An Island in the Flood

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We live in a world where we lose so many things. We start out, we depend on our parents, we depend on our relatives. As our body gets stronger, we find we can depend more and more on it, and then we start to lose these things. Our parents go, our relatives go, and the body, after getting stronger for a while, starts to lose some of its powers, lose some of its strength. If we want to live in a world and not suffer a lot, we have to learn how to let go with good grace. And that requires that we have something good to hold on to. We hear so much about the Buddhist teachings of letting go, letting go. Even the teachers who are famous for emphasizing letting go, they also talk about when to hold on. And John Cha has the image of coming back from a market with a banana in your hand. Someone asks you, “What are you going to do with the banana?” You’re going to eat it. “Are you going to eat the peel too?” “Well, no.” “Then why are you holding the peel?” And he asks, “With what are you going to answer?” And his answer has two parts. The first part is that you answer with desire. You need the desire to come up with a good answer. And secondly, the answer, of course, is that it’s not time yet to let go. You let go of the peel when the time comes to eat the banana. Meanwhile, if you’d let it go first, the banana turns into mush in your hands, and you end up with nothing. Mahaprabhu gives another example. This is just like climbing a ladder. You hold on to one rung, and then you hold on to a higher one. And only when you’ve held on tightly to the higher one do you let go of the lower one and raise that hand up to a rung that’s still higher. You follow this up, up, up, until you finally get to the roof of the house. Then you can let go of the ladder entirely. Even in the canyon you find an image like this. There’s one time when the Buddha’s talking about going from one level of concentration to another, and finally going to awakening. And then he says it’s as if you’ve caught a wave going from one support, from the next support, across a river. You can imagine stones in the river, and you go from one to the next, to the next, and finally you get to the other side. So there are things we need to hold on to, but we have to develop them. We have potentials in the body, potentials in the mind, that don’t have to get worn away with a body and a mind. So we work on those. You can take those with you, and those become your safe place. It’s like right now we’re trying to develop a state of concentration. There’s an image for this, too. The Buddha talks about a river being in flood, but there’s an island that rises above the flood. That, he says, is your refuge. It’s a refuge that you make for yourself. And it’s basically the practice of right mindfulness. The right mindfulness here doesn’t mean that you just simply be aware of things. Right mindfulness is the Buddha’s instructions for how to get into right concentration. You focus on a topic, in and of itself, like the breath, and you put aside all other thoughts related to the world. And you do this with three qualities. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Like you’re going to keep the breath in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, each time you’re tempted to think about something else. You remind yourself, “Okay, I’m supposed to stay here.” And then you’re alert to watch what’s actually going on in the mind as you try to stay here. If the mind is with the breath, then you try to make the breath comfortable. So it’s a good place to stay. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. If the mind is not with the breath, you bring it back. This relates to the third quality, which is ardency. You’re trying to do this well. An effort has to go into this. When you do this properly, the mind will settle down with a sense of ease, even with a sense of fullness. At first, the ease and the fullness come from the fact that simply that you’re not entangled in the issues of the world. You’re coming into your own safe place. It feels good to settle down, to drop those issues outside. Now, to drop those issues outside requires right view. In other words, realizing that there are things that you’ve got to do inside that are more important than issues of the world outside. You’ve got to take care of the state of your mind. Because if you don’t take care of it, nobody else can take care of it for you. You have other duties in the world outside that other people can take care of. You can pick up if you are not doing them. But this is one where you’ve got to do all the work. You get inspiration from others who have practiced as well. But the actual work is yours. Each time the mind slips off, you’ve got to bring it back. If it slips off again, you bring it back again. When you come back, you ask yourself, “Why did it slip off?” You try to figure that out. The best way to figure it out is that every time as soon as you’re aware that you’ve slipped off, you come right back. You don’t wait for the thought to finish itself. Just leave the ends dangling. And as you do this, you get quicker and quicker at seeing what are the steps when the mind begins to forget about the breath that’s moving someplace else. Sometimes it’s with the breath and it’s already ready to go. It’s waiting for a chance. You want to be able to see that. When you can see that, then you can do something about it. You can make the breath more comfortable. You can make it more satisfying. An important principle in this is that you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the energy flows in the body and which parts of the body are very sensitive to that energy flow. The ones that feel really good when you breathe in. If you’re not sure, you can just hold your breath for a bit. When you can’t stand it any longer, then you allow yourself to breathe. You’ll notice that certain parts of the body will gulp in the breath, take it in. Those are the spots you want to notice. You want those spots to feel gratified by the way you breathe. That way, the sense of wanting to belong here gets stronger. In this way, all the thinking that you do around the breath gets more and more satisfying. You’re happier and happier to be here, because it simply feels good to be here. You move from feeling good about the fact that your thoughts are now wandering away, and then it feels more positively good that you’re right here, a spot that feels really good. After all, the breath is the energy of life, and it should feel good. So expand your imagination as to what kind of breathing would be really satisfying. You can try to provide for the parts of the body that seem hungry for breath energy. In this way, the mind will be more and more inclined to want to come back and to stay here where the work can be done. So your mind goes after thoughts that are based on greed, or aversion, or delusion. Thoughts that pull you away from your safe place. Because you really want to understand that. As the Buddha said, you want to learn how to think the thoughts that are worth thinking, and don’t think the thoughts that are not worth thinking. And you want to develop your discernment as to what actually is worth thinking. You want to learn how to say “no” to the other thoughts outside, “yes” to the thoughts that stay with the breath. Unless there are duties that you actually have outside, then you can think as much as is needed. But always have the breath as a safe place you can come back to. Another image from the forest tradition. It’s like having a knife. You want to make sure the knife stays sharp. So you sharpen it, and you put it in a scabbard. And you pull it out only when you need it. And then you sharpen it again, put it back in the scabbard again. So that when the time comes that you have to cut through something, the knife is sharp. It’s ready to do the work for you. All too often we just use the knife again, and again, and again, chopping, chopping, chopping away. And the knife gets dull, and we don’t sharpen it, and we don’t protect it. And of course it’s going to get more and more difficult to cut through things. But as you develop your qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, it’s like sharpening the knife. So you use your mind to think about things that are important to think about, and then you let it rest. But your resting is not just sleeping. You’re resting with mindfulness. You’re resting with alertness. That’s what keeps it sharp. So you have your safe place in your life for cutting through things that are going to cause difficulties. That way you can protect it. Because if you hold on to things that are going to be pulled away from you, the image the Buddha gives there is of being swept downstream by a river, and there are bunches of grass on the bank. And you try to hold on to them. But they’re sharp, so they cut through your hands. Or else there are bunches of grass with very weak roots. You pull on them, you try to hold on to them, and they just get pulled away. So you don’t want to get swept away by the world. We have that chant, “The world is swept away.” Make sure you don’t get swept away with it. Make sure you have an island. A good place to hold on. That way you can go through the world safely. You can live this life where you don’t have to let go of things. You can let go with grace, because you get something really good to hold on to. And I will see you through many, many difficulties, since you come out safe.

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