

Creating a New Self

July 8, 2016

As I've said many times before, the mind is like a committee. It's got lots of different members. Each member lives in its own world, has its own ideas about what's going to lead to happiness. Sometimes they actually have meetings, and other times they just move in and move out. But their worlds are pretty impervious to each other. Because each member of the committee has an idea of what's important in the world and what's not important in the world. Some members are pretty outrageous; others are more reasonable. The outrageous ones tend to live in pretty distorted worlds.

This is what the Buddha calls becoming. Each self or sense of self you have also has a sense of the world. And because the self is formed around a nucleus of desire, what's relevant in that world or that particular world is going to be what's relevant to that desire—either things that help it along or things that get in the way. So you find as you go through the course of the day that not only your sense of you but your sense of the world around you is going to change quite a lot. You have to do what you can to make sure that your sense of the world is realistic.

When you're in a world, it seems perfectly normal. But from the point of view of another self and another world, it may be very distorted. Now, the fact that we have so many selves can cause a lot of confusion in the mind. But we can actually learn how to use that fact to our advantage. This is what we're doing as we're meditating—we're developing a new self: the meditator, the one who's more firmly grounded in the present and has a better grasp of what's actually going on. Because the meditator can see the other selves as processes—and see those other worlds as processes, too. It does what it can to break the bubble of the really unskillful ones.

The unskillful worlds tend to be really resistant—they hold on. Partly because deep down inside they know that if they took a dose of reality, they would dissolve. But for some reason, you still hold on to that particular view of the world or a particular view of yourself.

The self that feels wounded or wronged: That's one of the most difficult ones to get past, because there's a certain satisfaction in playing the victim. Whatever anybody does to you has to be bad because you're wounded or you're wronged. That way you can justify a lot of things to yourself. But whatever the sense of self, if it gets impervious, you've got to do your best to break into it.

I was talking to someone a while back who was saying that people don't really talk to one another, there's no way you can really communicate, because each of us lives in our own world and we're very protective of what we'll take in and what we won't. But as I pointed out to him, the Buddha was very perceptive. He saw that in each of those worlds, there is some suffering—there's always something wrong in that world. If you can admit to yourself that there's something wrong in this world, that by inhabiting this particular world or taking on this particular identity, there's going to be suffering, or there *is* suffering as I do this. And you can't blame it on other people; you've got to blame it on the fact that you've chosen this desire and have chosen this view of the world and have chosen this view of yourself: If you can admit that, then there is a possibility of communication, of taking that world apart. The suffering provides the opening that allows new ideas or new information in.

So this is what you've got to do as a meditator: You have to look at the particular worlds you're inhabiting and see which ones are creating suffering. And apply the process that the Buddha recommends. One, see that this particular world will arise and it will pass away. You want to see, when it arises, what's arising with it. That sense of self and that sense of the world that the self inhabits tend to arise together, and they arise with a particular desire. The desire comes because you feel you're lacking in something. You want to be able to identify that—to see how that desire is related to the suffering inherent in that world.

Then, When the desire goes, the world will dissolve. We don't see this process clearly because often we're just too busy moving on to the next desire and the next world and the next self that goes with that.

So one of the purposes of grounding you in the breath right here is to have the breath as a different world, your awareness with the breath as a different becoming, you in a different place. You're right here. And as you get more and more a sense that this is the normal place to be, then the mind when it's clearly

aware in the present moment, just with the breath, becomes the default mode. This helps you get a better perspective on the distortions in the other worlds and also the stress and suffering in those other worlds.

This is one of the reasons why we emphasize that it's really important to have a sense of ease and well-being as you're focused here. Because as we all know, when you're hungry, things don't look the way they really are. Everything becomes a potential food. You start seeing things in a distorted way. So try to feed the mind as well as you can with a sense of ease with the breath. Then, when you find another world moving in, you can see it for what it is: "This is based on this desire, and it's based on creating this kind of stress and this kind of suffering. Do I want it?"

This is where you get into the Buddha's next two steps in the analysis—you look for the allure and you look for the drawbacks of that world. What pulls you into that world? Sometimes it'll be the narrative that you build up around that particular desire.

I was reading about a psychologist who was studying people's attitudes as to what makes them happy, and he began to realize that people had very unrealistic ideas about what was going to make them happy. He thought it was very peculiar. But then he reflected on himself—he liked to climb mountains. And he realized that while he was climbing mountains, he was miserable. When he reached the top of the mountain, there wasn't much of a sense of accomplishment—just "Oh, that's all?" Then he'd go back down. Yet as soon as he got back from the mountain trip, he couldn't wait for the next one. Even though he was miserable in the midst of it, his mind had created a mystique around mountain climbing.

This is the way a lot of us are: We have some strange ideas of what's going to make us happy. So the Buddha wants you to actually look: Okay, what's the allure of those things? What's your reason for wanting to like something?

Then look at the drawbacks. When you actually have that experience, what is it? Is it good? What's the cost? Our minds tend to be pretty bad at doing this kind of cost/benefit analysis. Think of those billboards they used to have on the road into Las Vegas, where they bragged that they had a 96% pay back rate. People would look at the boards and they'd still drive into Vegas. The boards were

basically saying, “You give us a dollar, and we’ll give you 96 cents back.” And yet people still flocked to Vegas in droves.

So again, one of the purposes of meditating is to put you in place where you can look at things as they really are, and do a genuine cost/benefit analysis of your different selves and the different worlds you inhabit.

Be particularly careful about the selves that play into self-justification. Those have the toughest arguments; they have the hardest shell. But they also cause an awful lot of suffering.

When you can see that the cost is not worth the effort that goes into it, that’s when you look for the escape. The Buddha says it’s basically learning to develop dispassion for those different worlds, for those different selves. And it’s that realization—it’s not worth it: That’s when you really let go. All too often, we’ll see the costs at one time and the benefits at another time, but we don’t put them next to each other. We have some selves in our stable here that we don’t like, and yet they seem to have power—they keep coming back. That’s because you haven’t really seen their drawbacks. Or if you have seen their drawbacks, you don’t think about their allure at the same time. Or you see the allure and that just blots out the drawbacks. You have to learn to put the two of them together—at the same time. You see, “Oh, this is why I go for this and it’s dumb.” There is a definite allure there. If you don’t see the allure, you’re never going to be able to get past it.

So try to inhabit this space here with the breath as solidly as possible so that you can see those different selves as strangers. This requires that you have a strong sense of yourself as a meditator.

I was reading about someone talking about how meditators are taught to meditate, that whatever comes up in the mind, you just look at it as neutral—whether it’s good or bad, you just be neutral about it and try not to pass judgment on it. You can develop a strong sense of depersonalization and alienation that way, because there’s no place where the mind can land. It may sound like wisdom, but it’s actually very unhealthy. What you really want, as you get with the breath, is to have a very strong sense that this is where you really belong, and it’s good to be here, and this is a more reliable self—so that you *do* have a place where you can stand.

And, yes, you are passing judgment. Because normally as soon as you jump into a new self, is that you're saying Yes unquestionably. If there's something not good about it, then you just drop it, and go running for another one. It's like jumping from one relationship to another. When you're on a rebound from a bad relationship, you're going to take anything, regardless. And it's the same way with the different selves in the mind. You find yourself in a bad self and you just drop it, and run for whatever else comes up. Try to be more discerning, and you do that by holding on to yourself as a meditator. Having yourself as a meditator gives you a good safe haven to go—it's your safe space.

It's also your safe space as you're dealing with other people. Because remember that other people have lots of committee members as well. And you never know which member you're going to be meeting up with at any particular time. Sometimes a bad member in that other person's committee will spark the bad members in your committee. You can't be responsible for the other person, but you *can* be responsible for yourself.

So make sure that you stay with your healthy sense of self that you're developing here as a meditator. At the very least, no matter how the relationship goes, you'll come out safe and you won't be doing anything to aggravate the other person more than you have to. Your mere presence might aggravate them, but then there's nothing you can do about that. But what you can do is to make sure that the self you're inhabiting is on an even keel and as close to reality as possible.

So we are developing a good self here—one that we can rely on. It gives us a better position to look at the other selves we've been taking on, all the different worlds we've been taking on, and get a better and better sense of what they are. When you're trying to get insight, it's precisely here, seeing why you go for a particular self, why you go for a particular world, what kind of desire is behind it. That way, you get a better sense of which of the selves you want to keep in your stable and which ones you want to let out to the pasture.

So try to get firmly based here, right here at the breath—just your awareness and the breath, together, with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Because this is the self that's going to be able to sort everything else out. This is the world—the world of the present moment—that allows you to see all those other worlds for what they really are.