

Worldly Narratives

March, 2002

The chant we had just now—on aging, illness, and death—was precisely the reflection that led Prince Siddhartha to leave home and go into the wilderness. He realized that even though he had youth, power, wealth, beauty, and sensual pleasures of all kinds, still it was going to end. And he knew that no matter how good it got, the question was: What was he going to do in order to keep it going when it started to slip from his grasp?

We see this all around us. People with wealth who suddenly feel their wealth is slipping out of their grasp, and the question is: What did they do to get the wealth to begin with? And, what are they going to do in order to maintain it? Sometimes you can start stooping to some pretty low things. The same goes with power and all the other delusions that we put ourselves through around youth, beauty, and our sensual pleasures. The question is, what happens when those things leave you? There's a huge sense of emptiness—not only in the sense of loss, but also in the sense of how empty those things were all along. Then you look back on what did you do in order to maintain those empty things.

That was when he couldn't stand to stay in the palace. He had to get out. After he gained awakening, he recommended that everybody think on these topics, "Every day," he said. Whether you're a layperson or an ordained man or woman: These are the reflections that keep everything in perspective.

When you're out in daily life, it's so easy to lose perspective. That's why practicing in daily life is not just a matter of what techniques you do in order to maintain mindfulness and your attention on the breath. It's also a matter of having a perspective on things. Exactly how important are the things that are happening around you?

You have to realize that it's very easy to get sucked into the narratives of the day and to believe a lot of the assumptions that are being held by the people all around you. When you hang around certain groups of people, you tend to pick up their ways of looking at things, their ways of believing the shorthand assumptions that everybody has and that we tend to blind ourselves to, because everybody has them. They become so common that they don't seem remarkable. But if you learn how to mentally step out of those assumptions, you begin to realize how ridiculous a lot of them are.

That's probably the most important thing you can take back with you when you leave a place like this: a sense of perspective. One way of maintaining perspective is to repeat whatever reflections you can remember, in order to not get sucked into the beliefs that tell you that youth, beauty, wealth, and power

are important. Or that the activities of the young, the beautiful, the powerful and the wealthy are worthy of your interest. You've got to keep the Buddha's reflections in mind.

While you're staying here, these are the reflections that help keep you here. And *here* means not only the place at the monastery, but also right here at the breath. Because it's so easy to get caught up in the narratives that you spin about, "Well, how about if this happened? Or, how about if that happened? Or, I wished that had happened. I wish this had happened." That's the mind just creating worlds for itself right here and now. Again, the Buddha reminds you, no matter how wonderful the world, it all comes down to this: aging, illness, death, and separation.

Then there's the whole issue of karma: What did you do in order to maintain those things before they left you? That's what you'll be left with: the results of your actions, the imprint that they leave on the mind and the worlds they create for you.

Here in the West, we tend to have trouble with the Buddha's teachings on rebirth. But the Buddha wasn't the sort of person who'd teach things just because other Indians believed them at that time. He saw, through his own practice, that this was an aspect of truth that's useful to reflect on.

We all know the story about the handful of leaves. He goes into the forest, picks up a handful of leaves, and asks the monks, "Okay, which is more: the leaves in my hand or the leaves up there in the trees?" Of course, the leaves in the trees are much more than the leaves in his hand. Then he says that the leaves in the trees can be compared to what he came to realize in the course of his awakening. The leaves in his hand are what he taught about the four noble truths. The reason he taught those truths was because they were useful for putting an end to suffering.

So, as he said, he wasn't the sort of person who would teach things just because other people believed them. He taught rebirth because it's a really useful truth, in the sense that you reflect on how what you're doing with your mind, the worlds that you create with your mind, become the worlds that you're going to have to live in. And they all end in aging, illness, and death.

So you use the reflection on aging, illness, and death to see that the narratives you create with your mind are, in the Buddha's technical terms, nothing but *sankharas*. They're mental fabrications. And as long as the mind is going to fabricate, you'd be better off using mental fabrications to bring the mind back to where it should be. Reflect on how no matter how good the world gets—you could become President of the United States and have all the power in the world—but then what happens? You tend to abuse the power, you tend to get carried away, you tend to get swollen up, as we see happening so often. And then what are you left with? Memories of what used to be, along

with that huge burden of karma you created and that now you're carrying around.

So it's part of the Buddha's wisdom that if sankhara, this process of mental fabrication, is a problem, the only way to get out is not just to tell yourself to stop thinking. It's to tell yourself to start thinking in ways that are useful, that bring the mind back to the path. When the Buddha analyzed suffering in his first sermon, he said that it comes down to clinging to the aggregates. In the second sermon, he brought in the aggregates back again, but now as topics of reflection. The process of reflection itself is a mental fabrication. In this case, the reflection was to take these things apart: Exactly what in there is you or yours that you really can hold on to, that you really can find has any substance? Well, nothing.

So you peel these things away. You use the process of fabrication to peel away your attachment to fabrications. Use the process of fabrication to create states of concentration in the mind. That's what the path is: a type of fabrication, but it's skillful fabrication.

There are certain aspects of the Buddha's teachings that are non-dual but, when you're getting on the path, dualism is very important. There are skillful ways of thinking and unskillful ways of thinking. You learn to encourage the skillful ones and drop the unskillful ones. See how far the skillful ones take you, and only then should you let them go.

The Buddha talked about the turning point in his path, when he finally got on the right path. And one of the first steps was just to sit and look at his thinking processes: Which ones are skillful and don't lead to harm, and which ones are unskillful and do lead to harm? If he found that a thinking process was unskillful, he did what he could to check it. The activity of checking: That's a kind of thinking process as well. As for skillful thoughts, he allowed himself free rein. He just kept mindful of them to make sure they didn't start going out of bounds. Then he began to realize that even skillful thinking can tire the mind. That was when his mind was ready to settle down.

So meditation is not just an activity of stopping your thought processes. You have to learn how to think a little bit more skillfully first before you can stop thinking. Even in the first stages of jhana, there's directed thought and evaluation. It's a type of thinking: skillful thinking, thinking that keeps you with the breath, keeps you getting more and more absorbed in the breath. But it's still a thinking process, an intentional process.

It's through learning how to use your intentions wisely that you really get in touch with what your intentions are in the present moment. If you tell yourself you're just going to be with the present moment and not make any intentions, what happens is that your faculty of intention goes underground where you can't find it. It's like saying, "Okay, I'm just going to let the breath

come in and out on its own, and I'm not going to do anything to influence it." The factors that influence it can then go underground.

So if you allow yourself consciously to play with the breath, experiment with what this kind of breathing is like, what that kind of breathing like, you get more and more in touch with what your intentions are in the present moment. What used to be an unconscious process becomes a conscious process. When it's conscious, you can see it—see it in terms of cause and effect, see where it's skillful, see where it's unskillful—and can choose that make a difference. You start peeling things away as they come up into sight.

So you use the process of fabrication—which in the past you clung to as yourself, and all these narratives you thought about—and you turn that same process into a tool to take the narratives apart. Where do these narratives usually go? They all end in aging, illness, and death. There's no narrative anywhere that doesn't end in those things if you carry it out to its real conclusion. But if you just think in those terms, it just starts getting depressing, so you also use the process of fabrication to create a good state of solid well-being in the mind. That's what we're doing as we use our mindfulness and alertness to get down with the breath, get solidly established here, so that there's a real sense of well-being right here, right now. This way, when you're letting go of your old attachments, it's not out of aversion or hatred. It's more out of a sense of growing up. You've got something better to do with your time.

When you get more and more firmly established in the state of concentration, then you can use your perceptions and thought-constructs to start taking even that apart, to see what attachment there is to this state of quiet, this state of calm, this open, spacious state that comes with the concentration. Start taking that apart as well. Then you finally get to a point where they say you, "incline the mind to non-fabrication." And that's what heads you in the direction of awakening.

So, there are many steps in this process of peeling away the layers of the mind, like layers of an onion. It's not just that you say, "Okay, stop thinking. Put the mind into a meditation technique, like putting it into a factory, and hope that the technique will do everything for you." You have to use your own powers of sensitivity. Ask yourself, "Okay, which constructs are skillful, which ones are unskillful?" Learn how to side with the skillful ones as you take your attachments apart and at the same time develop good strong states of well-being in the mind.

Then, ultimately, you take apart the path as well, and that's what leaves the unfabricated: something that goes beyond time and space, beyond the present moment.

Our experience of the present moment is something that's fabricated, too.

In fact, it's interesting to note that when the Buddha explains dependent origination, sankhara, fabrication, comes before the other aggregates, it comes before our awareness at the six senses. This is one of the reasons why it's so difficult to uproot this process, because it's so basic, it lies so deep in the mind. Even before we experience things at the eyes and the ears and the nose and all our other senses, there are little narratives that go on in the mind, trying to make sense of everything before we've even experienced it, to filter things out before they even get to us. This is why this is such a difficult process to uproot, because it is so basic and lies so deep.

So, what we do is we turn around and learn to use the process in a more skillful way, so that it leads not to aging, illness, and death, but out of them.

That's the skill that the Buddha taught. And this is one of the reasons why the question of perspective is so important, because it's prior to everything else. This is why we have to drum it into our minds every day, every day—aging, illness, death, separation, and the principle of karma—so that that becomes the ordering principle in our lives. That becomes prior to everything else. That way, as the mind processes experience, it's got this little reminder, "Don't let yourself get carried away! Because if you let yourself get carried away, this is where things end up."

This keeps the mind headed in the right direction. If it's not headed in the right direction, it's headed all over the place. The process that we call samsara doesn't go any particular place at all. It just keeps circling around, back and forth, then tying itself up in knots, and going off someplace else, then coming back. It doesn't really go anywhere. The only real direction there is in life comes when you decide to give yourself a direction: out. Out of the process, ending the process, using the process to deconstruct itself. And then you're free.