

Samsara

January 2002

When we look around outside of us, we see a lot of greed, anger, and delusion, a lot of foolishness. And it gets discouraging. The world doesn't seem to be going in a better direction. It goes up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

And seeing this, there are many times when you want to get out. But then, of course, you look inside yourself and find that you've got the same greed, anger, and delusion, the same foolishness, the same up and down directions in your life, too.

So what do you do? A lot of the issue lies in looking at the whole problem the way the Buddha looked at it. He called it samsara. And in the early Buddhist texts, samsara's not a place. It's a process. It's something people do. You wander on. You wander here, you wander there, you wander around. You create a lot of things, you create your sense of yourself, you create your sense of the world, and you wander through what you've created, creating the next place you'll go.

It's important to look at that in that way. Because if you look at samsara as a place, then there's that whole issue, "Well, if you're getting yourself out of samsara, does that mean you're leaving everybody else to suffer in samsara? Isn't that lacking compassion?"

But if you look at it as an activity—where everybody's creating all kinds of suffering through their own lack of skill—then the issue becomes, "Shouldn't there be more skillfulness in the world?"

Where are you going to start? You've got to start with yourself. You've got to learn how to master those skills yourself. Because on the one hand when you act more skillfully, fewer people suffer. You suffer less, the people around you suffer less. And at the same time, you act as an example to them. You can show them the way that they can stop creating so much suffering for themselves.

So it's not so much a question of getting out of a particular place as simply not participating in unskillful activities anymore. Because the scary thing about seeing all that greed, anger, and delusion out there is that you realize you've got the seeds for the stuff within you as well. And if you don't eradicate them, then no matter where you go, you're still going to carry those potentials with you. You can really be safe only when they've been rooted out. Once they've been rooted out, then you can trust yourself wherever you go. And that's the greatest security there is.

So as we're meditating here, it's not that we're trying to run away. We're trying to learn how to be more skillful in what we do, in what we create.

Because meditation, too, is a process of creation. We create form, we create feelings, we create perceptions, thought-constructs. We even create our consciousness of things. There's an element of intention in all of these aggregates. We create them and then latch onto them. We set ourselves on fire with them.

You might make an analogy of building a big bonfire to burn ourselves. It keeps burning us and yet we keep adding more fuel. We complain about how hot it is and how much it hurts when we get burned, and yet we keep putting more fuel on because we don't know anything else to do.

What the Buddha has us do is to learn to be more skillful about what we create. Instead of creating suffering for ourselves—creating our sense of “me,” “I'm this, I'm that,” out of those aggregates—he tells us to take them and create a path. You work with the body, you work with form, you work with feelings, perceptions, constructs, consciousness. And all of them have a potential for becoming a path.

With form: The word has many meanings, but one of them is your internal sense of the body, the shape you feel sitting here. Focus in on that as your object of meditation. There's a breath moving through that shape. In fact, the breath is actually the basic point where you make contact with this sense of shape and maintain it. If the breath weren't moving, your sense of shape of the body would start dissolving away into a mist.

So you focus on the breath, you focus on form as a topic of meditation, as a topic of absorption, a theme for meditation. Rather than worrying about whether it's a beautiful shape or not, one you like or one you dislike, you just focus in on how it feels from within and turn it into an awakened shape. In other words, when the mind gets focused in on the body like this, it wakes up the nerves of the body. As you're aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, allowing all the sense of tension to relax, the energy starts flowing.

Ajaan Lee compares it to putting an electric current through a wire, through the wires of your body. There's a sense of waking up the elements inside. Once they're awake, they give the mind a good place to settle down, something really comfortable to feed on. If you're going to feed on something, feed on this sense of comfort. Because as he says, the pleasure coming from this ability to get the mind focused and absorbed is a blameless pleasure. It doesn't harm anybody else. It doesn't get in the way of discernment. So use this sense of form as a path rather than as a bonfire to burn yourself.

The same with feelings: You try to focus on where there's a sense of ease in the body and you maximize that. Try to make it steady and then let it flow around through the body in whatever parts the flow can go. That way, you don't feel so impoverished in the present. It's when you feel impoverished that

you go out looking for things outside to make up for that sense of lack. But if you fill the body with a sense of rapture, fill it with a sense of ease, there's much less hunger for things outside.

The same with perception: You learn how to focus your thoughts on the breath. The mental label you keep repeating—"Keep the mind on the breath, mind on the breath, mind on the breath, breath, breath": Take that faculty of the mind that's always labeling things and learn to use it skillfully. Label things that allow the mind to settle down. Once the mind has settled down, then you use the perception of inconstancy or impermanence, the perception of stress, the perception of not-self to pry away your attachments. In other words, notice the places where you tend to cling and analyze them to see that they really aren't lasting, they're really not as pleasurable as you thought they were. You don't really want to hold onto them. There's no need to hold onto them. These are some ways in which you use perception as part of the path.

The same with thought-constructs: The Buddha said that there are basically three kinds that you want to learn about, the three kinds you need to know in order to let go: meritorious, i.e., good or skillful thought-constructs; unskillful ones; and ones that are neither skillful nor unskillful.

Focus on thinking in skillful ways. If the mind has trouble settling down, you think about the Buddha. Think about him in ways that are inspiring. Or if he seems a little too unreal, too superhuman you can think about the Sangha, the noble Sangha.

The word "Sangha" doesn't mean just anybody who sits and meditates. In its noble sense it means people who've got at least to the point of stream-entry. They've had their first taste of the deathless. And when you look at the history of Buddhism, you see that this Sangha includes all kinds of people. Men, women, children poor people, rich people, monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen: All kinds of people are able to do this. Look at yourself: What are you? You're a human being, too. You're a person, too. If they can do it, you can do it. So you just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and go right back to the practice.

If you find lust taking over the mind, you can treat it in two steps: First, just look at the object of the lust from all sides. You'll notice that the lust tends to focus on details. This little detail, that little detail really sets you off. Well, look at some of the other details of the body. Have a more all-encompassing view of this thing that's got you worked up. And when you see it from all sides, inside and out, it gets to the point where you don't really want it anymore.

The second step is to turn around and look at the quality of lust in the mind. Is it a good thing? Is it pleasurable? It always wants you to focus away, as if it's saying, "Don't look at me, don't look at me, look at that over there," but you turn around and you look at the lust in and of itself. Once you separate it from its object and you realize it's nothing that you'd want to hang around

with, nothing that you would want to trust, you can weaken the allure of the lust in the mind.

As for anger, you follow the same two step. First, focus on the object of your anger. Learn how to develop goodwill for the person who's got you angry. You realize again that you've been focusing on certain things and blanking out large parts of your awareness of that person. Well, you try to open up your awareness, open up your mental image of that person. And you realize either that there are other details that are not helpful in keeping anger going at all, or else if the person is just really, really wretched and really mean and nasty, you've got to feel sorry for him. He's going down the straight road to hell. So why would you want to get worked up about a person like that?

Then you turn around and look at the anger in and of itself as an event in the mind. And again, you realize that, as a mental state, it's not something you'd want to trust. It's not something you'd want to cultivate. It's an extremely unpleasant emotion. It, too, is always saying, "Don't look at me, look over there, over there." But you turn around and keep looking at it, looking at it, and after a while you realize that you don't want it. That helps make it fade away.

Another guardian meditation is contemplation of death. This is for when you're getting lazy. You say, "Well, I could meditate more tomorrow or next week," or whatever, "I don't have to do it right now." But you never really know. All kinds of little, tiny things can happen in the body and get it all messed up right here and now. Little changes in your brain chemistry. Little tiny clots in the bloodstream just start wandering around and get lodged here, get lodged there. Weird little bacteria get into a tiny little cut you may have. The next thing you know, you're not in your body anymore. Are you ready for that? Well, if you're not, you've got work to do and you'd better do it now, because these things can happen at any time.

So learn to think in these ways to get yourself back on track. It's not the case that we simply don't think when we're meditating. We bring out our thought-constructs, our thinking processes, and learn to use them in a skillful way.

The same with consciousness. You realize as you sit here that you're registering all kinds of things. There are sounds, sights, smells, tactile sensations. Well, you can choose any of these to focus on.

Right now you focus on the tactile sensation of having a body. Then focus on the feeling of the body as it feels from within, how it feels as the energy flows, how it feels where the energy doesn't flow. And try to hang on right there. That's what you want to be aware of.

What you're doing is that you're taking the five aggregates, which you normally use to burn yourself, and you turn them into a path. It's like taking

wood that you were about to put into a fire and instead you build a bridge with it. Once it gets you to the other shore, you don't have to worry about the bridge anymore. If it happens to get washed away by the river, well, that's okay because you're on the other shore. In the meantime, though, you've got to be very careful about what you're building: You don't want to build a bridge and then, halfway over, start making it into fuel for a bonfire. You've got good raw material here, so learn how to use it properly.

That's basically what the Buddha's saying. Learn how to use it skillfully. Once you've used it skillfully, other people can take it as an example.

So again, it's not that we're trying to get out of a place where everybody's suffering, running off and showing no concern for them at all. It's more that everybody's involved in this big mass of unskillful activity. You can't get other people to be more skillful. Skill is something that each person has to develop for him or herself alone. But you find that as you act more skillfully, one, you suffer less, two, the people around you suffer less, and three, they also have you as an example. They see that, yes, bridges can be built. We don't all have to be sitting here creating bonfires to burn ourselves.

Just that much is a real gift, both to yourself and to those around you.