The Raft

September 12, 2021

We’re going to compare the practice to a raft that you take across a river. The raft is something you have to put together yourself. You can’t wait for the nirvana or ghat to come from the other side to pick you up and take you over. You make it from the things you have right here. All the different fabrications in the body and the mind. You’ve got the breath. That’s part of the body, part of form. And then there are the feelings, the feelings of pleasure that you’re trying to create by the way you look at the breath. Then there are perceptions, sannyas, the images you have in the mind of how the breath comes into the body, where it comes in, where it goes out, where you would like it to come in, go out, where you would like it to go in the body. Then there are fabrications, the direct thought and evaluation, the way you talk to yourself about the breath. You can ask yourself, “Is the breath right now comfortable?” You watch it for a while, and then you try changing it to see which is more comfortable. You have to have something to compare in order to have this conversation. So you compare different ways of breathing. Deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. See what feels best right now. And when you find something, you hold on to it. And then there’s consciousness, which knows all these things. So you’re taking these five aggregates and you’re turning them into your raft or across the river, making them from things that are on this side. And using it to cross over the flood. One of the big floods in the Buddhist side is the flood of views. But part of the raft is the view of right views. So again, you have to be very selective when you let go, when you hold on. As you’re crossing the river, there will be things that will come passing along with the currents, and you have to learn how not to hold on to those, because those can pull you away down to the whirlpools, down to the waterfalls. You want to stay safe with your raft. So the Buddhist lessons in letting go, in developing dispassion, they’re all selective. As John Lee said, when we’re practicing concentration, we’re actually going against the three characteristics. When we think about the three characteristics or the three perceptions, those are to give rise to a sense of dispassion. And while you’re in concentration, you use them, you apply them to your distractions, anything that would pull you away right now. You’re trying to see how it’s inconstant. You’re trying to see how it’s stressful. Now it’s really not worth taking on as you or yours. But as for the concentration, you’re trying to make that constant and easeful and under your control. So you don’t apply the three perceptions there. In other words, you’re working on developing. As John Fung once mentioned to me, when I first went to Thailand, I was back in those days when I didn’t think there were any controversies in Buddhism. But he said that there’s some people who say that the practice is simply one of letting go, letting go. But that’s not the case, he said. There’s a lot that you have to develop, too. If you look in the Buddha’s own instructions, he talks about the customs and noble ones, and one of them is to delight in letting go and delight in developing. So we let go of unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. Let go selectively. Then you get to the other side. That’s when you get off the raft and get onto the shore. Here again, there are people who say that the whole purpose of the path is to arrive at right view. But that’s like saying the whole purpose of the raft is to get on the raft. Which is not the case. Even right view is something that you have to let go. It’ll be there when you need it, but it doesn’t form the essence of the mind that’s awakened. If you think about the Buddha, after he came to awakening, he still used all the factors of the path. But as he said, there was nothing that he was attached to. He picked up the path, he picked up the raft when he needed it, then he put it down. Now we’re not there yet, we’re still in the process of crossing over, so you hold on tight. You’re here in concentration, hold on to the object of your concentration, hold on to the path, follow it all the way in, all the way out. If you have your center in the body where you feel comfortable, maintain your center there. Hold on tight to that, don’t let anything pull you away. This way you’re learning some manners in how you let go. People without manners will just let go of everything. Good, bad, indifferent. Throw things away. As a result, they don’t get the benefit that comes from good things, and they don’t have any path. The Buddha taught that the path is something that’s fabricated, something you have to put together. It leads to something unfabricated, something unconditioned. But you’ve got to get fabrications right. For them to take you there. So hold on to your breath for the time being. Because it is your path. When Bhuvan used to say, “Make bhutto, your path, make your mind the path,” this is what he meant. Our mind ordinarily is a path to all kinds of things. Sometimes it follows the path to heaven, sometimes the path to a human rebirth, sometimes the path to hell. It keeps going around and around. Sometimes the path to an animal rebirth. But we can make up our minds. We want to make it a path that goes to one place, a safe place, a good place. Which means that we take these different aggregates that we use usually to make ourselves suffer, and we put them to a new purpose. That’s what the Buddha meant when he said that you take the twigs and the branches and the leaves on this side of the river, and you make them into a path. You take what you’ve got. And that way, what you’ve got, if you put it together right, will take you where you want to go.

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