Fangs in the Static

October 13, 2024

In one of the Ice Age movies there was a scene one time where the animals are on a raft, adrift in the ocean, and it’s foggy and dark. And all of a sudden they see a light, so they paddle over to where the light is. And it’s a whole series of mermaids and mermen lounging on rocks, luminous. The mermen are very handsome, the mermaids are very beautiful. They look very welcoming. And the animals on the raft get kind of dreamy-eyed. But then as you look more carefully at the mermaids and the mermen, you begin to see this static in the image. And you look into the static and there’s the fangs of piranha fish. This scene sticks in my memory. I saw it when I was on a plane one time. Because our minds are so much like that, we fall for the worst appearances of things. And don’t look carefully. When you think about when you’re going to die, what if your mind still has that habit of ignoring the bad sides of things and looking for the good side, and just running for whatever. Because think of it, you’re in this body and it’s pushing you out, you can’t stay here. And different images will appear to the mind based on your past karma. Some of them will be obviously unpleasant, others will be apparently pleasant, but if you look more carefully you realize that they have a lot of drawbacks. Like this human realm that we came into this last time we were born. If you compare it to some of the lower realms, it’s got a lot of appeal. But you really want to come back. The Buddha says there are better ways to die. At the very least you want to go to a higher realm. Ideally you want to not go to any realm at all. Be totally released. So you have to look at the mind’s tendency to fool itself. The way it places perceptions on things. Perceptions of the labels that it places on things that tell us what this thing is, what it means, what it’s worth. And like any label, you can put a really pretty label on something that’s pretty crappy. And there are some pretty bad labels that are on good things. And John Fuhrman my teacher, was a connoisseur of tea. And a student one time was also a connoisseur of tea. And he bought this box of tea. It had Mickey Mouse on the cover. And yet it was really good tea. So you can’t tell things by the cover. You can’t tell things by the labels. You have to learn how to look behind the labels. This is why the Buddha, when he was asked to teach a monk, Giriramananda, who was sick and might be dying, when he was asked to teach a monk, Giriramananda, who might be dying, he told Ananda to go and teach him ten perceptions. And these are perceptions to undo our tendency to see coming back to the human realm or coming back to be reborn as a good thing. Some of them are about the human body. If you take the human body apart, piece by piece by piece, and put it on the floor in front of you, you’d want to run away. Yet when it’s all assembled like this, as you’re sitting here right now, it’s perfectly fine. No problem at all. But you have to ask yourself, is this something you really want? Another one of the perceptions is of the drawbacks of the body. You can think whatever part of the body there is, there’s at least one disease, maybe many more diseases for that part of the body. As soon as you get a body, you’re opening yourself up to the possibility of suffering from this, suffering from that. Is that what you really want? In another place, the Buddha talks about the fact that simply that you have a body means that you’re subject to people yelling at you, subject to people hitting you. There are a lot of drawbacks to having a body. Yet many times we can think of only the good things. So you have to ask yourself, if something is attractive, is it necessarily good? Learn to look at the other side. As John Lee said, don’t be a person with one eye, be a person with two eyes. Anything that looks attractive, looks for its unattractive side. Anything that looks unattractive, looks for its attractive side. Because there are some things that look unpleasant, but actually might have something good to offer. Because you think about it, when you’re going to die, and have to be reborn, you want to be reborn in a place where you can practice the Dhamma. And sometimes those places are pretty unpredictable. Think about the northeast of Thailand, extremely poor area. That’s where the forest tradition came from, though. So even though if you’re born in a poor house, you might have the opportunity to meet with a true Dhamma. Unlike people who were born in Bangkok back in those same days, where they were taught by the monks that the path to Nibbana was closed, the path to Jhana was closed. Monks should engage in social services. So even though you can be born in a wealthy house in Bangkok, you might be hearing wrong view. Born in a little tiny shack in the northeast, you might hear right view. So don’t go for the appearances. Never mind that the Dhamma is something you want, regardless of the appearances. And then look at the things that would pull you away. That’s what these perceptions are for. Because they not only talk about the disadvantages of being born as a human being, they talk about the disadvantages of being born as a deva. Any world you could go to, it’s all going to fall apart. If it’s a really good world, you get really attached. Nothing about the devas living comfortably. All they have to do is think and whatever they want appears. Can you imagine how spoiled they’re going to be? And when you take on any world, what is it made out of? It’s made out of the same things that your experience of the world is made out of right here. The form of the body, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness, all very ephemeral things. So how are you going to build anything lasting out of things that are ephemeral like this? No, not all those perceptions are negative. The Buddha also has you think of the positive perceptions of how the cessation of these things would be a good thing. This passion for these things would be a good thing. This requires a certain amount of maturity to realize, yes, that there is a peace that comes. And we trust in the Buddha when he says that that is the highest happiness. Years back I was teaching the Four Noble Truths to a group here up in Orange County. And when we got to the Third Noble Truth about Nirvana, they said it didn’t sound all that attractive. You get to the Fourth Noble Truth where we have jhana, the practice of right concentration, which talks about pleasure and rapture. They said now that sounded attractive. As I told them, go for the jhana first, go for the pleasures of concentration first, and then as you get more sensitive by making states of concentration, you ultimately do want to go for the unfabricated, something that doesn’t require any putting together at all. It will not fall apart on you at all. The Buddha also has you develop these positive perceptions for cessation and dispassion. And then the final perception he has you focus on are the perceptions that come from breath meditation. Because when you do breath meditation you get more sensitive to how the mind creates its perceptions, where the allure of those perceptions is, what the drawbacks of the perceptions are. In other words, you get a better sense of what’s actually happening in the mind as it feels drawn to something. As the Buddha said, perceptions are like mirages. They promise something but then you get there and it’s not there, it’s someplace else. So you don’t want to be driven by perceptions, but you use wise perceptions first to pull yourself away from the attraction of bad ones. It’s like learning how to look at something that’s for sale, look at that label, look at the package, and say okay, I can’t judge the item by the package, let’s look inside and see what’s actually there. In other words, you’re training the mind how not to fool itself, or not to be fooled by its greed, its aversion and delusion. And you learn how to see the tricks of greed, aversion and delusion, how they make you think that something’s going to be really good when it’s not, or how they tell you that something is bad when it’s not. You learn to look behind the label. That’s when you begin to trust yourself. And you have to realize, if you can’t trust yourself now, while you’re sitting here perfectly fine, how well are you going to be able to trust yourself when you’re being pushed out of the body? You can’t stay here any longer. And all the regrets and all the attachments come welling up in the mind. And you have to learn how to not be affected by them. So the purpose of concentration is to make you strong, and to provide you with a basis for discernment, so you can begin to see through the ways the mind lies to itself with its perceptions, with its labels of things. So when the static comes, you can see, yes, there are bangs in the static. You know, you don’t want to go there. Or something that may not look all that appealing to begin with, but when you get there, you realize, okay, this really is fun. The idea of dispassion, cessation, the peace in the body may not sound all that attractive now. But as you practice the meditation, you get more sensitive to what really is the mind’s well-being, what really does weigh the mind down. You find that you get more and more attractive to the idea the mind’s not being weighed down by anything at all. So this is why the Buddha has you develop those perceptions. To incline the mind in the right direction, so it learns how to see through its tricks, its own tricks, and doesn’t let itself get fooled by itself ever again.

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