

The Larger Picture

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In Lewis Carroll's book *Through the Looking Glass*, there's a character who says he likes to think about three impossible things every morning before breakfast, to clear out his mind. In a similar way, it's good to think about infinity a couple of times a day, about all living beings throughout the universe. It helps to clear our minds as well. When you see things in a larger picture, it's easier to look at your own picture, to take your own problems, your own sorrows, your own difficulties and put them in perspective.

Sometimes when you live with nothing but your problems, they loom very large in the mind and they become overwhelming. But if you see them in light of the problems of all living beings in all directions, it's strange, but it makes your own problems easier to bear and gives you a better handle on how to deal with them.

We can take a lesson from the Buddha's three knowledges on the night of his awakening. The first one was a narrative knowledge, about his own lives. He had been born here, had this name, had this appearance, ate this kind of food, had this experience of pleasure and pain, and then died. Then he was reborn someplace else and went through the same things over and over again. That in and of itself gave him a larger perspective on the difficulties in the one lifetime he was experiencing right now.

From there he went on to the second knowledge, the passing away and re-arrising of all living beings. This was not just his own story, but the story all the beings in the cosmos. He realized he wasn't the only one who had a long line of births and deaths and rebirth and re deaths. Everybody undergoes this process. But seeing everybody undergoing it allowed them to see larger patterns, especially concerning the role of kamma. Then, from seeing the larger patterns, he focused on the present moment to see how he could undo those larger patterns as they played out in the kamma of the present moment.

That was the insight that finally awakened him: focusing back on the present, after having taken that larger view. So as we go through our own practice, it's good to try to take that larger view first. Often we go from our story of who we are and our issues from day-to-day life straight into the present moment, without stepping back to get the larger picture. As a result, we miss a lot of things. We carry a lot of our narrower attitudes into the present moment, our ideas about

who we are, where we've come from, where we want to go. Without seeing those issues in the larger picture, we can create a lot of problems in the present moment.

For example, the simple issue of impatience in the practice: We may have read certain things about meditation, or we may have had an experience in the meditation in the past that's not happening now. The things we've read about are not happening. We read about levels of concentration, levels of mindfulness, and we look at our mind, and it's there for one breath and two breaths, then it's gone. We compare ourselves to what we've read, we compare ourselves to what we would like to be, and we don't like the comparison. It makes us impatient. A lot of our problems are just that: running back and forth between what we remember from the past, what we anticipate in the future. We don't like what we are in the present, and that gets us impatient.

It's not that the Buddha doesn't want us to have goals. The end of suffering is a huge goal. We have to accept where we are at the present moment, and realize that we're not going to get there unless we look very carefully at the present moment.

So you've got to put aside memories of the past, anticipations of the future, and just look at what you've got right now: this breath, this breath. Whatever level of mindfulness and concentration you have, try to develop what you've got. Don't despise it. Don't look down on it, saying, "This isn't enough, I want more," and then trash what you've got. You've got to protect what you've got, you've got to maintain it, even if it's a little, especially if it's a little. You've got to look after it. As for how long it's going to take for this little moment of mindfulness to grow, well, remember, how many lifetimes have you been through so far? An awful lot. It's uncountable. But at least you've got the opportunity right now to push things a little bit in the right direction.

So whether the seeds of mindfulness are large as you'd like them to be, that's not the issue. The issue is that you take care of what you've got. After all, remember: Redwood trees come from little tiny seeds, much smaller than the large seeds that you get from some very small plants. So don't despise the little seeds of mindfulness you've got. Just take very good care of them, nurture each seed as you find it. This breath, this breath, this breath: Be content to be with this breath. When you focus on the present moment like this, this is how things have an opportunity to grow. After all, where did the Buddha find his awakening? In the present moment. After having taken the larger view, he was able to focus down on what he actually had, right here right now. The large view gives you perspective, reminds you that this is a large project you're taking on.

The trick to taking on large projects is to break them down into small pieces and take one piece at a time. If you try to tackle the whole mountain all at once, you find you can't do it. You just get discouraged. And that's it. You'll never get up the mountain. But if you take it one step at a time—and there will be setbacks and other problems along the way; you'll run across crevasses and other problems that you didn't anticipate—but when you take it one step at a time, you find that you can get around each problem.

The larger picture is there to remind you that it is possible. As for whether it's going to take one day or one month or one year or one lifetime or more, don't make that an issue. Just tell yourself that you've got what you've got right now, and make the most of it. Good things will grow from that.

So try to see things in terms of the larger picture and learn what helpful lessons you can garner from the larger picture. Then come back to what you've got here right now. This is how patience is developed. Patience doesn't mean that you simply sit around, saying, "Okay, whatever I've got here is okay and I just have to accept what it is and leave it at that." You accept what's there but then you learn how to develop it. And if the development is slow, or if this stage in the development is slow, learn to accept that fact as well. But keep at it, because what you've got to learn how to accept about the present is not just what's there but also the fact that there's a potential for growth. So much of the talk about acceptance neglects that fact: that we have the potential to learn from each little mistake we make, the potential to pick ourselves up and then move on, and to develop skill step by step by step.

As for our desire for how quickly we want it to be done, again that's referring to the past and the future when you want to focus in on the present. It's that narrative that says, "I want the results right now, because I don't have much time," and although it's true we don't know how much time we have, still, you do have the present moment. And some things take time.

It's like the old story of the person growing rice. You plant the rice grain, and a plant comes up, comes up, one inch, two inches, but you know it has to be couple of feet tall before it gives rice grains, so you pull on it to make it several feet tall. What happens? You pull out the roots and the plant dies. You never get the rice.

If the practice is in a stage where it's going to grow slowly, nurture it and allow it to grow slowly. Be very patient and very careful. The more precisely you focus on the present moment, the more things will grow.

So the larger picture actually means being very precisely attentive to the small picture. This is one of the principles that comes from a complex causal pattern,

like the one the Buddha taught. Large patterns are played out in the very small scales as well.

Focus on the small scale and you find that the larger pattern will take care of itself. The important thing is consistency, that you really stick with it. And don't let yourself get discouraged. That way, what initially may have seemed impossible actually does become a possibility, because you're focusing on the actuality of the potentials you've got right now, and learning how to make the most of them.