Creatures of Habit

July 19, 2008

We tend to be creatures of habit. Our mind has lots of ruts. You slip into the rut and you just go following wherever it usually takes you. It’s like driving through the snow. Years back, when I was young, still inexperienced driver, I was driving through the snow. I was driving down a snowy road one day and got stuck in a set of ruts and it plowed right into the back of a parked car. I couldn’t get out of the ruts. Fortunately for me, the car was parked illegally. There’s quite a story. The owner of the car, apparently, was a large-scale contractor in Alexandria. When the cop came, he pulled out his card and tried to impress the cop with how powerful and influential he was. The cop saw this poor, nervous sixteen-year-old and felt sorry for me. So he gave the man a ticket and I got off free. But a lot of times we plow into parked cars and other things with our ruts and the cops don’t let us off. Also, fortunately, however, we tend to have many different habits. That sutta we chanted just now on not-self, the Buddha never says that we have no self. He doesn’t say that we have a self. But he does analyze how we make a self, and we tend to make lots of selves. The notion of self basically comes from our desire for control. In some cases, the control is skillful. If we didn’t have any control at all, we’d be totally helpless. We do have a measure of control over our actions, which is why self-making is a habit. And as with all habits, sometimes it’s a skillful self and sometimes it’s an unskillful one. The sutta we chanted just now is aimed at people who are ready to become arahants. They’re at the point where they could let go of all of that. They’re on the verge of total awakening, at which point the issue of control is no longer an issue. But up to that point, we have to have some sense of control in our practice. The insight of the Dhamma-I, seeing that whatever is subject to origination is also subject to passing away, doesn’t deal simply with impermanence, but also deals with causality. There’s a connection between the fact that something is caused and the fact that it will eventually then pass away, when the cause passes away. But it’s important that we learn how to take advantage of causality while we can, while we still need to, which means that we learn how to take advantage of the fact that we have this selfing habit. If we were stuck with just one self and it was already defiled, there wouldn’t be much you could do about it. You’d have to wait for somebody else to come along and clean up your act. In fact, that’s the whole proposition of Pure Land Buddhism and a lot of religions throughout the world. Your self is so corrupt that you can’t hope to do anything about it. So you’ve got to wait for Amitabha or somebody else to come down and straighten you out. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. If selfing is an activity, you can do lots of different kinds of selfing, and we already do it anyhow. If you look in the course of the day, there’s the “you” that can cook, there’s the “you” that has to deal with people, there’s the “you” that has to move your body around, there’s the “you” that can think about things. There are all kinds of different “yous” in there. And so, as we try to take advantage of this opportunity to train ourselves, our different selves are training one another. They can observe one another. So this is an opportunity that we want to make the most of as we practice. In other words, learning how to step back and become an observer and watch the mind’s other habits, to see where they’re skillful, to see where they’re not. And if you see that you’re heading off in an unskillful direction, you try to do something that would steer you in a more skillful direction. If you notice that you tend to focus on negativity, there’s a part of your mind that can observe that and then make the decision to say, “No, we’re not going to go in that direction. We’re going to go in another direction.” A lot of the meditation is providing you this more skillful self with tools so that you can steer the mind out of its old ruts. So you don’t have to keep plowing and depart cars. The Buddha’s teachings on the Ten Recollections are useful in this way. The basic meditation technique he taught was breath, which is one of the Ten Recollections. You keep the breath in mind and you learn how to use it as a way of giving the mind a home, a place where it can settle down and feel at ease. And being with the breath, you develop this quality of the observer, just sitting there watching the breath. It’s a neutral topic, but you can learn to make it decidedly pleasurable and really intensely pleasurable. That’s possible. But that requires that you learn how to observe yourself, what perceptions you have of the breath, how you picture the breath in your mind. If you think of the breath energy as already permeating the blood vessels, the nerves throughout the body, it changes the way you think about the pumping in and pumping out through the lungs. If you think instead of just connecting all the different power lines of the body, and John Lee uses that image of the power lines going throughout the body, you can connect them up. It doesn’t require a lot of heavy breathing to get the whole body energized. Just open up the channels and the breath goes. We’re, of course, not talking about oxygen. We’re talking about breath energy. So if you find yourself dealing with the breath, dealing with laborious breathing, you can ask yourself, “How do I conceive this process?” If I change my conception, change my mental image of what the breath is all about, it could make the breathing a lot easier. So try that. Think of the body like a big sponge. Everything is all open, ready for the breath to come in and go out through every pore of the skin. Think of relaxing every pore of your skin. Just hold that perception and keep it in mind. That’s one way of changing the way you habitually relate, even to the breath. You’ll find that there are a lot of habits related to your breathing. They probably go way back to when you drew your first breath. You had to figure out what is this process that you’re suddenly required to do. You didn’t have to do it when you were in the womb. So you started relating to your breath back at the time when you knew nothing at all. Maybe you have some unskillful ways of conceiving the process, and they can go pretty deep into your nervous system. So question them. Try to replace them with alternatives and see what happens. If you find that you can get interested in the breath in this way, you don’t have to worry about the other recollections. The breath gets absorbed in and of itself. But there are times when other issues arise. Either you’re bringing certain attitudes to the meditation, or there are issues that have arisen in the course of the day that need to be worked with. In other words, you can’t stop thinking, so what you’ve got to do is learn how to think in alternative ways. If you’re feeling discouraged, recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is useful. If you’re having doubts about the path, think about the fact that when the Buddha taught, he wasn’t asking money from anybody. He didn’t really need anything from anybody at all. It was a teaching that was offered in total generosity, with no agendas. It’s hard to find a teaching like that. You think about the kind of person he was—well-established, a lot of wealth, power. For him to go off into the forest like that would be like some famous millionaire in the present. He’d be slipping out the back door of his mansion and just disappearing into the forest for six years. And when he came out, he didn’t claim to be a god or anything. He’d found a technique, developed the skills to put an end to suffering. And you think of all the honorable people and men and women who, over the centuries, have followed this path. They met with difficulties. They weren’t Arahants right from the very beginning. You read the Theragatha and the Therigatha. It can be very inspiring that people can go through a lot of difficulties and yet still come out on the other side. So when you’re feeling discouraged about your progress in the path, think about them. Some of them are worse off than you are right now, and yet they were able to draw on whatever strengths they had and come out with awakening in the end. You’ve got strengths, too. Ananda once said that this is where conceit is useful in the path. These people can do it. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. I can do it, too. If you’re feeling like a particularly unworthy human being, you can reflect on your generosity and your virtues in the past, the times when you went out of your way to help somebody, or the times when you knew you could take advantage of somebody and get away with it, and yet you didn’t. Reflect on that to remind yourself that you are a worthy human being. If you’re feeling lazy, the Buddha recommends that you think about death. It could happen at any time, suddenly and without any apparent reason. We received news of two deaths today. One was an old monk who’d lived past a hundred, and everybody said, “Well, that’s normal. You get that old and it’s normal.” It’s perfectly reasonable to die. Then there was a young man, thirty-seven, whose aorta burst. That could have been a death, too. It sounds like it might be worse than a death in the sense that they’ve got him alive, but his brain is dead. That doesn’t seem reasonable. Yet it’s the way things happen. People die in the womb. People die when they’re little kids. They die in the course of being born. Age is not a determinant of whether you’re going to die or not, which could be a depressing thought. But then the Buddha says, “Don’t think of it in that way. Ask yourself, ‘Are you ready to go?’” For most of us, the answer is no. The next question is, “What could you do to get yourself ready to go? What practice?” You’ve got the opportunity right now. Make the most of it. If you’re feeling lazy tonight after the end of the meditation, well, just take the rest of the night off and remind yourself that you may not live to see the sunrise. So put in a little extra time so you have a little bit more mindfulness, a little bit more concentration, a little bit more discernment that you can use so that when the body stops functioning, you’re not totally at a loss. When lust arises, the Buddha recommends contemplation of the body. This is a contemplation that many of us resist. We say, “I already have a negative image of my own body. Why should I contemplate that more?” It’s not that you personally have the only unattractive body in the world. When you start taking the body apart in terms of what’s inside there, everybody’s body is unattractive. Again, it’s useful to have this practice readily at hand for when you need it, i.e., when lust suddenly hits, which can either come when you see somebody attractive or something suddenly hits. If you have a mind that says, “Hey, we haven’t had any lust for a while. Let’s start imagining something lustful,” you really ought to counteract that tendency. Remind yourself, one, where does lust lead? It leads to a lot of suffering. And to this object that you’re lustful about, is it something you really want? Is it something you want? The more you think about it in the proper way, it helps to cut through the lust and the desire to have lust. That, actually, is the big problem. It’s not so much the fact that you’re lusting after something, but you want to be lustful. And so much of our society encourages that. That’s what keeps the economy going. There’s a lot of brainwashing out there that says, “Well, if you try to counteract your lust, you’re going to get sick. You’re going to get sick and twisted.” You’ve got to learn how to counteract that. The mind without lust is a clear mind. It’s an unburdened mind. The mind without lust can know things and see things that a lustful mind can never see. So work on your tools. If you see yourself heading off in a negative direction, try to think in more positive ways. If you’re heading off to a particular defilement like greed, anger, or delusion, counteract it with contemplations that help you look at those defilements in a new light. Typically, they talk about anger as being cured by goodwill, but sometimes it just doesn’t hack it. If you’re really furious at somebody, remind yourself that when you’re furious, you tend to do really stupid things, and your enemy is going to like that. Do you want to please your enemy? It may not sound like a noble contemplation, but you’ve got to deal with your defilements, sometimes on their own level. What it comes down to is looking at the defilements and learning how to observe your thoughts from the outside, in terms of cause and effect. Remind yourself that there are many “you’s” in there. It’s like a big committee. Learn how to take advantage of that fact, that one of you sees another you doing something really unskillful. Remember that the Dhamma provides the tools, alternative ways of thinking, and they’re just as much you as your other old habits. That’s one of the other good things about this not-self teaching. You’re not stuck with old habits. You can change your habits. You can choose to be a new you at any time, or to strengthen the skillful you’s which have gotten weak because they’ve just been overwhelmed by events in your life, by this very unskillful culture we have here. The Buddha’s there to provide you with tools to help that particular you. So when you find the mind slipping into old habits, remind yourself it doesn’t have to keep slipping that way. You’re free to change your mind, to think in new ways. Your old habits will laugh at you and say, “Oh, this is wicked. We’re going to win out in the end.” You don’t have to believe them. Maybe you will win out in the end, but so what? I’m going to try right now, for this breath, to think in new ways. The next breath comes, and you all try for this breath, too. Then you find as you take it one breath at a time, you begin to build up momentum. And since the old you is just a series of habits, if you don’t follow the habits, the old you starts going away. It gets weaker and weaker. And even if it takes time, you realize, “Okay, it’s just a series of habits. Keep chipping away, chipping away, chipping away.” There will come the point when you chip through. So learn how to keep on encouraging yourself, because this is a large task we’ve taken for ourselves. And whatever skills you’ve learned in the past for sticking with a long-term issue or a long-term goal, bring them to bear. So even though ultimately you may not have total control over everything in your life, you find that you can control your intentions with practice, and the area of control will grow. So you can take advantage of the fact of these many selves. Instead of being scattered all over the place, you can learn the strategies for managing them, allowing the skillful ones to come out on top.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2008/080719%20Creatures%20of%20Habit.mp3>