

Big Things in Little Things

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Sometimes it seems as if the Buddha is the one who has all the fun. After all, he's the one who gets to survey the world in his meditation.

Before he started on his quest he surveyed the world, and in his vision the world was like a stream that was drying up. It was filled with fish fighting one another over the water. He looked around and he didn't see anything that was not laid claim to. He felt a very strong sense of *samvega*.

After his awakening, he surveyed the world again: He saw beings on fire with the flames of passion, aversion, and delusion. He saw beings totally deluded, claiming, as he said, disease to be a self.

The Commentary also tells us that every day the Buddha surveyed the world to see who was ready for the teaching on that day.

But when we come to meditate, what does he tell us to do? Sit down and look at your breath. Know when the breath is long, know when the breath is short: That's where the breath meditation starts. Why does he have us focus on such little things? It's because the little things contain the big things. The breath in particular, is your anchor in the present moment.

As the Buddha saw as he surveyed the world, the big problem is that people have no control over their minds. Their minds are what's shaping their experience, and their minds are in horrible shape. And when the shaper is in bad shape, then of course the experience is going to be shaped poorly, too.

So we're focusing on the little things of the mind, the same way that a carpenter would focus on his tools. If you're a carpenter, you have to spend a lot of time sharpening your saws, making sure your tools are properly balanced. It seems like you're wasting a lot of time that could be spent in building things. But no, the time is not wasted at all. You want your tools to be precise, so that when the mind moves, you know what it's doing.

The reason we fight one another over things, the reason we call disease a self, is because the mind doesn't know what it's doing. It thinks it's gaining an advantage, but it's not seeing things clearly. So this is the first order of business: Get your mind so it can see things clearly. Sharpen your tools, and then look carefully at what's going on inside.

We've talked about how the Buddha describes your present experience in terms of three kinds of fabrication. There's bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath; verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation, the way you talk to yourself; and then mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions. These are things you experience directly as you meditate. You're focused on the breath, you direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate

the breath, you use perceptions in order to maintain your anchor with the breath and create a feeling of ease around the breath.

But when the Buddha defines these terms, he doesn't define them in ways that apply only to meditation. They're defined in ways that apply to your whole life, your experience as you go through the day. Now, there's another context where the Buddha talks about three kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—and there he's referring to your bodily karma, verbal karma, and mental karma that lead to a new rebirth. I know one scholar who says you have to realize that these are two totally radically separate sets of fabrications and that we shouldn't confuse them. But that's missing the whole point: The whole point is that by focusing on the three types of fabrication in your meditation, you get to see the larger forces that are shaping lives, this life and onto other lives. You see how they get started right here. Instead of having to follow them through many lifetimes to see where they go, you can watch them right here in the present moment.

The worlds that the Buddha was surveying come from right here. All those worlds of suffering, all those worlds of delusion come from the fact that we're deluded right here. So the only way to end our delusion is to look very carefully *right here*, try to solve the problem *right here*. So even though right here may seem like a very small place, and the things we're focusing on may seem very minor, they have larger implications. It's from these small things that the bigger things grow.

You look around the world and you get a sense of samvega. Well, what does that world come from? It comes from bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication. You got into this world because of things you did with your body, things you did with your words, things you did with your mind. So did all the other beings in this world. And the way to get out is not to destroy the worlds; it's to go back and look at where they get created, which is right here in the present moment: out of the way you breathe, out of the way you talk to yourself, out of the feelings and perceptions you hold in mind.

So the focus may seem narrow and small, but it's not as if you're turning your back on the larger issues. You're learning to look at the right spot, to solve the problem at the right spot. If you let your mind wander away from this spot, you're going to get lost in whatever worlds get created. So every now and then, when you do your own surveying of the world and it looks pretty miserable, come back here.

Our society's going through what you might call a stress test right now, as they do with heart patients. They put you on a treadmill and they make your heart work hard to see how it responds to stress. Our society seems to be responding very poorly to stress. But why is that? It's because people don't know what they're fabricating. Their attention is off someplace else, not at the process itself, not where it's being done.

So the ideal way of reflecting on the world and surveying the world is doing it in such a way as to bring your attention back right here, realizing that if the problem is going to be solved, it's going to be solved right here.

As the Buddha said, if you fabricate things in ignorance, they're going to lead to more suffering. If you do the processes of fabrication with knowledge, they become a path out. So keep your awareness focused right here.

This takes time, and it takes focus and patience. Like the carpenter sharpening his saw: Each little tooth on the saw has to be just right. The difference here, of course, is that the carpenter doesn't have to know the teeth more than enough to know that they're sharp enough to do the job. But here, as you work with your tools—the breath, the mind commenting on the breath, visualizing the breath to itself—you get to look directly at where the big problems come from and you can solve them before they get big.

As you survey the world, remember that it all comes out of right here. So bring your focus back here, with a sense that this is where the real work is accomplished. And however long it takes, it's all good work. The Buddha would never have you focus your attention away from the places that really matter.