The Fortress

August 5, 2022

Chandli would often have you develop concentration first by developing a sense of sanghvega, thinking about all the possible things that you could think about right now that would pull you out of concentration. Then contemplate how there’s really no substance to any of them. The affairs of the day. The affairs of having a body. Think about them in ways that help you see that they’re not really worth thinking about right now. Think about your family, your friends. As the Buddha said, think about all the times you’ve lost a mother, lost a father, brother, sister, daughter, son. So many times, for each category, the amount of tears you’ve shed is more than all the water in the oceans. As the Buddha said, if you think about that, it’s enough to make you want to get out. Or you can think about your attachment to the body. Well, what is there? Take it apart in your imagination. Put the skin here, put the lungs there, the stomach, liver, intestines, all the bones in a pile. Now, of course, remember that the body, when you take it apart like that, does not need an anatomical diagram. It’s got a lot of blood and other things flowing around. It’s all in there. But it’s all sewed up in the skin. And when it’s sewed up in the skin, we’re perfectly content to be attached to it. But just think of something simple. Suppose you had no eyelids. Your eyes would be staring like some creature out of a horror film. These are the things we get all worked up about. So find a topic that pulls your attention away from the rest. And think about it in such a way as to give rise to samvega. Your mind will be more and more inclined to want to come back and settle down right here. Because this is the way out. When the Buddha taught the Dhamma, as he said, the beginning of wisdom comes with, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term wealth and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” So wisdom is framed in the quest for happiness. Everything else gets pulled in in terms of right view and right resolve. He’s in service of that frame. When the Buddha talks about karma, he talks about rebirth. On the one hand, rebirth is to remind you what long-term really means, how long it can be. As for the principle of karma, it reminds you that you have the choice. There are different paths that you could follow in the search for happiness. Which ones do you want to follow? How many can you follow at any one time? Or do you want to follow the path that goes to something higher than ordinary? That’s your choice. It’s because you have these choices that your generosity means something, your virtue means something. The fact that you’re sitting here meditating means something. If we had no choice, we’d be like automatons, doing simply what we’re programmed to do. But the Buddha is affirming the fact that, yes, we have choices, and we can make the most of them. So right now, your choice is to stay right here, to settle down, to develop right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, with all the factors in the concentration group of the noble path. With right effort, you generate happiness. You generate desire to do this. You take your desire, your general desire for happiness, and you focus it. The way out is going to be gaining some control of your mind. So if anything unskillful can come up, you want to prevent it. If it’s there, you want to get rid of it. Right now, you’re simply watching things coming and going and being entertained by them. You’re being entertained by the passing shadows on the wall. These qualities make a difference. They have a karmic imprint on the mind. So you don’t want to get involved in anything unskillful. So you’re trying to replace unskillful qualities with skillful ones. You’re trying to give rise to them if they’re not there, and you’re trying to maintain them and develop them when they are. That’s the basic approach. Then right effort gets folded into right mindfulness. It’s the quality of ardency. With right mindfulness, you’re getting started on your real concentration practice. You’ve got your theme, the body in and of itself, the breath, right here, right now, without reference to anything else outside. When you’re practicing mindfulness, there are basically two activities. One is the practice of staying focused on your frame of reference, and the other is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So here again, any little tendrils that would head out and try to latch onto anything outside, you cut them. Because remember, the Buddha’s analogy is right mindfulness. It’s a wide-open and accepting state of mind. It’s very focused. It has its boundaries. In the Dhammapala’s image, you’re putting up a fence. You think, “I’m not going to wander away from this one spot right here, the body in and of itself.” Anything that goes outside of here, you turn it back at the fence. And, of course, if you’re going to stay here, you’re trying to make it comfortable, this is where right mindfulness shades into right concentration. You’ve got the mindfulness, the alertness, the ardency. These get turned into directed thought and evaluation, singleness of preoccupation. Focus on the breath in a way that adjusts it, gets it so you’re ready to settle down. It feels good to settle down here. This element of pleasure that comes with concentration is something that’s really important. I don’t know how many people have accused Ajahn Lee of teaching people to be stuck on pleasure in teaching jhana. But if you don’t have this pleasure to hold on to, you’re going to go back to other pleasures. That’s one of the reasons why the mind keeps sending tendrils out to the world to see what pleasure there may be. It’s funny that we can find pleasure in distress, but we do. So we’ve got to give it some pleasure inside. The Buddha compares the practice to a fortress, and the people in the fortress are two. There are the soldiers, which are right effort, and then there’s right mindfulness, which is the gatekeeper. You’ve got to keep them well fed. Otherwise, the soldiers give up on their duty, or they turncoat and become spies for the other side. The same with mindfulness. It starts taking bribes. It’s okay to watch unskillful things arise and pass away, because after all, isn’t that what mindfulness is? Isn’t that what discernment is? You can twist the Dhamma in all kinds of directions. The Buddha says if you’re going to have discernment, your insight into arising and passing away, one has to be penetrative. As he defines it in other places, penetrative means you really see the distinctions of what things should be arising and shouldn’t be passing away, what things shouldn’t be arising and shouldn’t be passing away, and what things should pass away. That kind of arising and passing away is actually what’s helpful. Because remember, the gatekeeper does have to be very selective in who he lets into the fortress and who he keeps out. He doesn’t just open the doors wide open and say, “Okay, anybody who wants to come in, come in. Stay as long as you like. Do what you want.” He keeps out the people who would be helpful to the soldiers. He keeps out the ones that’ll be traitorous. Fifth column. So it’s in this way that right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration all work together. So you can find a way out. That’s where that image falls apart. You get back to the image of the path. We’re going someplace, but we’re going someplace by staying right here, developing the good things that we have right here, the good potentials, putting aside the potentials for suffering, and paying very careful attention to what’s going on right here, right now. There’ll be a part of your mind that says, “Okay, what’s going to happen? When is it going to happen?” You say you have no idea when it’s going to happen, but if anything’s going to happen, it’s going to happen right here. If you try to replace your gaze here with someplace outside where things are happening, well, things are happening outside, but they’re not going to be all that helpful. If things seem too quiet right now, we’ll allow the mind to rest. But try to be vigilant. Look after the mind resting to make sure it doesn’t get drowsy, doesn’t lose focus. Try to stay on top of what you’ve got right here. When the things will arise, they will give you insight. When they arise, you’ll be right here ready for them. The problem is that they tend to arise at times when we’re looking away. Because what we need to see is right here. The Buddha talks about three kinds of fabrication going on. There’s bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. When he’s talking in terms of meditation, bodily fabrication means the breath. Verbal fabrication means direct thought and evaluation. Mental fabrication means perceptions and feelings. All right here, right now. But he also talks about those three types of fabrication in terms of rebirth. Bodily fabrication then becomes just any bodily action that leads to results in the next life. Verbal fabrication, any verbal act. Mental fabrication, any mental act. I’ve seen some people say that these two different meanings of the term are totally unrelated. But how can that be? And what use would there be in seeing them as unrelated? It’s more useful to see that they are related. In other words, you’ve got the forces that lead to rebirth happening right here, right now. You can’t move the body unless you breathe. You can’t speak unless you engage in direct thought and evaluation. You can’t think unless you deal in perceptions and feelings. So the raw material is right here. So again, another good reason not to lose focus and start wondering about the world out there. Everything you need to know is happening right here. Your gaze isn’t still enough, steady enough, subtle enough. So work on that. There is work to be done as you rest right here. You’re trying to refine the way you rest. It may take time, but it’s time well spent.

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