay with the breath. Then we have those other reflections to remind yourself of why you don't want to go out in the world.

That chant we had just now came from a dialogue between a young monk and a king. The king was curious: This young monk had come from a good family, his relatives were still alive, he was wealthy, and yet he had gone forth. The king was of the opinion that people usually went forth because of poverty or loss of relatives or loss of health. But none of those was true in the case of this monk. "So," he asked the young monk, "Why did you go forth? Why did you become a monk?" And the monk answered with these Dhamma summaries.

The first one: *"The world is swept away. It does not endure."* He illustrated that point with a question to the king, "When you were young, were you strong?" And the king said, "Yes, I didn't see anyone who was my equal in strength." Of course, being a king back in those days meant that you didn't just sit around in the palace with your dogs. You were actually a warrior. "How about now?" "Well, no. Now I'm eighty years old. Sometimes I mean to put my foot one place, and it goes someplace else." The young monk said, "That's why I said the world is swept away. It does not endure." Something you thought was so solid, so reliable, starts failing you.

"The world offers no shelter. There's no one in charge." Here again, he asked the king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king had what was called a wind illness: shooting pains in his body. Sometimes he was so wracked with pain that all he could do was lie in bed. His courtiers and relatives would gather around, saying, "Maybe this time he'll die. Maybe this time he'll die." Imagine that. You're wracked with pain, and that's all they can think of. "Maybe he'll die this time." Then the young monk asked the king, "Can you tell your courtiers and relatives to take some of your pain and share it so that you don't have to feel so much?" "Well, no." The king admitted that he would have to feel all the pain himself. So, even if you're a king, you can't be in charge of your pain. When the pain comes, there's no shelter against it.

Then the statement, *“The world has nothing of its own.”* Here the king argued, “I have treasures stored away in caves and in vaults. How can you say the world has nothing of its own?” So the young monk asked him, “All the treasure you have: When you die, can you take it with you?” “No,” the king said, “I would have to leave it behind.” That’s why the monk said, “The world has nothing of its own.” Your ownership is, at best, temporary. And if you were to ask the things that belong to you, or that you say belong to you, “Who do you belong to?” they would have no sense they belong to you. Even your own body doesn’t have any sense that it belongs to you. It does what you tell it up to a point. But when it decides to stop working, it doesn’t ask permission, doesn’t give you any forewarning. It just does its thing.

So there you are: the teachings, basically, about aging, illness, death, which form the basis for the teachings the Buddha gave on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. As he basically said, “If something is inconstant, it’s going to be stressful. If it’s stressful, is it really worth holding on to as you or yours?” Now, if there were nothing else in the world besides these inconstant things, we’d say, “Well, I’ll hold on the best I can.” But the third noble truth is saying that if you let go of these attachments, you’ll find that there’s a happiness that’s not conditioned, that’s better than the happiness that you can find in the world. Then it’s worth saying, “Let’s try that better happiness.”

But then you get to that fourth contemplation. *“The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.”* The young monk asked the king, “You rule over a prosperous country, right?” “Right.” “Suppose someone were to come from the east and say there’s a kingdom there, with lots of wealth, lots of things you could take, and its army is very weak. You could take it if you wanted. Would you go for it?” And here the king’s eighty years old. He’s just been made to reflect on how inconstant, stressful, and not-self his life has been, along with all the places he’s looked for happiness. Yet still he says, “Yes, I’d go for that.”

This is what’s maddening about human beings. We can see the drawbacks of the world, but we just keep coming back anyhow. The young monk asked the king if there were another kingdom to the south, one to the west, one to the north, how about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean: Would he go for that one too? “Yes.” As long as we’re looking for our happiness out in the world, there’s never enough.

So as you sit here, focused on the breath, remind yourself that this is why we have these contemplations—to cut down any feelers that the mind sends out into the world, saying, “How about thinking about this? You have a whole hour here. Surely you could take five minutes to think about this, that, whatever.” These contemplations are here to remind you: What are you looking for when you look out there? You’re looking for trouble. You’re looking for disappointment. Is that really what you want?

When you can gain a strong enough sense that “At least right now, I don’t need to go there,” then you’re more willing to put in whatever effort is required to get the mind to settle down and feel at home here. As long as the pleasures in the world seem easy and the concentration seems hard, you’re going to sneak off to the easy pleasures. So, you’ve got to keep reminding yourself again and again and again that those easy pleasures come at a big price.

Even though the concentration may seem onerous, don’t think of it as a burden. Think of it just as a skill you’re working on. And those pleasures in the world, no matter how much you think about them, are never enough. Whereas those who’ve completed the path have found that there really is a source of true happiness inside. You get to what they call “the land of enough,” something that doesn’t have to be done for the sake of anything else. It’s the “for the sake of which” for which we practice. We can arrive at completion.

So think about that every time you meditate. It makes it a lot easier to cut off those little feelers that go out: wanting to probe the world here, probe the world there, to see what you can think about here, think about there. Turn those feelers back in. How about probing around in the breath, probing around in the state of your mind, how you’re focused? That kind of exploration is really worthwhile.