Lighter & Stronger

March 11, 2025

One of the basic principles of going on a trip is to take more than you need. Because the more you take, the more you get weighed down, and the harder it is to keep going. So there’s a strength in letting go. The Buddha talks about perceptions that you can develop that strengthen the mind. So that can become more independent. In fact, the perceptions help separate you out from things that you might ordinarily depend on. It includes the perception of inconstancy, perception of not-self, perception of the drawbacks. In this case, it would be the drawbacks of coming back and having a body again. We think of the body as opening the world to us, providing us all sorts of opportunities, but it also opens us up to disease. Every part of the body has one or two diseases, if not more. Even your eyebrows have little mites. And there’s the perception of abandoning, the perception of cessation, dispassion, the unattractiveness of the body. These are all designed to help you let go. And in letting go, the Buddha says, you strengthen the mind. Because you find that you can rely on less and less, so you’re not weighed down. Take the perception of inconstancy. Just observing that something is inconstant means that you have to step back from it. Because if you were one and the same with that thing, then when it disappeared, you wouldn’t notice it disappeared because you wouldn’t be there. That’s similar, but it arises again. You wouldn’t see it arising. You’re suddenly there and together with it. So the fact that you can observe something as it’s inconstant means this isn’t you. And it’s separating you from it. Instead of losing something that you needed in order to survive, you realize you can survive perfectly well without it. In fact, there’s a joy that goes with letting go. It’s the same, of course, with not-self. When you observe that something doesn’t fall in line with your wishes, it shows that it’s not really you. It’s not really yours. It’s not worth declaring as you or yours. This is one point that a lot of Buddhist scholars have argued with. What’s wrong with the idea of a self that you can’t control? And it’s possible to have that idea. But is it really worth identifying with something you can’t control? Their attitude is, “Well, if it’s all you’ve got, then you’ve got to hold on to it.” Here the Buddha’s making the point that you don’t need it. There’s something better. This is why we take the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self in the light of that third noble truth. We’re measuring things against something that is constant, totally easeful, and doesn’t require any sense of self. Not at all. It doesn’t require any sense of not-self either. You need not-self when you’re holding on. It’s like a bottle opener or a can opener. When the bottle needs to be opened, you hold on to the can opener. And when the bottle is already open, then you put it down. But you, again, strengthen yourself by not weighing yourself down. And all those things you claimed as you or yours, you have to remind yourself you don’t really need them. You’ve got something better. And so on with the contemplation of the drawbacks. Contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body. You realize what you’ve got here. Even though it’s a useful tool, it can bring a lot of suffering if you’re attached to it. And you’re better off not being attached. Again, these perceptions have to go with the whole set of the four noble truths. Because you get the mind into concentration. One of the things you’ll learn as you get the mind into concentration is that in the very beginning you need a lot of activities. We talked today about how concentration is fabricated. In the beginning, to counteract all those streams of the mind that would head off in different directions, you have to protect your focus on one object with lots and lots of activity. To counteract the fact that the mind wants to think about things, well, you think about the breath. You evaluate the breath. But there comes a point where you don’t need to do that anymore. A lot of people feel a little bit disoriented when they stop that internal commentary. And some people think that it’s a great insight in the fact that there is no ego there and no self there. There’s still a sense of self, but it’s very much attenuated. I was talking to somebody today who’s had one experience of no commentary in his mind, and he felt this is it. This must be the experience of not-self. That’s the problem with having preconceived notions about what you’re trying to get. What you have to do is look for what am I still doing? And to what extent is it necessary? And you realize after a while that the rapture that comes with the second jhana is kind of tedious. In the beginning it’s energizing, but after a while the mind wants something that’s more quiet. So you let that go. You need it in the sense of pleasure. The sense of having to breathe, you let that go as well. When the sense of breath energy is filling the body, you begin to notice that you can go longer and longer without breathing. It’s not that you suppress the breath, it’s just that everything is so thoroughly breathized in the body that there’s no need to breathe in or out. What you’re doing is discarding things, discarding things, discarding things. You’re finding that you’re stronger without having all those things. So many people go through life thinking, “Well, I’m going to need this someday, I’m going to need that someday.” And so they carry a lot of stuff around. The image they give in Thailand is of an old woman who carries a big bale of straw on her back. Because you never know when you’re going to need straw. Well, it’s stupid to carry that stuff around. And we think that we’re rich because we have a lot of things we’re carrying around. But we weaken ourselves. Both in the carrying around and in the sense of, “Well, I’m going to have to depend on this, I’m going to have to depend on that.” Your mind becomes a hothouse plant that can survive only in very specific environments. What you want is a plant that is really hardy, can survive anywhere. What that means is a mind that has lots of skills. And the skills of peeling things away like this is one of the primary ones. So you strengthen the mind by holding in mind perceptions that help you to separate yourself out from the things that you felt you had to rely on, or that you actually thought were you. Like this body. It’s hard for a lot of people to imagine themselves without a body, the particular one they have. And the body keeps refusing their claims. It finally kicks them out, then they go looking for another one, laying claim to that too. It’s because they have this attitude that they have to depend on things. Whereas if you develop these perceptions, these inner skills, you find that you’re perfectly fine without having to depend, without having to lean on anything. And therein lies strength. And therein lies freedom. Because we do have this tendency to keep fabricating states. Even with the concentration, you realize it’s a fabricated state. And there’s that attitude, “Well, it’s the best of God. I might as well hold on.” But this is why we’re lucky we have the Buddha to remind us, “No, there’s something better.” If you can learn to see where you’re fabricating it, stop doing that. And don’t replace it with any other fabrication. See what happens. That’s when the mind can exhibit its full strength. You’re strong because you travel lightly. And the mind is especially strong when it doesn’t have anything at all. It doesn’t need anything at all. There’s that refrain that you hear again and again and again, “How happy we are we who have nothing.” See how they suffer, those who have something. People bound in mind with people. People bound in body with people. People bound even to their own ideas. When you learn how to let go, that’s when you have everything you need.

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