Your Ancestral Territory

April 18, 2021

We begin each meditation session with chants about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, partly so that you can develop the right environment the right mental environment for the practice. And it’s just sitting here right now. But also so that you can associate these ideas with your breath. So that when, in the course of the day, you have to go to the breath. So when something difficult comes up, either from outside or inside, you go to the breath. And surrounding the breath are thoughts about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, thoughts about the Brahmavaras, to give you some perspective on what the issue is. So that as you stay with the breath, you’re not simply hiding out, trying to suppress the difficult issue, but you’re actually getting some perspective. So you can deal with the issue in a skillful way. Of course, as you go through the day, you do want to stay near the breath. It’s one of the establishings of mindfulness, the basis of your concentration practice. And you can think of the stories about the monkeys and the quail. They wander out of their ancestral territory. They’re going to get into trouble. But if they stay in their ancestral territory, they’re going to be safe. The story of the quail. It had wandered out of the field that had been newly plowed with all the stones turned up. And sure enough, a hawk swoops down, picks it up, carries it off. And the quail laments, “Oh, if only I hadn’t wandered away from my ancestral territory, I would have been safe.” “This hawk would have been no match for me.” Of course, that peaks the hawk. So he lets him go. He says, “Go back to your ancestral territory, but even there you won’t be able to escape me.” So the quail goes back, stands on a stone in the middle of the field, and taunts the hawk, “Come get me, you hawk.” The hawk swoops down and just as he’s about to get the quail, the quail hides behind the stone. The hawk shatters his breast on the stone, and the quail comes out safe. So in that case, the quail is simply hiding out. And the same with the monkeys. If they stay in their territory where the human beings can’t go, the human beings won’t be able to lay traps for them. It’s when the monkeys wander out of that territory into the areas where human beings can also go. When they lay traps, that’s when the monkeys get caught. So again, the image is largely one of hiding out. And there is that aspect. There are certain areas we just don’t go. But there are more than places just to hide out. As I said, if you stay close to the breath, it reminds you of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. They exist in this world. What perspective do they give you on the issues that’s facing you? This is a world in which the happy people are the ones who develop the Brahma-viharas, who have goodwill for all, compassion for all, empathetic joy for all, equanimity for all, as it’s appropriate. And what light do those attitudes throw on the issue? So it’s not just hiding out. It’s going to a place where you have a good perspective and you’re likely to come out winning. This is where it’s perhaps better to think about taking the high ground. In any battle, you want to be the one who holds to the high ground. Don’t let anybody lure you away. There’s a story of the Battle of Hastings. The Normans were invading southern England. And the English had hurried down. They’d just engaged a battle further north, and then they got the word that the Normans had landed down south. So they rushed down. And they’re wise enough to take the high ground at Hastings. And if they’d stayed on the high ground, they probably would have won. What happens is, the French make a charge on their cavalry, which was new. And then they turn around and beat a retreat. And the English couldn’t help themselves. They ran down from the high ground, chased the Normans away. And meanwhile, there was another Norman force that had come up behind. It seized the high ground. And now the British were down in the plain. And that’s when they got slaughtered. There’s a similar story in Thai history. Two Thai princes had been seized by the Burmese, taken as vassals, taken into Burma to be trained to be good vassal princes. And they were trained together with the Burmese viceroy. And there was some rivalry among them. And so it happened that there was a bandit chief who had a mountain stronghold. And so the king decided to have the young princes test their military strategies, see if they can get rid of the bandit chief. So first it was the turn of the Burmese viceroy. He took a large force and went running up the hill. And of course, the bandit chief had the high ground, and so he chased them down, chased them away. And then it was the turn of one of the Thai princes. He sent a small force up the front of the hill. And the bandits force chased them down. In the meantime, the prince had sent a larger force up behind the hill, seized the hill, and was able to get rid of the bandit chief. So the lesson there is, take the high ground and don’t be lured away. This is all too often the problem. Even when you’re with your breath, it’s all too easy to slip away. Suddenly you start getting involved in a storyline that pulls you away, pulls you away, sucks you in. And before you know it, your defilements have seized the high ground and you become their victim. So when we talk about staying with the breath as you go through the day, it’s not just a matter of maintaining contact with the breath between meditation sessions so it’s easier to settle down the next time. It’s your protection in the course of the day. And as I said, it’s not simply a matter of hiding out. You take an in-breath and you remind yourself, “Ah, I live in a world where there’s a Buddha, where there has been a Buddha, and this Buddha left behind a Dhamma. What did the Dhamma teach that other people have been able to use to get past suffering? My sufferings, even though they may be modern American sufferings, are at the basis of no different from the sufferings and the defilements of people in that time. They were able to find their way out. Why can’t I?” Then you approach every problem with the Brahma-viharas. You think about incidents in your life where you were mistreated or you mistreated other people. In both cases, you’ve got to have goodwill for all. Because, as we know, we’ve been through this many, many times, many, many lifetimes. We don’t know this, perhaps. But the Buddha says to take that as your assumption. And the karma has gone back and forth, back and forth, to the point it’s hard to tell who started what. And rather than settling scores or claiming victimhood, it’s good to say, “Let’s just get out of this.” And the way out is through goodwill, backed up by compassion, backed up by empathetic joy, grounded in equanimity. When you can look at your problems from that perspective, then they don’t have any hold on you. You hold to the high ground. So remember, this is your ancestral territory, in the sense that you want to join the lineage of the noble ones. They’re happy to have you join their lineage. It’s a lineage that’s open to all. And it’s one that provides safety in all directions. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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