Becoming & Birth

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There was once a senior monk in Bangkok who was very much opposed to the forest tradition. He fell sick one time, and then Chandli went to visit him. He sat and meditated in the corner of the room. And exactly what he did, it’s hard to tell, but he was sending some of his mental power into the monk, who could feel it. He said, “What are you doing?” And Chandli said, “I’m making a gift of stillness.” The old monk said, “Well, whatever it is, keep it up. It feels good.” And gradually the old monk began to recover, and Chandli taught him to meditate. He was able to get into some good states of concentration himself. But at one point, the old monk asked Chandli, “It seems like as you meditate, you’re creating a state of becoming.” And Chandli said, “That’s right.” And the old monk said, “Well, aren’t we supposed to be practicing to get rid of becoming?” And Chandli said, “Before you can get rid of it, you have to understand it.” He made a comparison with eggs. He said, “You have a chicken who lays eggs. You eat some of the eggs, and you study the others.” In other words, as you get the mind into concentration, there are times when you simply want to have a pleasant abiding right now. You feed off the food of rapture, you feed off the food of pleasure. There are other times, though, when you use the concentration to study your mind. And one of the things you want to study is this process of how the mind creates states of becoming. You’re going to see it in two ways. One is in the concentration itself. The state of becoming is a sense of identity in a world of experience centered on a desired object. In this case, the desired object is a sense of pleasure that comes with the breath, but it’s allowed to spread throughout the body with a sense of well-being. The world, of course, is the body itself. It’s the self as a whole. And you are the meditator in the midst of all that. So you get to see how these states of becoming are put together. You’ve got the breath, which is bodily fabrication. You’re talking to yourself about the breath. That’s verbal fabrication. And you’ve got images in the mind, how the breath is flowing, where it can flow, where it can’t flow. And of course, feelings of pleasure. That’s mental fabrication. And those are the beginning of the processes that lead to becoming. So you’re looking at the raw materials right here. The other way you learn about becoming is when the mind slips away from the breath and it goes into another thought world. Something attracts it. Something grabs its attention. It may not be something it likes. Sometimes your attention gets grabbed by things you don’t like. And you start focusing on them. And you have a different world, the world in which that object exists, and you as the person entering into it. It’s kind of like when you fall asleep and start dreaming. You lose your moorings in this larger state of becoming, the world we’re living in right now. You find yourself in a different world. And you go into it. You want to study this process carefully because it’s how birth happens. The Buddha never talks about what gets born, but he talks in a lot of detail about how birth happens. Because it happens again and again and again, starting at the level here inside the mind. And then when you have to leave this body, leave this human world, different potential becomings will appear in the mind. And you may choose one, or you may get suddenly drawn strongly to one or another. The Buddha’s image is of a fire. The house is on fire. And suddenly the fire gets blown to some other place and catches that place on fire. Usually his images of going to one place to another is going from one house to another. But it’s not always the case you go to a house. You might find yourself out in a desolate place with nothing, or something even worse. So you have to be careful. You want to train the mind now. Well, it’s relatively healthy. The body is relatively sound. So you get some control over these processes of becoming, and this mind’s tendency to go slipping into these different worlds. It’s really good at that. But a lot of times where it goes is totally out of control. Something appears and catches your fancy, and you go with it. So you want to be more solidly established here in this body, awake, alert, mindful. So when something comes up, you can examine it. Is there something worth going into, or is that not? And you get better and better at judging what’s worth going into and what’s not. You’re going to need that ability when you leave this body. Because things will appear. Sometimes they can be very appealing. And they may not necessarily be good for you. The case I always think of is Thailand in the 1970s. You could have been born, say, in a palace. But in the palace they were teaching wrong view. They were teaching that the way to Nirvana was closed, the way to even Jhana was closed. In fact, this is one of the things that John Lee had to fight when he went to teach that old monk in Bangkok. The belief was all over, the scholarly monks in Bangkok, that Nirvana was no longer a possibility, Jhana was no longer a possibility. So the best things monks could do was social service, working in schools, that kind of thing. And so John Lee had to prove that Jhana was still available. People could do it. One of my favorite stories about how he did this was that there was an old woman whose job was to clean bathrooms in the monastery where he was staying. During her free time she would come and sit and meditate with him. There’s something about John Lee, sometimes he could lend his powers to other people. She was very impressionable and she discovered she had the ability to read minds. So she started reading the minds of the monks in the monastery and she was shocked. So she went and reported to the abbot. This monk is thinking these kinds of thoughts, that monk is thinking those kinds of thoughts, all of which were thoughts a monk should not be thinking. And the abbot, who knew the monks pretty well, was not surprised. But he called the monks together and said, “You guys got to watch out. These people are going to read your innards.” So that’s how gradually the forest tradition became more and more accepted in the circles of Bangkok. But if you were born, say, in a palace in the olden days, you would have been taught wrong view. Whereas if you were reborn out in a peasant village in the really poorest part of Thailand, i.e. the northeast, you would have had the opportunity to meet with the Dhamma, meet with people like Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Sao, all the Kumbhajahns, and attain to the true Dhamma. So just because a potential place looks inviting, looks comfortable, doesn’t mean it’s necessarily going to be good. It’s going to be a good place to practice. So you want to make your determination that if I have to be reborn, I want to be reborn in a place where it is possible to practice, and I’ll be motivated to practice. And see if you can stick with that particular wind that will blow you. Because you have to watch out with winds. Sometimes they turn on you. Sometimes they turn into tornadoes. Sometimes they switch direction. So you really want to get some control over these processes that lead to becoming. That’s one of the reasons why when we meditate we don’t simply follow whatever comes up in the mind. That’s a recipe for disaster. We have a very clear idea where we want to stay, where we want to settle in, and where we don’t. This is an aspect of the process that gets pushed off to the side in a lot of modern Buddhism. We’re told, well, you just learned how to accept everything, just be with the knowing, be with your awareness. Contentment is good, so be content with whatever comes up. And that way your defilements eat you up, and you don’t get any sense of control. I received a letter this evening from a meditator who created a huge change in his life when he realized that he actually could control his thoughts, and that it was a good thing that he tried. Which is sad, because that’s the Buddha’s message all the way through. When he was teaching Rahula, he was teaching him that some intentions you follow and others you don’t. When he himself was looking at his mind, getting it on the right path, he said he got on the path when he learned how to divide his thoughts into two types. Those that were based on skillful intentions, like renunciation, non-ill-will, non-harmfulness. Those based on bad intentions, sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness. And how he learned how to promote the first and stop the second. And even as you’re getting the mind into concentration, you begin to realize that there are levels of disturbance in the mind that in the very beginning don’t seem to be disturbing at all. You’re sitting here thinking about the breath, analyzing the breath, and the mind can get very centered that way, as the breath becomes more and more comfortable. But then as it settles in, it gets to the point where you don’t need to talk to yourself about the breath anymore, and that chatter becomes a disturbance. What was a tool for getting the mind into concentration suddenly becomes a disturbance. You let it go. And it’s a similar process as you go through the levels of concentration, one after another. So you are learning to make choices, and you are learning to say “no” to some things in the mind, and “yes” to other things. And you just get more and more skilled at it, and get a better and better sense of what’s worth saying “no” to, and what’s worth saying “yes” to. So discernment does deal with dualities. We’re not here to see the oneness of all things. We’re here to see things as separate, as the Buddha said, and to make value judgments about what’s worth following and what’s not. That’s how we prepare ourselves. Because if you haven’t reached the level where you don’t have to worry about the problem of rebirth anymore, you’re going to have to be very careful about where you choose to go. You want to live a life that offers you good choices, and you want to train the mind and the qualities that allow you to be very clear about what’s going on, what your choices are, what you are choosing, who’s doing the choosing, what the results are going to be. That’s when you can provide yourself with a good refuge inside. A refuge that’s very particular, and is safe because it recognizes where the dangers are, and how they can be avoided.

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