The Raft of Right View

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We’re all familiar with the teaching that the practice is like a raft. And that once you’ve taken the raft across the river, you don’t have to carry it around anymore. You appreciate the raft because it’s done so much for you. But that doesn’t mean you have to keep carrying it around. That’s the point we all focus on when we’re on the other side of the river. But when you look at where you are now, you’re crossing the river. And while you’re crossing the river, you have to hold on to the raft. If you try to make a show of how unattached you are, you fall off the raft. As the Buddha often says, the river carries you down to where there are monsters and whirlpools and rapids. In other words, if you don’t hold on to the raft, you get swept away. So this applies to all aspects of the path, from right view all the way on to right concentration. These are things we have to hold on to. And what makes them right is that they work. Actually, they do put an end to suffering. This is why the Buddha was so clear about which issues he wanted to talk about and which issues he wouldn’t talk about. He primarily talked about suffering. What suffering is, how it can be brought to an end, and particularly about what you can do to put an end to suffering. This is why he also had to talk so much on the topic of action or karma. In fact, when he starts out with mundane right view, it’s mainly about action. Action is real. And you do have a choice. What you’re going to do and say and think and those choices have consequences. One interesting facet of this is that when he talks about action, right from the very beginning, he emphasizes the importance of generosity and gratitude. The connection being that since you do have choices, then generosity really does mean something. If we had no choice, if we were forced to do things just through the laws of atoms or physics or some supreme being’s will, then nothing we did would have any virtue or vice. It would just be sort of the workings out of the machine. But we do have a choice, and generosity is an expression of that freedom of choice. It’s always a good exercise to think back to when you were a child. What was the first time you actually gave something of your own free will to somebody else? When you weren’t forced by anyone to give, there was no specific occasion that you were expected to give, but you just wanted to give something. That was probably your first real experience of freedom. For a moment you were able to go beyond your greed for things or your attachment to things, and you were also thinking about other people, what they would want. You’re beginning to get outside of yourself. That’s an important connection right there. And as for gratitude, you appreciate all the efforts that other people have made to further your well-being, starting particularly with your parents, your teachers. The fact that you appreciate their efforts and their kind motivations shows that you appreciate kindness, you appreciate goodwill, you appreciate goodwill and goodness. Of course, that means you’re more likely to make the same efforts yourself. And so right from the very beginning, when the Buddha talks about right view, it’s not just a matter of analyzing things, but there’s an element of motivation in there, too. That goes with generosity, gratitude. And essentially, goodwill. Since we do have the power to act, let’s act in a way that leads to true happiness. Let’s figure out why we’re causing suffering and what we can do to put an end to it. It’s this combination of discernment and goodwill that determines why the Buddha chose to teach about suffering and the end of suffering. He wanted to look at what aspect of your experience is something you can use for the sake of true happiness, such as your views, your resolves, your speech, your actions, your livelihood, your efforts, your mindfulness, your concentration. These should all be focused on understanding why you cause suffering and how you can put an end to it so that there can be true happiness. This is why we have the Four Noble Truths, suffering and its cause, the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering, and why the Buddha assigned different duties to each of the truths. Suffering, he said, is something you want to comprehend. Comprehend means that you understand it to the point where you develop dispassion for it. It’s hard to think that we’re passionate for our suffering, yet there’s a really strong connection between the suffering and the passions of attachment, clinging, craving. The Buddha wants us to look at the things we hold on to to see where they cause stress. And ultimately, of course, this will mean that we have to learn how to let go. You learn how to let go of the path, but that’s the last thing you let go of. First you want to learn how to let go of everything else. If you make a comparison, it’s like being on a raft, but you find that you’re tied down with lots of other ropes to anchors on this shore. So even though you may be on the raft, you can’t get anywhere, because there are all these other things pulling you back. So you’ll have to learn how to cut through those. Then you hold on just to the raft itself, and that’ll take you across. So we try to comprehend suffering, and once we comprehend it, we can see what’s causing it. And then you let go of the cause. But to do this, you require a special strength of mind, because it’s hard to just sit with the suffering, sit with the pain. And that would start reacting out of fear or dislike, either trying to push it away or trying to run away from it. So we have to develop the qualities of the path, particularly mindfulness and concentration as strengths, so we can watch the suffering and not feel threatened by it. And this way we learn how to realize the end of suffering. So those are the four duties—comprehending, letting go, realizing, and developing. So right now, as we’re working with the breath, we’re trying to develop a good solid foundation for the mind. You want to find some place in the body where there’s a sense of ease and well-being. There may be pains here and there, but they don’t fill the whole body. As John Lee once said, “If there was nothing but pain in the body, you’d die.” So as long as you’re still alive, there must be some place in the body where you can focus, where there’s a sense of well-being and ease. And if you start looking for these spots, you find that there are more than you might have anticipated. Then you learn to focus on them. The image the Buddha gives is of a field. The field has lots of different seeds, lots of different kinds of soil. And you’re focusing on where you want to water, what you want to grow, what seeds you want to water, which part of the field. So we want to focus on the ground. The good parts, where all the nice fruits and vegetables grow. One of John Lee’s images is that you have the choice. You can hang out with fools and thieves, or you can hang out with wise people. The wise people are the comfortable parts of the body. If you want to think of the mind as a committee, you can hang out with the good people in the committee, the ones who can give you a sense of ease and well-being. It’s like eating a fruit. If there’s a rotten spot in the fruit, you don’t go eating the rotten spot. You eat all the other good parts. Cut the rotten spot out. That’s the first step, is developing this sense of confidence that comes from having developed the good parts in the body, the comfortable parts. The parts where the breath energy flows, feels full. So notice, can you sense whether the breath energy in the body is depleted or is it full? If it’s depleted, how do you fill it up? So you’re not squeezing it as the breath goes out, and you’re not forcing it too much as it comes in. And as that sense of well-being gets stronger, then you can think about how it’s going to penetrate the parts that are less comfortable, the parts where the pains are. Often we’ve been shooting ourselves with arrows around the pain. The original pain itself may be one thing, but we tend to tense up around it, block it off, and create a lot more problems around it. So one of the first steps in learning how to comprehend it is to breathe through it and see which parts of the pain are actually caused by things you have no control over and which parts of the ones that you have been meddling with yourself. Tightening things up, squeezing it off. So still, though your main focus is on the comfortable parts, just think of them radiating out, radiating right out. Radiating right through the pain, flowing right through the pain. Try to see if you can take apart that perception of the pain as something solid and impenetrable. Try to think of it as being more porous than when you’ve developed a better relationship to the pain in this way, where you don’t feel so threatened by it. Actually look into it. What’s going on around the pain? What perceptions are contributing to making the pain worse? Why is, say, a physical pain also painful to the mind? And here you can start using your ingenuity. And Jhana Mahabhaya has a lot of different techniques for dealing with it. One is learning how to see, say, the painful part of the body in terms of elements. There’s the earth, water, wind, and fire, all of which have no sense of pain at all. And then there’s the painful feeling that kind of flits around them. We do have this tendency to glom the earth element and the pain together. So whichever part of the body seems solid and we think about the pain as being solid, just say it like the muscles or the bones or whatever. And that creates a huge obstacle, a huge burden on the mind. If you sense that perception happening, remind yourself you can change the perception. The solid parts of the body are one thing. They don’t sense anything at all. They’re just solid matter. And then there’s that little painful sensation that kind of flits around them. And then there’s the awareness that’s aware of both of these things. All these things are three separate things. Can you see the distinction? Do you see how the pain moves? Another question he asks is, where’s the sharpest point of the pain? Does that stay in the same place, or does that move around too? And when it moves around, what’s causing it to move around? Is it totally physical, or does it have something to do with the mind? Remember, as the Buddha said, the reason for the mind’s suffering is not the body, it’s what the mind itself is doing. So what you’re doing when you’re looking at the pain this way is you’re actually watching how the mind gathers its forces around the pain and how it treats the pain and mistreats the pain and then mistreats itself. Or to think of another image, it’s like wanting to see all the animals in the savanna. If you go wandering around the savanna looking for the animals, you’ll never see them, because they’ll hide from you. But if you go to the waterhole, all the animals are going to have to come at some point during the day. And there you are. You get to see who’s coming. And so all the mind’s attitudes toward the pain, toward itself, toward the world, its way of relating to the body, its way of relating to itself, these are all going to appear around the pain. And as long as you’re not feeling threatened by the pain, you’re in a good position to watch these things and to see exactly where it is that certain thoughts and perceptions create a bridge between the physical pain and pain in the mind. And you begin to realize that that bridge is unnecessary. This is where your goodwill comes in. Why should you keep causing yourself to suffer when it’s unnecessary? So what you’re actually letting go of here is not the pain. You’re letting go of whatever activity in the mind is connected with the clinging or craving for particular perceptions, for particular thoughts, for particular ideas, attitudes. And when I say clinging, it’s not like your mind. Your mind has a hand that’s holding on to these things. It’s just a habit. The mind keeps doing these things over and over again. And you learn how to let go. It’s important, though, that you see the distinction between the cause and the suffering, because they require you to do two different things. For the cause, you want to let it go. For the suffering, you just want to watch. We do have this tendency. We want to let go of the suffering, but you can’t do that. It’s like going into a room filled with smoke. You don’t put out the smoke. You search for the fire. You put the fire out and then the smoke goes away on its own. So ultimately what it comes down to is the fact that the physical pain is not the problem. It’s the mind’s way of relating to it, the things it says, the things it does around the pain. This principle applies both to physical pain and to emotional pain. That’s something you want to learn how to watch, too. And again, it requires that you develop a safe place in the mind. So you know that if the pain ever gets really bad, you have a place to go where you’re safe, where there’s a sense of ease, well-being, fullness, refreshment. So you can gather your strength and then go back to work and try to let go of the pain. Try to understand what’s going on again. That’s one of the reasons why we’re practicing concentration again and again and again, is to get this sense of well-being so we have a sense of confidence, we have a sense of inner strength, so we won’t be totally overwhelmed by any suffering or pain that comes up. Then we can learn how to deal with it, not out of fear but out of curiosity. Try to figure this out. Why does the mind cause itself to suffer? Exactly what is it doing that’s causing the suffering? Once you see that it’s unnecessary, that you don’t have to hold on to these things, that’s when you develop dispassion. You say, “Oh my gosh, I’ve been doing this and it’s just… It’s like pounding a nail into my head again and again and again. I don’t have to do that.” And that’s when you begin to realize that suffering can come to an end. Then you have a sense of gratitude to the Buddha that he went out of his way to teach this skill, all the things he could have taught after his awakening. He didn’t have to teach anything if he didn’t want to, but he wanted to leave this gift behind, this wrath that we hold on to as long as we need it. Then we feel appreciation for it, and then we are free to go on our way. It’s beyond the path, as the Buddha said. You can’t trace the mind after that. It’s like trying to trace the footprints of birds as they go through the sky. Because when there’s freedom from suffering, the freedom is total. So hold on to the wrath while you need it. And if you use it properly, there will come the day when you can let it go.

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