Stagnant Water Stories

October 5, 2021

In Thai, there’s an expression, rung nam nao, which literally means “a stagnant water story.” It’s a kind of story where you see the beginning of the story and you know how it’s going to end. It’s not going to be all that imaginative, the same sort of thing all over and over and over again. And the mind has its stagnant water stories, the thought worlds where you go over something again and again and again. And even though you don’t like the story, it keeps coming back, and you go for it again. You’ve got to find some way of pulling yourself out. And this is what the skills of meditation are for, because those stories count as a state of becoming, an unhealthy, exasperating one. And as with all states of becoming, you have to learn how to pull out. There are two qualities that are very connected that are helpful here. When you’re establishing mindfulness, you have to be mindful. In other words, keep something in mind. In this case, keep the breath in mind. And keep in mind all the things you’re going to be dealing with. When something unskillful comes up, you have to remind yourself, “Okay, this is nothing to get involved with.” You have to recognize it as an unskillful mind state. And you remember whatever techniques you’ve learned in the past for getting out. There’s ardency, which is the attempt to do this work. Then there’s alertness, which is watching what you’re doing. And you have to realize that it’s not simply being aware of what you’re doing. There’s going to be a little bit of a commentary there as well. “Now I’m doing this, now I’m doing that.” And as the mind gets established and the factors of mindfulness are turned into the factors of jhana, this quality of alertness, together with ardency, turns into evaluation. We look at what you’re doing and you ask yourself, “Is it going well? And if it’s not going well, what can I do to make it go better?” And here that verbal fabrication gets more pronounced. So you’re pulling out, watching what you’re doing, and then commenting on it. Then you’re trying to comment in a way that’s helpful for getting the mind to settle down. So it’s this combination of being aware of what you’re doing, pulling out to watch, and then commenting. That’s precisely what you need to do with these stagnant water stories. Because there will be a part of the mind that says, “I just want to be done with these things and get rid of them.” Then you have to have intelligent commentary. It says, “As long as there’s an appeal to these stories, as long as you haven’t really fully understood them, you’re going to have to live with them.” The trick is learning how to live with them but not be overwhelmed by them, overcome by them, how to step out of them. Let them run on their own as long as they want, and you learn how to be apart from them. Sometimes this ability to step out is called the observer or the knower. But notice it’s composed of two things, just bare awareness of what’s going on. But it’s not really bare. It’s got some commentary going with it. The commentary is basically attention, the questions you ask, the comments you make. And you want it to be appropriate. The Buddha never had any use for bare attention. For him, there were only two types, appropriate and inappropriate. And it all has to do with the commentary that you’re running. So try to remember that you want intelligent commentary, one that’s going to be helpful. One that doesn’t just get frustrated and impatient. You can remind yourself to get out of these things. You have to understand them. These are an instance of suffering, stress. You’re latching onto something. It has to be comprehended before you can get rid of it, be done with it. And part of comprehending it is seeing what the cause is, what the origination is, where it’s coming from in the mind. The fact that this story has such a pull, you have to watch and ask questions, and watch again and ask questions, and try to find that spot outside where the mind can gain some nourishment, some refreshment, so that it does have the patience and it does have the strength not to get frustrated. This is why we develop the breath, so you have a good place to stay. At the same time, as you’re working with the breath, you’re developing this quality of evaluation. You’re learning to teach yourself how to talk to yourself, basically. We’ve been talking to ourselves ever since we learned language. There are times when a thought comes in and we don’t feel right about letting it go. We want to see it through to the end, even though it may not be all that useful or helpful. But there’s that part of the mind that feels completely compelled, almost obligated, to finish off its thoughts. And you have to remind yourself there’s no obligation. Just because one committee member has proposed a thought doesn’t mean you have to take it on. And as you’re evaluating the breath, you will find that there are distractions that come up. This is where you have to remind yourself to pull out of the distraction, watch it, and learn the intelligent commentary on it. Now you’ve got a good place to stay with the breath. That helps you with your patience. Because patience is not just putting up with things. It requires that you find, “What is pleasant here? What can I rely on? Where are my strengths right now?” They’re there. I keep thinking about that time when Ajaan Fu had us do an all-night sit one time without morning. It was after a very busy day. I felt I couldn’t do it. I said as much. He said, “Is it going to kill you?” “No.” “In that case, you can do it.” I wasn’t all that convinced, but I gave it a try. It was partly out of sheer tenacity and partly because I learned some things about the breath that night. I learned some things about how you can play with the breath, play with your perceptions of the breath, to make it interesting, make it more comfortable, make it a more reliable place to be. So sometimes when you’re forced, you find that you have resources inside that you didn’t expect. So the part of the mind that pulls out of the breath, paints a black picture, is not necessarily what you want to believe. In fact, you don’t believe it at all. The whole point of the teaching is that it’s something that we can do. It’s a teaching appropriate for human beings. We’re human beings. So it doesn’t demand any superhuman forces. But as you take it on, you try to rise to the challenge, you find that human forces can be a lot stronger than you might have thought. So take heart. The Buddha teaches us the skills we need to take advantage of the potentials that we have. As Ajaan Soheil used to like to say, “If you don’t trust anybody else, at least trust the Buddha.” Lots of other people have trusted him, and they’ve all benefited as a result.

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