



SAMSARA: CREATING OUR WORLD

By Beth O'Brien, Ph.D.

Perhaps you've seen the recent movie [Samsara](#), a documentary film by Ron Fricke. The film is a non-narrative stream of images describing the human experience and the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It is a movie about flow, and how things are interconnected. I was so moved by the film that I began to explore the topic of [samsara](#) in more depth.

What is *samsara*? [Tharissaro Bhikkhu](#)¹ states that *samsara* means "wandering on." It is the answer to the question "What are we doing?" *Samsara* is not a place; it is a process of creating our world and moving into it. We might call this world building. As one world falls apart, we create another. The worlds we create feed off the worlds of others, just as their worlds feed off of ours. Sometimes the side by side experience of these coexisting worlds can be mutually beneficial, but most often we end up harming others in the creation and maintenance of a life centered primarily on our needs.

As an example, think about the clothing you put on today. Dressing is part of our routine and an activity most of us take for granted. In the United States, we are able to acquire items that are "on sale, a steal," or a "great buy." The price fits our needs, but what harm might be done in making goods we take for granted? Who made that item? Was child labor involved? Was the manufacturer fairly reimbursed? How many of the earth's resources were involved in producing and shipping our garments?

We can learn skills to stop creating our own world of suffering. To liberate ourselves, Buddhist teachings suggest that we free ourselves from earthly preoccupations and follow a path of self-discipline, meditation and nonattachment.

¹ [Tharissaro Bhikkhu](#), Samsara, [Access to Insight](#).

Kindness

As we wander through life, we can stop the negative impact of *samsara* by being kind towards our fellow human beings. As a result of my yoga training and practice, I have found several approaches which enhance benevolence towards others:

Be Aware. Perhaps a first step in lessening harm and suffering is to simply become aware of others and see outside ourselves. On a recent trip to Japan, I noticed that the Japanese people I encountered initially seemed remote and preoccupied with their daily demands. By looking beyond my first impression I discovered something different. Once eye contact was made, and a bow exchanged, the interaction felt warm and welcoming. If I hadn't deepened my awareness, I would have felt apart and separate.

Connect. A second step to getting beyond *samsara* and self-absorption may be to simply pause, then find the connection. Ron Fricke said in an interview about his film that "It's like life invited everybody here to the planet and didn't ask anyone to approve of the guest list." Life gives us an opportunity to share our worlds and help one another along the way. Individuality gives way to mutuality. Perhaps we make a choice to walk along a path with another to provide support, encouragement, or silent companionship. Or in our most difficult moments, someone ditches preoccupation with their own world and simply shows up for us.

Shift your perspective. One of life's biggest challenges occurs when our desires conflict with someone else's. In other words, our separate worlds collide. How do we make sense of this in a way that advances our own enlightenment? Sure, we can choose to have power over another and get our way, but is this the higher path? Or is more harm created in the exchange? I remember disagreeing with a friend of mine over how we parent our children. It was an important concern, as her daughter and my daughter were friends. When I talked with my friend and she explained why that approach was needed for her daughter, my feelings of frustration melted away. Understanding her perspective enabled me to develop empathy for her situation, and our tug-of-war ended.

Stop Harming. Sometimes imperfection slaps us on the back and reminds us that we do hurt others, often those who are most dear to us. We can own up, apologize, and do our best to make amends. This lesson is a reminder to step up, care more, and try to lesson harm towards others.

Find a guide. Guides are all around us. They may be a friend or family member, an elder, a counselor, a health practitioner, a minister or a teacher. When I feel lost or stuck in a difficult situation, I seek a guide to help me. The Buddhist concept of Bodhisattva states that there are beings that could enter enlightenment, but instead they are reborn into *samsara* to free others from *samsara*.

The Dalai Lama is an example of a present day guide, the Bodhisattva of compassion. In reaching out, we are reminded that we are not alone.

The film *Samsara* shows us that life is but a brief journey. It is within our power to devote our living moments to being kind to one another along the way.

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