

Refuge and Resonance

karmic equations and the power of choice

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We all have this experience daily in one way or another: we become totally engrossed in thought and leave our immediate surroundings. Of course our bodies are still there, riding the subway car or walking down the sidewalk, but in thought we go elsewhere. It happens for various lengths of time and in various ways. It includes what we think of as “day dreams:” when we follow imaginary lines of thought as a means of entertainment and escape, as well as times that we might call “practical thought” when we perhaps plan out what we’re going to be doing later that day. *I’ll stop at the grocery store on the way home and buy avocados and tortillas, swing past the post office and mail the bills, and then call Granny on the cell phone to see how she’s doing.* It includes those times we reexamine the past, perhaps totally reliving a scene that occurred with someone at the office, but inserting the perfect response we didn’t make at the time. It includes planning for the future. Whatever the shape or variety, we all spend a great deal of time “lost in thought” as we have come to call it, when we are somewhat absent from the present moment. We’re still there enough (hopefully) to navigate successfully and to interact with our surroundings, but at the same time we’re not *really* there, not *really* present.

This phenomenon is not necessarily a bad thing. Part of the beauty and power of our creative nature resides in this ability to follow lines of thought off somewhere other than the here and now. Also, our productivity is somewhat dependant on our ability to think ahead and back in time, making assessments of various paths and drawing out plans and ideas. Being “lost in thought” becomes a liability when we live this way too much of the time and neglect an awareness of the present.

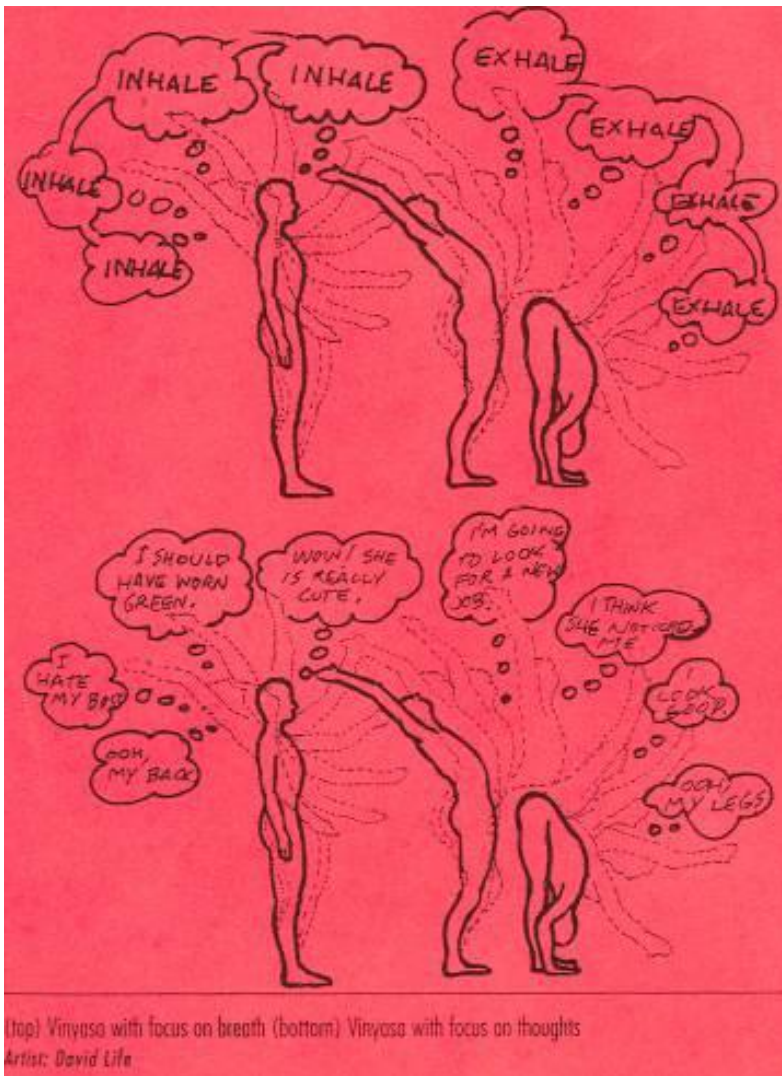
Typically, we bounce from daydream to daydream all the time without ever becoming aware of it. We can be buying lunch and reliving a meeting from the morning at the same time and then suddenly go off in a totally different direction.

I can’t believe that he actually said that at the meeting this morning. I don’t think it’s gonna fly at all. I’m going to have to . . . Ah hi, I’ll have the rice and bean burrito please. Ummm, and a water. And a cookie. Yup. Thanks . . . that guy kind of looks like Peter Jennings. Or is it Brian Mitchell? . . . Wolf Blitzer. . . is that the guys real name? Stone Phillips, Cokie Roberts . . . What is it with newscaster names? Oops, excuse me. Hmmm, I’ll sit by the window . . . hey, she’s kind of cute.

This kind of mental meandering might easily continue straight through the entire meal, preventing you from really being present and tasting what you’re eating, and often takes us through entire days. Even when we talk with other people face to face, it’s

possible to interact without a real conscious exchange. How often do we give each person we encounter our full attention, really looking them in the eye and being *present* with them? More often than naught we *unconsciously* interact. We half listen to what they are saying while we plan our response.

It's easy for us to trip through the day reacting to stimulus like dogs chasing treats. You know how single minded a dog can be when you're eating in front of them? We aren't much different. The pursuit for sensory gratification can be all encompassing. We want gratification. We want to be stimulated. Especially in today's world where we have been raised surrounded by creative and aggressive advertisements and high tech fun, there is a new threshold for desired stimulation that makes it even more difficult to be satisfied with a simple conscious moment. Our minds jump from one desire to the next. *I want something to eat; (and then while unconsciously eating) I want something fun to do tonight.*



I love this illustration by David Life depicting how even in yoga class our meandering mind flows incessantly.

Refuge

“Taking Refuge” is the first Buddhist empowerment. It involves saying a mantra, the first part of which is, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.” I once spent some time thinking about those words and what they meant to me and realized that in *refuge*, there is an important lesson for all of us whether we have any affinity towards Buddhism or not. When we are living *unconsciously*, we are not aware of the fact that we’re taking refuge in anything at all. We are on automatic pilot moving from one gratification to the next.

“In fact, the body follows the mind like a shadow. Once your mind has a thought, it is bound to be translated into actuality.” – p.16 Oshos’ “Tao”

I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha...

Reflecting on this mantra, the thought came that this is perhaps not only a declaration, but also an opportunity to reflect on all the *other* things I take refuge in. I typically “take refuge” or *seek comfort* in many things without giving much consideration to doing so. For instance, I take refuge in music much of the time; listening to it, playing my guitar, writing songs, listening to the radio or CDs. I thought about our culture as a whole and what we take refuge in. Watching television, reading books, eating food, doing housework, *not* doing housework, following sports teams, playing with our pets, watching movies, working, dancing, practicing yoga and meditation, going for drives or bike rides, ingesting recreational drugs, meeting friends for dinner, hiking in the woods, playing golf ... Each of us can easily think of numerous examples of things we take refuge in. Some of them are obviously good for us, and some bad, particularly when experienced in excess. I leave any judgment on what is justified and in what circumstance up to you and focus instead just on our relationship to the *wanting* of such things.



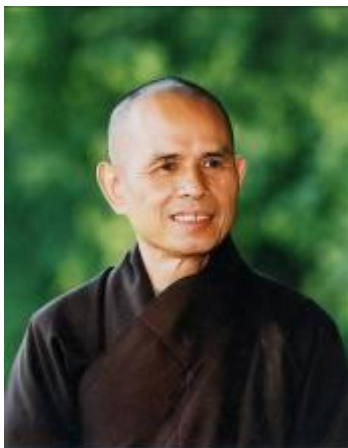
If we are to be *conscious* beings, we need to tune-in to the things that cause us to take action. For isn't that what we indeed do when faced with the desire to ... rent a movie and watch it horizontally from the couch, for example? Don't we then seek that

outcome with a single-minded resolve? Without becoming aware of these impulses, we are unknowingly encompassed by desire and reaction. This can manifest into what Tibetan Buddhism calls the “hungry ghost” experience, a kind of vicious cycle of desire, reaction, desire, reaction - which never leads to true satisfaction.

I sometimes overeat, ingesting for the pleasure of taste even when my stomach is full. I sometimes obsessively follow the happenings of the Boston Red Sox, checking the score on my cell phone multiple times while I drive home from work. In each case I am reacting to a desire for stimulus. The pleasure of taste is one of life’s greatest joys. We are fortunate to live in a time when the cuisine of many parts of the world is easily available. Likewise we are fortunate to have a wealth of various types of entertainment close at hand. Whatever your particular itch, it can be scratched, but if we ignore an *awareness* of our desires and wantings, we take these gifts for granted.



In our day to day lives, what we choose to take refuge in has a direct effect on our state of being. The experience of our life results largely from what we feed our body and mind. If we are living in such a way that we promote vibrancy, consciousness and peace, then we are more apt to move effortlessly with our environment, to consciously act instead of unconsciously react, and to manifest peace in ourselves and those around us though awakening to our Buddha nature.



I once witnessed a lesson in mindfulness by watching Thich Nhat Hahn walk to the stage to address the large audience silently waiting for his teachings in Boston’s Heinz

Convention Center. There were thousands of people there, but when he entered the facility through the side door and started to make his way to the stage, the room was completely silent. His teaching began the second I saw him. It was a lesson in meditation just to watch him make his way slowly across around 20 feet of floor and then up a few stairs, across the stage to the microphone where he sat to address us. His every movement was conscious and at ease. His speaking was the same way. It seemed that every word that came from his mouth was chosen mindfully. The simple words he spoke held great power in their vehicle of conscious delivery. I felt that in a way his mindful presence was more the lesson than the meaning of the words themselves. I take refuge in Thich Nhat Hahn's example of love, compassion and mindfulness.

We can now carry video games, movies, and music in small hand held computing devices that allow us to "go off somewhere" at any time and any place. In these times we are typically removed from a "simple present", i.e., a present that consists of an awareness of our immediate surroundings, our physical bodies, and our breath. There's nothing inherently wrong with this if done in moderation I suppose, but again, we have an opportunity to reflect on these activities and to strive for conscious consumption as opposed to "hungry ghost" consumption.

Sometimes I consciously choose to tune-in to the "simple present", becoming consciously aware of my body, breath and immediate surroundings. Even if I'm standing in a crowded bus aisle during rush hour holding onto the hand rail, the moment I decide to experience the *simple present*, I observe what I was just thinking about, observe what I feel physically throughout my body, consciously bring my attention to my breath and try to be really *present* in the fleeting moment, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of my immediate environment.



I try to live consciously all the time, but of course, I often seek out easy comfort and sensory gratification in unconscious ways. Living consciously, living unconsciously - It all adds up to be a karmic equation which at any given moment equals my experience of the present. Being objectively aware of what I take refuge in is to gain insight into what drives me to take action, and this distinction helps foster the experience of

conscious choice. This does not mean that I become desireless or totally master my wantings, but it means that I can objectively observe myself, gain insight into my typical way of being, and consciously move into a future aligned with my Buddha nature.

Is it possible to enjoy the nuances and pleasures of this amazing planet while living consciously? Is it possible to “be in the moment” and live as a bodhisattva with a slice of pizza in hand while watching baseball? That’s what I’m trying to find out.

I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, and Manny Ramirez

