The World Is Swept Away

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The world is swept away, and yet we keep craving it, trying to base our happiness on things that are going to change. They’re changing right before our eyes. It’s like trying to build a house on a sandbar in the middle of a river. You know the sandbar is going to move. Sometimes it’s moving as you watch it, and yet you still try to build a house there. When the Buddha talks about inconstancy, it’s not like he’s just describing a neutral fact about experience. He’s talking about “watch out.” All of the three perceptions are perceptions that say, “Watch out.” You look for happiness, and things are going to change. Your happiness is going to change. And when happiness changes, it doesn’t always change for the better. It can often get wiped away. Things are stressful. If you identify stress as something that’s going to make you happy or where your happiness is going to lie, you have to be really careful. There are some things that are stressful in the past, and for the time being you’ve got to hold on to those, even though you know they’re going to change. Like the raft that the Buddha talks about. You put together branches and twigs and logs, tie them with vines, and you know these things are not going to last forever. But they can get you across. So you try to make use of them that way. But then there are other things coming down the river. Sleepers, they call them, big logs that come down. You don’t see them above the surface, but they’re right below the surface. When I was in Thailand, it became good friends with a family where the father had died just because of a sleeper. His son had fallen into the river one day. They lived on a raft on the edge of the Basak River. The baby boy had fallen into the water, so the father had dived in, got the kid up on the raft, and then this big log came and struck him right in the ribcage. He died a few days later. So there are things that can change and can really kill you, kill your happiness, kill your well-being. And if you try to latch on to these things as you or yours, you’re going to suffer. Notice the Buddha is not saying that there is no self. He’s simply saying, “Look, if you see that something is stressful and something is changing, is it appropriate, is it a skillful thing to identify it as yourself?” The obvious answer is no. Yet still, we go back and identify with these things. So look to the raft. The raft is what’s going to get you across. That’s something you want to hold on to. When we come to the practice, it’s because we hope that we’ll be able to hold on to something that’ll give us something reliable. And what the practice tells us is that if you’re looking for something reliable, you have to find it inside. Here are the tools, here are the techniques, here are the strategies you need. And one of the important strategies is concentration, because it gives you, even though it’s not what we’re looking for in terms of efficiency, what totally reliable happiness is. It gives you a place to settle down, gain some nourishment, gain some rest, and protect yourself from a lot of things that obviously change. Now, your first impression of concentration may be that it’s changing a lot, too. It’s not as solid as you’d hoped, but it is something that can be developed. Remember, the Buddha taught four tasks with regard to the noble truths. And the task with regard to concentration is to work at it, to develop it, make it stronger, make it deeper, make it more lasting. You don’t just watch it come and go or come and go. You watch it stay. And if it’s not staying, you do what you can to make it stay. There’s got to be a very strong intention here, backed up by mindfulness, the ability to remember this is where you want to stay, this is what you want to stick with. And what motivates your intention? Well, the realization that if you don’t have this to hold on to, you’re going to be swept away by the river. The Buddha’s not forcing this on you. There’s nothing in the teachings that say that you have to do this. It’s your own sense that you’ve had enough suffering. That’s what keeps you on the path. That’s what keeps you on the raft. So when you’re working with the breath, working with a place to get the mind to settle down, don’t focus on the inconstancy of the object. Focus on the side that’s more constant, what you can make constant. And make that a challenge. How far can you stick with this? And if you notice anything that’s going to pull you away, you have to let go. This is a basic principle of wisdom. If you want something that’s really good, you’re going to have to learn how to let go of some things that you like. Again, that’s part of the stress of the path. Do without some of your old pastimes, some of your old ways of nibbling at this and nibbling at that, because you want a source of food that’s a lot better, a lot more reliable. It’s like the difference between being a hunter and gatherer and being a farmer. With a farmer, you lay claim to a certain piece of land and you work it as thoroughly as possible, and a lot of energy goes into it. For quite a while, throughout the year, you don’t get any food yet. But once you do have the food, then you’ve got stores of food that you can keep for a long, long time. Hunters and gatherers have a lot of trouble during the winter. But the farmers have a place where they can put their food and keep it. That’s why people switched over. It takes more work, but you get a lot more out of it. It’s the same with working with concentration. You put the work in, and it’s going to take a while to start seeing the results. But when the results come, they are there for you reliably, and you’re much less exposed to the ups and downs of the world outside. So think of this as your ticket out of this world that’s swept away, being swept away right before your eyes. If the concentration seems small, protect what you’ve got. It’s all too easy to say, “My concentration is miserable,” and then just kind of shred it up with frustration. It’s like a little tiny fire. You’ve got to protect it from the wind. It may take a while to catch, but once it’s caught, then it will warm you against the wind. In other words, the effort you put into this will repay you, unlike so many other things out there in the world where you put a lot of effort in and then the river just washes them away and that’s it. So ask yourself where you’re going to place your happiness. And remember the Buddha’s words, there is that bank on the far shore where you are safe from the river. And always let that possibility inspire you.

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