

A Much Better Place

December 9, 2003

One of the Buddha's more radical insights was that our actions create the world we experience. This applies both to the inner world of our meditation and to the outer world of our senses.

The good news is that if we don't like the world we're living in, we can create a new world. Or we can decide not to create a world at all. The Buddha's teachings push you in the direction of that latter alternative. Looking at the outside world, they focus on the ups and downs.

There's a chant we had last night of the four qualities of the world that led Ven. Ratthapala to ordain and leave home: The world is swept away, the world offers no shelter, the world has nothing of its own, it's insufficient, a slave to craving.

There are also the four worldly dhammas: *loka-dhammas*. Actually, there are eight altogether, but they come in four pairs: there's gain/loss, status/loss of status, praise/criticism, pleasure/pain. We don't like to think of these things as pairs that have to go together. We like to think we could have the gain and the status and the praise and the pleasure without the other side.

But wherever these four things exist, the other four have to exist as well. The point here being that we should think about these things as pairs and see them as they work out in our lives, realizing that this is basically what the world is made up out of. This is what the world has to offer. It gives and it takes away. There comes the question: Do you really want what it has to give if it's going to get taken away?

There's another teaching where the Buddha attacks the whole problem of the world from another direction. Instead of looking at the results of building worlds, he looks at the raw materials: what are you making them out of?

Well, there's nothing but your sense of sight and the actual sights you see, your sense of hearing and the sounds you hear, and so on down the list of the senses. When you look at those basic building blocks, there's not much. Sights come and go, sounds come and go, smells come and go. And yet it's out of these coming-and-going things that we create our sense of a big solid world out there, of a place in which we live.

One of the purposes of meditation is to start taking that sense of place apart. They talk about the experience of nibbana where there's neither here nor there nor in-between, but how do you get from here to that place of no place at all?

Partly it's through the kind of contemplation of the world that these texts

advise. You can look at the basic building blocks and see that there's really nothing much there: How can you build a solid place out of these fleeting things? Then you look at the other end: What does the world have to offer? Things that change, things that come and go, are given and taken away. And it's never enough.

So the Buddha advises that you turn around and look at where you think you are right now. It's usually the sense that you're someplace here in the body. So focus on that.

Focus on that awareness of the right here, right now. Start really looking very carefully at that, because it's right there that you can break through to a place of no place. But before you can do that, you have to get a very strong sense of being right here, being with the breath. Often, as you get more and more focused on the breath, there's a very strong sense of becoming one with the breath. You're in the same place together. And for the time being, that's fine. Because as you get to know this place, you get to know all kinds of things. But you want your awareness to fill this place.

How do you get it to fill it? You start with one spot. It could be the tip of the nose, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, the palate, the middle of the head—any spot where you find it easy to stay focused. Then try to think of what's next to that spot. And then go out in a widening circle from that particular spot. But before you do that, try to get a sense of comfort in the major spot, because that's what you want to spread: a sense of ease that seeps out.

Some people find it easy to focus on their awareness as it spreads out to fill the body. Other people find it easier to focus on the body first. What's right next to your spot, what lies right around that spot that you've chosen? Then what lies around that? And keep moving out, moving out, moving out.

And although your awareness of the body begins to expand, your sense of the body at the same time gets more detailed. What you're doing as you move out is that you're relaxing the little muscles in your blood vessels. From the major blood vessels, you go to the smaller ones and then the smaller ones and the smaller ones. There's a paradoxical sense of getting more and more detailed as your awareness gets more and more expanded.

What you normally do is that you close off large areas of your awareness of the body in order to think of this, think of that, those places where the mind likes to travel. If you didn't close off different parts of your body like that, you couldn't go. So by shutting them off, you're free to travel.

Now, as you're meditating, you don't want to travel. So focus on letting things open up, even the little tiny things here: the sense of the capillaries down in your fingers, down in your toes, all over the body.

So to get to that place of no place, you have to settle into this place right here. And then, from this place, you can look at what you've got around you. You find that you're a lot safer as long as you maintain this sense of inner place, being located inside right here. As soon as you go stretching out to identify with something outside, you're opening yourself up for all kinds of suffering.

As the Buddha said, there are different kinds of people: those who can see the danger coming before it comes; and then there are those who have to be slapped in the face with a danger before they realize, "Yes, this is dangerous here!"

Of course, it's best for us to see ahead of time the danger of identifying, say, with forms, feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness, all the things that go into making up our sense of the world—either as the building blocks or as the big structures that get built out of them.

You realize as soon as you stretch yourself into these buildings, they could collapse on you at any time. You're safer not going into the buildings. Sometimes, though, we have to have a couple buildings fall on us before we realize how dangerous they are.

But in order not to get overwhelmed by that experience, you need the strength that comes from keeping the mind centered. Even if you can't keep it in here all the time—if you find yourself slipping out and wanting to live in this building, that building, this world, or that world—do your best to maintain this inner sense of strength, this inner sense of well-being.

That way, when those outside buildings collapse, you're not totally wiped out. You're up for the challenge of learning how not to do that again, learning how not to identify with that particular spot, that particular place, that particular mental construct. Otherwise, without that kind of energy, you get totally overwhelmed. Challenges come and you're just not up for them.

So it's important that you develop this sense of inner strength, even if you can't maintain it all the time. Work at it as much as you can. It's the strength that allows you to deal with the sufferings of life and at the same time to find a way out—to be up for the challenge in such a way that you're not creating more trouble for yourself but you're actually finding a way out of the trouble.

Because a lot of the practice is a practice of shedding, putting things down.

It's like the difference between being a person who's eating in order to put on weight and one eating in order to lose weight. Your attitude toward food gets very different.

If you're really into the dieting, there's a sense of accomplishment that comes from being able to give up certain things, to do without certain things. You feel that you're healthier and healthier as you do it.

As for the people who are trying to put on bulk, they're constantly afraid that they're not going to absorb enough and keep enough. Anything can happen to make the body shed weight. So they're constantly trying to hold on, hold on, hold on: add on to more things, lay claim to more things. It's a very desperate mental attitude.

The attitude of learning how to do without, though—and this is not just with physical things but also doing without all kinds of other things you find that you've been identifying with and yet are opening you up to suffering—as you learn to let go, you're feeling healthier and stronger. You're not opening yourself up to the attacks of these worlds or the collapses of the worlds that you've been creating. You're not wasting your energy trying to create more.

This way, the energy of the mind gets more and more concentrated. And this inner sense of your spot, your space that you've been identifying with, gets stronger and stronger all the time—at the same time getting more precise, so that you can begin to see what this is made up of as well.

But don't be in too great a hurry to take this particular center apart. You want to learn how to hold on here so that you can let go of things outside. It's only when the things outside are taken care of: That's when you can turn around and start taking this inner world, this inner spot, apart as well.

Ultimately, there is no "here" or "there" or "in-between" in the mind. That sense of being in the body or the body being in the mind or whatever: Ultimately that goes. When that goes, then any sense of being oppressed either by being in the world or by the world being in you: That goes away, too. It has no basis.

But before you get at that spot—before you can get to that spotless spot, let's put it that way—try to maintain this spot as much as you can. Let it grow. Let it develop roots, so that when the world gets swept away, you're not swept away along with it. When gain comes, when loss comes, you don't get involved with them. Because you've got a much better place right here.