The Image of the Raft

December 31, 2023

When we meditate, we choose one object to focus on, in this case the breath. And if we’re going to think, we think about the breath. What we’re going to watch is the breath. Gather all these different mental activities around the breath. This is how the mind can become one. And once you’ve chosen the breath as your object, then you try to stick with it. You hold on. We hear so much about the path being a path of letting go. But there are a lot of things you have to hold on to. You have to hold on to the basic principles that the Buddha said apply in all cases, which is that there are some actions that are skillful and should always be done. Other actions that are unskillful and should never be done. So we hold on to that principle. We may be holding on to a view, holding on to our ideas about how things should be done, but we’re holding on for a purpose, not just holding on and staying there. The image the Buddha gives is of a raft on this side of the river that’s in danger, and on the other side of the river is safety. And there’s no bridge, there’s no boat going across, so you have to make a raft. You make a raft out of the twigs and branches you find on this side, and you tie it together well, and then you make an effort to cross the river holding on to the raft. And you don’t let go until you get to the other side. And when you do get to the other side, that’s when you can let it go. You don’t want to be foolish enough to carry the raft on your head, because you’ve reached safety. But until you reach safety, you’ve got to hold on. So when we think about the Buddha’s principles about what should and should not be done, we have to remember that he said this is one of a teacher’s most important gifts to his students. There’s a clear sense that certain actions are skillful and that you have the ability to choose to do them. Other actions are unskillful and you have to have the ability to choose not to do them. You hold on to that principle. Anything else that would get in the way, anything that would be contrary to that, that’s what you let go. That’s your raft. As the Buddha said, we could train the mind to think nothing but skillful thoughts. He compares it to being a cow herd back in the day. In the old days, if you had cows, you had to be very careful during the rainy season, because rice was growing in the paddies. You wanted to make sure your cows didn’t get into the rice, because if they did get into the rice, there’d be a lot of trouble. So if they’re heading toward the rice, you have to beat them back. Whatever is needed to stop them, you do that. That’s for skillful thoughts. He says it’s like being a cow herd during the dry season. The rice has been gathered. There’s no danger. The cows can go into the fields, and there’s nothing for them to eat, nothing for them to destroy. So they can wander as they like. But, as he noted, you can think skillful thoughts all day, and there’d be no danger coming from that, aside from the fact that you get tired. And when the mind gets tired, it’s far from concentration, and it’s very easy to start giving in to unskillful thoughts again. So you get the mind to rest in concentration. So you need this as your source of strength, the ability to stay right here. And you want to hold on to this. Here again, you’re holding on to a way of doing things, but you’re holding on with the purpose, ultimately, of arriving at another place and then letting go. That’s the difference. If you hold on to an activity simply for the sake of holding on, that’s going to be suffering. Buddha identifies suffering as clinging to the five aggregates—form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness. And there are four ways of clinging. You can cling in terms of sensual pleasure, sensual desire. You can cling in terms of your views. You can cling in terms of your ideas of what should and shouldn’t be done. And you can cling in terms of your sense of who you are, all of which you can create out of these aggregates. And that’s suffering. But the path to the end of suffering also involves aggregates. Like you’re sitting right here, focused on the breath. That’s the body, or form. You’re trying to breathe in a way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. That’s feeling. You hold in mind your image of how the breath runs through the body. And you try to choose a perception that allows the breath energy to flow freely so that the sense of ease you get from the breathing can flow freely. It can flow throughout the whole body. That’s perception. You talk to yourself about what ways of breathing are skillful, what ways of breathing are not, and how you might change things. Once the breath is comfortable, how do you maintain that sense of comfort? And when you can maintain it, how do you let it spread? All that talking to yourself is fabrication. And there’s consciousness, which is aware of all these things. So you’ve got the five aggregates. As for the forms of clinging, you do have views about what’s right and wrong. You do have ideas about what should and shouldn’t be done. And you do have a sense of yourself as being competent, able to do this. So in this sense, you are still clinging, but you’re clinging in a skillful way. As for clinging to sensuality, the Buddha says that has no role in the path. But the mind does have a desire for pleasure. This is why we give rise to pleasure in the concentration. How many times have I heard people say, “Watch out for concentration. There’s going to be a sense of pleasure and happiness. You’re going to get addicted. You’re going to get attached. So it’s better not to do concentration at all.” Well, the Buddha wasn’t one of those people. He actually made right concentration an important part of the path. And as I said, you can’t get past sensuality unless you have a pleasure like the pleasure that comes from being with the breath. If you don’t have that pleasure or a higher one, then the mind goes sneaking back to its old pleasures or worse pleasures in sensuality. So to get past sensuality, you have to have a sense of well-being with concentration. You have to be able to hold on to that. So there are things you have to hold on to. Think of the raft again. If you’re in the middle of the river and someone says, “Well, the people who reach the end of the river, they let go.” You try to let go to show that you’re at the end of your course across the river. Well, of course you’re going to get swept down the stream. There’s actually a Mahayana text which says you have to let go of the raft in order to get across the river. And I’ve never seen any raft work like that. When we understand the Buddha’s teachings, it’s not just a matter of understanding lists of words. It’s good also to think about the analogies that he gives. To get a correct understanding of what we should and shouldn’t do. And this is where the raft analogy comes in. That it is important to hold on. Eventually you let go. You’re holding on to the raft. And as you’re holding on to the raft, you’re letting go of a lot of other things. But there are some things you have to hold on to in order to get to safety. So don’t be embarrassed about holding on. If someone tells you this is a kindergarten practice, well, there are a lot of good things you can learn in kindergarten. And it’s best to make sure that you’ve got your foundation solid and your understanding solid so you’re not easily deceived. I’ve noticed that the people who get deceived about the nature of the path, the ones that are told, “Well, just let go. Your mind is not in concentration. Well, that doesn’t matter. Let go of your desire for concentration.” That’s laziness speaking. And there are a lot of people who like to think that they’re clever, they’re intelligent, they don’t need to deal with the basics, they can go straight to the top. But you go straight to the top. It’s like climbing a ladder without any rungs. You climb and climb and climb and you just fall down. And it’s very easy to get deceived about what’s at the top. Because all you’re doing is based on your preconceived notions about what’s advanced. And you’re not really going to know those things until you’ve got the foundations really solid. Like when we work on concentration, it’s based on mindfulness, and mindfulness is based on right view, and it’s also based on virtue. Why is that? Because following the precepts teaches you to be honest. If you’re really going to stick with the precepts, you have to keep them in mind. That’s mindfulness. You have to be alert to what you’re doing. That’s alertness. And you have to be ardent in trying to do this well, sticking to the precepts. And be honest with yourself. If you’ve broken a precept, admit the fact so you can learn from it. You figure out, “Well, why did I break that precept?” Just the other day, I received a phone call from a woman who had intentionally killed a mosquito. And it disturbed her. She had taken the precepts for a long time. She hadn’t intentionally killed anything for a long time. And then one day she was out in the garden, and the mosquitoes got to her. And she found herself deliberately killing a mosquito. And some of her friends said, “Well, it doesn’t matter. A mosquito is just a tiny thing.” But if you say it doesn’t matter, then you start getting dishonest. And other things don’t matter either. And you have to ask yourself, “What in the mindset is okay to kill?” Because if it’s okay to kill a little something like that, then it can go to bigger and bigger things. And the mind becomes dishonest. And when the mind is dishonest, then whatever insights you gain from your concentration are going to be dishonest too. So hold on to the basics. You’ve got that raft, and it’s the same raft from the beginning of this side of the river over to that other side of the river. It’s the raft of the Eightfold Path, which boils down to virtue, concentration, and discernment. All three of those are going to be required to take you all the way across. So those are the things you hold on to. And don’t be embarrassed that you’re holding on, because when you hold on to these things, it allows you to let go of all kinds of other things. The other things that come sweeping down the river, you don’t have to hold on to them. You hold on to what will take you to safety. Then once you’ve arrived, that’s when you can totally let go. So have a clear sense of time and place in your holding on, time and place in your letting go. And that’s how you can be said to be wise.

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