

Beyond Imagination

February 13, 2023

In the multi-kuṭi we have a penguin calendar. And this month's penguin—apparently it's a crested penguin—looks like a penguin punk: red eyes, lots of feathers around its head. It looks like a punk hairdo. A punkuin. Imagine some animal wanting to look like that.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha said that the mind is more variegated than the animal world. Think of all the different species of animals, different kinds of lives they live, different kinds of bodies they have, the things they find attractive. And the Buddha said it all comes from the mind.

Your mind is capable of all that kind of stuff too. You've been fortunate enough to land a human birth this time. But it's not for sure where you're going to go next time around. The course of the mind can get very, very strange sometimes.

There's another passage where the Buddha says the mind is more variegated than a moving picture show. You might say, "Wait a minute. They didn't have movies back in those days." But they did have something called a moving picture show. They'd set up a lantern, then take some substance which was very much like clear cellophane, on which they would paint pictures. And then, using a lantern, they would cast the image of the picture on a wall, and then have shadow puppets moving through that landscape. So it was a big screen, basically, with things moving around: all kinds of things, all kinds of imaginary cities, countrysides. And again, the mind is more variegated than that.

We're very creative—and unfortunately, it's usually creativity that ends up in suffering. We're creative in the ways we suffer, because every life we could create ends in aging, illness, and death, separation, over and over and over again. There's that chant that we often recite: "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to me."

What do we have left? We have our kamma. The Buddha says if you reflect on that, make sure to be skillful in your kamma: what you do, say, think. But then he has you go on: Think about all the beings in the world. No matter where you could be reborn, even if you went to the highest level up there with the Brahmas, you'd still be subject to aging, illness, and death. And you'd have to be separated from that at some point and come back down again. We just go around and around and around like this. We don't go anywhere.

It's good to think in these terms. It gives you some perspective on what you might want to do with your life. The emotion this gives rise to is *samvega*,

sometimes translated “dismay,” sometimes “terror,” sometimes “awe.” The awe here, though, is not the awe of a beautiful, overpowering scene of nature. It’s more the awe at how imaginative and active we are in creating suffering for ourselves, and how long this has been going on, and how we seem to be indefatigable. We try it again, try it again, try it again. If you don’t like being an emperor penguin, you can be a crested penguin. If you don’t like being a man, you can be a woman. If you don’t like being a woman, you can be a man.

We keep changing all the time. Our whims drive us. It’s like that comment that one of my history professors once made time about the Tsar of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century: “The Tsar ruled by his whim, and he had a whim of iron.” In other words, random thoughts would come into his mind, and then he’d have them enforced, sometimes quite harshly.

You wonder when you’re going to have enough of this. Think of all the suffering involved. If it were just pure creativity, it wouldn’t be so bad. But it keeps ending in suffering, again and again and again. Either we get what we want and then find that it falls apart, or we don’t get what we want to begin with at all.

We keep trying to find new ways. There’s part of the mind that doesn’t like following the Buddha’s path because the path is not as creative as the other ways we’ve been following. But that doesn’t mean you don’t use your imagination on the path. When you’re practicing generosity, you can use your imagination in how you’d like to be generous: the things you’d like to give or do as a gift. There’s a wide range there.

As you practice virtue, you find yourself challenged in different ways—specifically around the precept on lying, which is probably the most important of the precepts—because there will be times when you have some information and don’t want to give it to everybody. There are some people you know who will want that information but then abuse it. So how do you keep them from knowing that information without lying, without misrepresenting the truth? That takes some ingenuity.

The same with concentration: Think about all the different ways you can conceive of the breath, the different spots in the body where it can come in, different spots where it can go out, different ways that it can run through the body, either going up or going down, going left or right. Ajaan Fuang one time told one of his students to imagine a line going down through the body, starting at the top of the head and going down through the center of the body, down to the base of the spine. As you breathe in, think of the breath energy going into that line and then coming out of that line. See what that does.

You can imagine the breath coming in and out of the bones. You can imagine the breath coming up from the seat on which you're sitting right now. As you breathe in, it comes up and spreads up the torso and out the legs. This is especially good when there's pain in your hips. There are lots of different ways you can play around with the breath energy to keep yourself entertained here, and also to find a sense of well-being—because it's so easy for the body to get imbalanced as you're sitting here still. You want to have ways of moving things around inside and you can use your ingenuity, use your imagination to do that.

And the same with the thoughts that would give rise to discernment: The different *ajanas* talk about different ways that you can imagine taking the body apart and doing things with it: putting it here, putting the parts here, putting them there. Imagine a knife cutting through the different parts of the body you have right now.

So there's room for imagination on the path. But there's part of us that rebels against the idea that we're all going to go to the same place, and that we'll have had enough of our blind creativity. You have to look into that part of mind, because it doesn't seem to want to register the suffering that goes along with that creativity. That's the part of the mind that says, "Oh, you're being morbid," or "You're being pessimistic. Look on the good side of things."

Well, as long as you do that—and the Buddha said things do have their pleasant side; if the aggregates didn't have their pleasures, we wouldn't fall for them—if you focus on the pleasures, all you do is get overwhelmed with passion. And then, in passion, you start creating things that will then all start falling apart and falling *on you*. It's not that they just disappear into thin air.

The body becomes more and more of a burden the longer you have it. The current Supreme Patriarch of Thailand likes to make this point again and again. People ask him how he is, and he says, "Look, I'm a ninety-year-old man. How do you expect? The proper question is, 'Can you bear with it?'" There are people who find that, as things start falling apart, they get so depressed that they'd just like to be annihilated. Well, it turns out that desire for annihilation simply leads you to another becoming. And you keep coming back. You get tired of that. You get tired of annihilation after a while, so you come back.

So you've got to see that this imaginative power we have, our creative power, has its teeth and its fangs. And it's huge. This is why, so many times, when they talk about awakening, there's that aspect where you start thinking about the world as a whole. Think about the Buddha's night of awakening. First off, he started with stories of himself: all of his many past lifetimes, going way, way, way back to the point where he couldn't even see that there would be a beginning

point. Or as he said later, the beginning point was inconceivable. That's a huge stretch of time.

Then he thought of space: all the beings in all of the cosmos. Then he saw them dying and being reborn in line with their kamma, and just going around and around and around, a few of them getting out now and then, but most people just going around and around, going nowhere.

That was when he came into the present moment with a really chastened sense of, "Something's got to be done. I've got to get out." Or think of the Buddha's comment when he gives that questionnaire on not-self. He goes through all the aggregates. With each one, he says: "Is it constant or inconstant?" Well, it's inconstant. "If it's inconstant, is it stressful or easeful?" It's stressful. "And if it's inconstant and stressful, is it worth it to call this you or yours?" A lot of people would say, "Yeah!" But he had some wise students who said, "Well, no." And he didn't stop there. He said, "Stop and think. All these aggregates—past, present, future, near, far, refined, coarse—are all inconstant, stressful, not-self. None of them deserve being called me or mine."

In other words, it's not just here in the present moment, but wherever you could go, at any time, it's all the same stuff over and over again. That's what you've got to see. In spite of all the creativity and all the imagination that goes into it, it's all the same stuff again and again and again: different ways of dressing up pain.

When you can think in these ways, then you realize that the Buddha's right: The best thing is to get out. Fortunately, getting out doesn't lead to some oatmeal kind of place that's bland. When you finally delve down into your attachments and pry them away, pry them away, you find that you reach a happiness that you just cannot imagine. Imagination can go only so far. Creativity can go only so far. This is something uncreated, unimaginable. It's really indescribable, except that the Buddha mentioned some of its good features: It's total freedom, total bliss. There's an awareness there. It's very true, unchanging. And it's the most excellent thing there is.

So you have to realize that even though the human mind has lots of imagination that can imagine all kinds of states of becoming, there are limits to imagination. And there's something much better that goes beyond those limits. That's what you want.