Crossing the Ocean

April 16, 2022

Sanghran is the beginning of the new year throughout South and Southeast Asia. Tomorrow we’ll have the ceremony that goes along with it. But tonight it’s good to stop and take stock of what you can get out of it, the idea of a new year. Our practice focuses mainly on the present moment. You’re focusing on the breath right now. But every once in a while it’s good to take the long view to see why we’re focusing on the breath, what’s accomplished. And when you take the long view, it gives you a better perspective on what you’re going to be doing as you focus back in on the present moment again. And John Lee makes the comparison that life is like crossing over the ocean. And for a lot of us, we’re put to difficulties. Our boat is not very secure. It’s not well stocked. We have a problem with water. We’re surrounded by saltwater. But we can’t drink saltwater. We can’t bathe with it. So what do we do? He says you need the skill of how to go across the ocean. First you start by stocking your boat with provisions. That’s being generous. And then you practice restraint of the senses to caulk your boat. In other words, you’re sealing it up so water doesn’t seep in and you don’t sink. As you go through the day, you want to make sure that when you look at something or listen to something, you know who’s looking and who’s listening. In other words, is it your discernment? Is it your wisdom listening? Is it your mindfulness looking? Or is it your greed, aversion, and delusion? You’ve got to look at your motivation. Because if you give in to an unskillful motivation on something simple like this, it becomes habitual. Then it carries into your meditation. You’re sloppy outside, you get sloppy inside. Again with John Lee, one of his comparisons is, “If you have no restraint over the senses, it’s like leaving the doors and windows of your house open all the time. Anything can come in.” I went with John Fu one time. He very rarely accepted invitations to eat at people’s houses because he didn’t like chatting. But he would go on the condition that he didn’t have to chant. He could give a Dhamma talk instead or have a Dhamma discussion. One time I went along with him, and the sister of the sponsor came up after the meal. She’d been meditating with somebody else. She asked him, “This meditation that we’re doing here, it’s mainly to make the mind empty, right?” He said, “No, you can’t leave your mind empty. You have to give it work to do. If you leave it empty, it’s like leaving the door to your house open. Anything can come wandering in. Animals can come wandering in. When they wander in, they take over the house.” So you don’t just leave your senses exposed. You don’t leave your mind exposed. You protect it. You look both at your motivation for looking, and then when you look at things in a certain way, what’s the impact that it has on your mind? Does it give rise to more greed, aversion, and delusion? Okay, you’re looking in the wrong way. Even when something is really desirable, you can look at it in a way that has its undesirable side, and vice versa. The things that you really don’t like might actually have their good side. We don’t like loss. We don’t like loss of status. We don’t like criticism. We don’t like pain. But they have their good side. If you learn to see their good side, then you can live in this world and not be put into danger by it. Your boat is well-sealed. Then there’s that issue of the water. We live in a world where there’s lots of things going on. People say, when you look at the internet nowadays, it’s called “doom-scrolling.” It’s just one disaster after another. I’m reminded of a wildlife documentary I saw one time. It was about troops of monkeys in the Himalayas. There was one troop that was attacking another, and the camera pretended to focus on one of the baby monkeys watching the adult monkeys going at each other, ready to kill each other. And the look on its face was, “How did I get into this world?” Well, if you look at the human world, it’s the same sort of thing. We’re not much better than the monkeys, except that our teeth are sharper. We’re more capable of killing large numbers of one another. And there are people who think that their happiness comes from doing that. That’s what’s shocking. What are you going to do? You’ve got to find some way of getting some good out of this world and putting some good back in. John Lee’s recommendation was that you set up a distinct distillery to distill the salt water and make it fresh water. You do that through the meditation. Focus here on the breath. As the Buddha says, “Focus on the body in and of itself.” For the time being, you don’t make any reference to anything outside. Stay inside your boat, watch the breath, and then develop good qualities of mind as you do it. You’re going to have to apply them to two activities, actually. There’s staying focused on the body and also putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. This is where you distill out the salt from the water. Because there’s goodness that can be found in the human world. It can be found, though, through developing the mind. You’ve got to take in all the salt. So you focus on what you’ve got right here, right now, and you loosen your reference to the world outside. Remember, when we get across this ocean, ideally we get to the point where we’re no longer involved in becoming, taking on an identity and a particular world of experience. To do that, you have to learn how to not think in terms of your identity or of the world. Just look at events that you’ve got going on right here, right now, as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down. Because that’s what mindfulness is for, or right mindfulness is for, developing right concentration. So you really want to stay established in your frame of reference, the body as a whole, breathing in, breathing out. To do that requires three qualities. There’s mindfulness in the ability to keep something in mind. Mindfulness, in general, is defined as the ability to remember what was done and said long ago. Of course, you don’t want to clutter up your mind with all kinds of things from long ago. You want to use the things that are actually relevant to getting the mind to settle down—the lessons you’ve learned from the past, the lessons you’ve heard from somebody else or that you’ve observed from your own practice. You want to keep those in mind. It’s not the case that we’re practicing a beginner’s mind every time we sit down to meditate. You want to be alert. You want to be fresh in your alertness. But you want it to be informed. You have some knowledge of what’s skillful and what’s not already. You have some knowledge of where you like to stay focused or where it’s most comfortable to stay focused. Why use that knowledge? Because you’ve also learned that you can’t take a lesson that you learned yesterday and force things to be that way again today. You have to make some adjustments. So you have to remember that as well. Then there’s the quality of alertness, the freshness of your powers of observation, as you focus specifically on what you’re doing right here, right now. And then the third quality is ardency, not dullness. When you try to do this well, because the Buddha’s picture of the mind is that it’s active, we’re not just here aware, aware, aware. As he said, the mind is the forerunner of all things, or all phenomena have the mind as their forerunner. That’s the first line in the Dhammapada. Because the mind is active, it’s looking. As the Ajahns say, “It flows out.” You want to take that flow and actually make something good out of it. Be conscious, be alert to how it’s flowing. In this case, you want it to flow toward concentration and flow toward discernment. This way it gets through your distillery. You filter out all references to the world outside. There’s still some reference to you doing this. In the Sutta, the Buddha talks about the things you say to yourself while you’re practicing mindfulness, especially the first stage of mindfulness. And it does involve a sense of “me” and “I.” “I will breathe in this way, I will breathe in that way, breathe in long, breathe in short, breathe in sensitive to the entire body, breathe in calming bodily fabrication, breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure.” There’s an “I, I, I,” and then there’s “me.” Sensual desire is present within “me.” Mindfulness is present within “me.” There are still some terms of becoming, but you use the terms as they’re needed. The main emphasis is on the experience of the breath and the stillness you can develop in the mind, and your understanding of the mind that develops as you do this. You’re developing both tranquility and insight together. Then you’ve got a mind that’s pure water, drinkable water. That’s what the Buddha calls the purity of mindfulness and equanimity. That’s where you’re aiming. Then you can see things really clearly. You don’t stop with the concentration. You use the concentration again to discernment. But you want this ability to get the mind settled in, clear, concentrated, able to watch things, not get knocked around. That’s bringing the mind into balance. You’ve gotten rid of all the salt and all the other impurities, and the mind at this point is pure and malleable. The change in the image is like gold, and you can do what you want with the gold. Particularly, you can use it to understand why it is that the mind, even though it wants nothing but happiness, keeps on creating more and more suffering and stress for itself. The mind in concentration is a really good place to see that clearly. If you’re not in concentration, sometimes it’s hard to admit to yourself that you’re actually the cause of your own suffering, or that your actions are the cause of your suffering. You get defensive, and things just close up. But once there’s a sense of well-being, the mind is refreshed. You’ve got that fresh water now. You can drink it. You can bathe with it. Then you’re in a much better mood to look at, “Well, where is it that you keep on bringing dirty things in? Why do you have to keep on bathing?” In other words, you take that water and you put it to use. But you keep on making it. You’ve got a long ways to go across that ocean. But there’s water all around. If you apply the right effort, that’s the warmth that you apply to the distillery, you can get the fresh water that you want. Of those three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—Ajahn Lee points out that the ardency is actually the discernment factor, because mindfulness on its own is neutral. You can be mindful of all kinds of things, skillful and unskillful. The same with alertness. You can watch yourself do skillful and unskillful things, and it still counts as alertness. But with ardency, there has to be the element of skillful for it to really be ardent, in the Buddhist sense of the term. So that’s the heating element in the distillery. Keep on applying that together with the concentration, together with your equanimity. As these three qualities work together, you get the fresh water you want. And that’s what can keep you going. In Ajahn Lee’s image, he said, “Once you’ve got enough water for yourself, you realize you can create clouds with your distillery, clouds of fresh water that will go around and rain on people who need rain.” In other words, you send thoughts of goodwill. So you’re not the only one who benefits from your distillery. The people around you benefit as well. That’s when you’re living in the world. And you’re not just taking from the world, you’re giving. This is part of the problem of our suffering. We’re constantly trying to feed off things, taking in, taking in, taking in. And no wonder we get sick, because we’re not all that selective about what we take in. But now that we’ve got this distillery, even though we’re taking in salt water, we can turn it into fresh water. And then we can reverse the dynamic. Then we can give something good back. So we can find happiness in this world. And we can give happiness in this world as well. We may not be able to change the world for everybody, but we do what we can. We take care of our needs, and whatever’s left over, we’re happy to share. So when you take that long view, it turns around and focuses right back here. It’s in the same way that when the Buddha would talk about karma, sometimes he’d talk about huge cycles of the universe, deep time, how the universe would evolve and devolve again and again and again. But he’d always end the discussion with karma. Why does the universe evolve and devolve this way? It’s because of karma. Where is karma being made? It’s being made right now. So focus back here, right now, in the same way. Where is your mindfulness right now? Where is your alertness? Where is your artsy? Well, it should be right here, right now. That long view gives you a clear idea of what it should be doing. It’s simply up to you to do the work.

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