Working with Nature

January 11, 2024

There’s a classic image that many of the Jhans use, that when you’re planting a tree, planting a rice plant, you do some of the work, but the plant does some of the work, too. And you have to let the tree or let the plant do its work. In other words, you look after the causes. You look after the water. Make sure the plant is getting the proper amount of sun. Make sure that no bugs are coming to eat it. But you can’t make the plant grow faster than it’s going to grow. If you pull on it to make it grow faster, make it taller, you’re going to kill it. But if you just leave it to its own devices, it may grow, but it won’t be the kind of plant you want. So it’s a combination of knowing how much effort to put in and where the effort is best directed. We’re working with the nature of the mind, but we’re directing it in a certain direction. As in the orchard here, we water the trees. We try not to water the weeds. Of course, the weeds will spring up. We’ve got to get rid of the weeds, otherwise they’re going to drink up all the water and waste it. But as for how well the trees will grow, how many avocados they’re going to create, that’s up to them. So we’re working with nature, directing it in a way that nature might not go on its own. If it’s just left to its own devices, it’s not going to get to nibbana. Sometimes it may, by a fluke, get into concentration. But if you’re not paying careful attention, you’ll fluke out of it as well. So it’s a combination of knowing what to do and what not to do. What we do do is the causes. As John Lee points out, when you’re trying to get the mind into concentration, you direct a thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation. Those are the causes. So you keep directing your thoughts to the breath, and you evaluate it to make it a good place to stay. Although this may involve some activity and you want to get the mind still, to get it still, you have to give it a good place to stay. That’s for the pleasure and rapture that can come from it. Those are the results. When you look after the causes properly, the results will come. So tend to the causes that you want here. And part of the mind will say, “Okay, that’s interesting, but there are other things I want to do right now. I want to get this over as fast as I can, move on.” You can’t let that voice take over. That’s like letting the trees just do their own thing without you watering them or taking care of them. We’re tending the mind in a certain direction, and then it will do its thing. So there’s a balance here. Some people really want to push the practice. Say, “I’ve got a short time here at the monastery. I want to get at least at this level or that level.” Well, what do you know of this or that level? You may have had some experience in the past, but a lot of times our conceptions of this or that level are based on ignorance. So you can trust things best if you focus on the causes. Those are things that you can know about. If your mind is with the breath, you know. If it’s not with the breath, you know. You bring it back. And you bring it back again and bring it back again. And you find over time that it gets more and more inclined to come. If you do it right. In other words, if you don’t berate it for going off, just note that it’s gone off and you come back. You look after the causes, and then things will develop in the mind in line with their nature as they respond to those causes. You look in the foreground. You look at the forest tradition and the teachings there. A lot of them have to do with agriculture. That’s what a lot of the monks were familiar with. They’d grown up with rice fields and orchards. So they knew it was a combination of working with nature, but also directing nature in the direction you want it to go. Nature on its own. The nature of the mind is samsara. It likes to do samsara. Samsara is not a place. It’s an activity. It’s a wandering. It’s going from one state of becoming to another. What you’re trying to do here is create a state of becoming that stays. So you use some of the mental factors that would lead to becoming. But you’re trying to do it in such a way that you can create a place where the mind can settle in. And part of its impulses will be to settle in. Move on. It’s amazing how you can create a sense of well-being and concentration and then just drop it when you leave. You want to try to maintain it as best you can. It’s nurturing it in the direction that the Buddha lays out. That’s how you take its nature and turn it into something else. As long as the mind is going to create states of becoming, you create a good one. And then you learn to observe it. That’s the step beyond concentration. And the Buddha says you don’t want to get into that too fast. The analogy he gives is of a skill, archery. The archer knows how to shoot long distances, fire shots in rapid succession, pierce great masses. You want to get that good at your concentration. Then you can observe it. So focus on doing things right, and the mind will develop. It will mature. You can’t think of a tree with fruit. You’ve got a mango tree, and the mangoes are green. And they’re hard because they’re unripe. And someone tells you, “A ripe mango is hard.” A ripe mango is yellow and it’s soft. So how do you get the mangoes yellow and soft? You don’t squeeze them. You don’t paint them. You focus on the roots of the tree. Put fertilizer down. Put water down. Keep the bugs away. And the mangoes will do their own thing. They’ll ripen on their own. We try to direct nature, but there’s a part of it that nature has to do on its own, at its own pace. This requires patience, discernment, all of which are good qualities to develop in the mind. So learn that proper balance. You want the results, but you can’t keep thinking about the results. You’ve got to focus on the path. There’s a teaching in Dogon where he says that the duty of developing the path is the same thing as the duty of realizing cessation. He’s not saying the path is the goal. He’s saying the activity of doing the path is where you find the activity of uncovering the goal. That means that you don’t keep looking down the path and saying, “When is it going to come? How can I get there faster?” You focus on the steps that have to be done and focusing on them. You get more observant. You get more alert. You notice things in the mind that you wouldn’t have noticed before, which is precisely what we’re trying to do here. We’re not just trying to squeeze it in a certain direction. We’re trying to get it to settle in so we can watch it. And the more patient you are, the more you’ll see.

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