Things You Have Around the House

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When the Buddha found the deathless, it solved his problem, the problem of suffering. But it presented him with a problem as a teacher, how he would teach the way to other people. Because after all, the deathless is unfabricated, and you can’t use the deathless, you can’t use something unfabricated to get to something unfabricated. But then the Buddha reflected on his own path. He had used fabrications—bodily, verbal, mental—to get to the unfabricated. And so he divided fabrications into three types. There were the types that were suffering, and the types that were the cause of suffering, and the types that are the path to the end of suffering. In other words, he used fabrications which are stressful, to put an end to stress. He learned to use it strategically. He’s very clear about this point when he talks about the highest dhammas. He says dispassion is the highest of all dhammas, fabricated or not. But as for the highest of all fabricated dhammas, it’s the upful path. So there’s a lot of his strategic wisdom, or his genius as a strategist, to find how he used fabrications and how he used stress. He used all kinds of things that are going to be abandoned when you reach nirvana, when you reach the deathless, but have to be perfected as skills beforehand. You start with desire. This is the path that puts an end to desire. But you need to walk on it to do it, for it to work. You need conceit, in the sense that you realize, “If other people can do this, they’re human beings, I’m a human being, I can do it too.” That will be abandoned at the end, but it’s a necessary part of the path. Virtue, concentration, discernment—these are all fabricated things that will be put aside. Even the discernment that tells you to let go, that gets put aside too. But it has to be developed in the meantime. So what this means is, as we’re working on the path, we have to put up with a certain amount of stress. There’s a fair amount of difficulty. When the Buddha talks about pleasant practice, it’s not pleasant in the sense that there’s no fabrication or no stress at all. It’s simply that it’s relatively more pleasant than painful practice. You learn how to focus on the breath or whatever your object is that you can stay absorbed in. And you engage in fabrication, direct a thought, an evaluation, to figure out how to get the mind to settle down with that object so that you have a nice snug fit. It feels good to be here. It’s a pleasure. And even though the Buddha said this path avoids the extreme of sensual indulgence, he uses that word “indulgence” to describe how we engage with the pleasure of concentration. You’re devoted to it. You indulge in it. Not to the point where you lose track of your object and just wallow in the pleasure. But you keep going after the object and creating the causes for the pleasure, because you know that you need this as sustenance. You need this as your resting spot. And you need this as your laboratory. It’s like working from home. This is your home, but this is also your office. The mind needs to be well fed. Otherwise it won’t be able to handle the more difficult work that comes when you have to pry away your attachment to things that you really like. As Ajaan Sawat used to say, “The cause of suffering is the things we like.” We have to see the danger in those likes. It’s going to be hard. And so it’s good to have a place you can fall back on. And having this place to fall back on also makes the mind a lot more objective in its judgments. Otherwise, if it’s hungry for certain things, it’s going to see that they’re good regardless. It’s like scientists working with monkeys. They have a certain allowance to buy bananas for the monkeys, but if the scientists themselves don’t have an income, they’re going to start eating the monkeys’ bananas. That’s going to affect the results of their research. So we work on this relative pleasure. We realize that there will be pains in the practice. Not just physical pains, but mental pains. In fact, those are the big ones. The difficult times when things aren’t going well, when you have setbacks, or when you’re face to face with an attachment that seems really resistant. You have to be prepared for the fact that this path will involve difficulties. And don’t let yourself be waylaid by the people who say it doesn’t. Then all you have to do is just let go and let go of the desire to attain something, and there you are. The analogy the Buddha gives is of trying to get milk out of a cow. If you twist the horn, you’re not going to get milk. Now, someone might come to tell you, “Okay, you’re efforting too much. You should stop twisting the horn.” And sure enough, you stop twisting the horn, and it is nicer. But you still don’t have the milk. They might say, “Well, don’t worry about the milk. You don’t need milk. You’re perfectly fine. You can live off the air.” But it gets pretty thin after a while. We really do want something that’s special here. So we have to put up with the work and the things we have to hold on to. The Ajahns talk about this quite a lot. There are different images to use. In John Lee’s images, he said, “You want to learn to let go like a rich person rather than like a pauper.” The rich person has done the work to amass wealth. And then when you let go, what it means is that the wealth doesn’t disappear. It’s still there. It’s just that you’re not carrying it around all the time. In John Fugeng’s images of a booster rocket, when I was first to stay with him, it was soon after the American moon landing. He talked about how the practice is that you start out with booster rockets, and then when the booster rocket has spent its fuel, then it drops away. And the next one has its fuel, and then it drops away. That’s how the moon unit finally gets to the moon. There are things you hold on to, and then you let go. In Jammahabodha, there are images of using a ladder to climb up to the roof of a house. You hold on to one rung, and then you hold your other hand on the other rung. And then when that top hand is secured, then you let go of the lower rung and you use that hand to grab onto a higher rung. And you repeat the process up the ladder. You’re always holding on to something as you’re letting go of something below it. And finally, when you get to the roof, then you can let go of the whole ladder. So there’ll be things you’re holding on to in the path, and there’ll be stress in the path. But it’s the only way. What’s good about this is the different kind of fabrications you use in the path. There are things you have around the house already. It’s like those old do-it-yourself kits. They build a little rocket out of things you have around the house. Here you are building a path to the moon. You’re building a path to the end of suffering out of things you have around the house, things you have in your mind already. You already have desire. You already have some conceit. You already have some mindfulness, some concentration, some virtue. So you learn to take these things you’ve already got and you fashion them into something really good. You can simply take the way you breathe and you can turn it into an object of intense pleasure, an intense rapture. So we’re using things right around us, things right at hand. And as you put them together, you will be amazed at what they can lead to. There’ll be difficulties, there’ll be stress. But when you finally arrive there, you realize it’s more than worth the effort.

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