Rivers of Craving

January 2, 2023

What are you doing right now? If you’ve made up your mind to meditate, try to stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Sometimes you find that other thoughts come up. In fact, it’s rare that it’s not the case that other thoughts come up. One of the skills you want to learn is how not to go with those other thoughts. You’ve made up your mind that this is where you really want to go. And the more you can stick with it, the more you’re developing good habits in the mind. Remember, when the Bodhi gained his awakening, where did he gain it? We could say he gained it under the Bodhi tree in India. But we could also say that he gained it right here, where the mind and the body meet at the breath. So we don’t have to go over to the Bodhi tree to gain it. We can focus right here, where the mind and the body meet at the breath, and learn a lot of the same lessons that he learned. But first we have to get the mind into concentration, get it focused as steadily as we can. Because it wasn’t until he got his mind concentrated that he actually could see what was going on. This is why we should have respect for concentration when the Buddha taught us. He talks about the different things that we should respect in order to keep the true Dhamma alive. He talks about the triple training. Then he says again, concentration. Concentration is part of the triple training. So obviously he meant to stress the fact that concentration really is important, and it tends to get overlooked. So we don’t want to make that mistake. We should have respect for the fact that we have got to get the mind to settle down so you can do what you can. I was reading recently someone saying that you should be a friend to yourself and not place high expectations on your practice. That’s not being a friend. Think about the best teachers you had, the ones that taught you the most. They were the ones who demanded the most out of you. They were skilled. They knew how to get the most out of you. They knew in a way that you were happy to give it. But they were demanding. And there’s a part of you that has to be demanding with yourself. You can’t say, “Well, I’ve got a whole hour here, so let’s spend fifteen minutes checking my internal emails and then your internal Facebook and all the other internal communications that are going on in the mind.” You’ve got to get right to work. Some people have a fear of getting into concentration too quickly because they don’t know what they’ll do with themselves once the mind settles down. The thing is, you maintain what you’ve got. And in the maintaining, you’re going to learn a lot of important lessons. So you want to get with the breath as quickly as you can. Work down through the different spots, say in the spine, where there might be blockages that are going to create troubles in your leg later on. Open those up and get everything ready so you can settle in. And as you settle in, you begin to see things more and more in terms of actions. There will be a sense of you doing the actions, and eventually you want to get past that. But for the time being, you need that, because these actions, to be skillful, are not going to just happen on their own. If you let things simply follow whatever course they’re going to follow, you’ll find yourself drifting away. So as you’re focusing on settling in, really maintain that intention. Keep reminding yourself that it’s really kind of you to maintain that intention. You have goodwill for yourself. You’re concerned for yourself. There’s that Pali term, uttapa, which means compunction. It comes down basically to caring about what’s happening and what’s going to happen in the future. It’s your way of showing concern for yourself. Because we realize that there are these dangers in the world, and the dangers come out of the mind that’s not trained. So you’ve got to get it focused. And in getting it focused, you’re learning an important skill, how not just to follow whatever comes into the mind. Because, as the Buddha discovered, as he finally did get his mind to settle down, got past the first two knowledges and got to the real essence of the awakening, there is this tendency of the mind just to follow its cravings. That’s what causes suffering. And as long as the mind is weak, it gives in to whatever impulse comes in, if it hasn’t been trained. So part of the training is to strengthen the mind so that even when the body is tired, even when you’re sick, you still have mental strength, the strength of concentration. But then there’s the strength of discernment as well. And the strength of discernment is something else. It’s when you see and understand why it is you go over these things. If you were to die right now, say you were in a lot of pain and you had been in pain for a while, and the time came when you discovered that you can’t even breathe, where would the mind go? The Buddha says there are basically three different directions you can go. One is to go with sensual fantasies. These can be fantasies of all kinds, fantasies about a place, fantasies about a person. There are fantasies about objects, fantasies about relationships. The thing about those fantasies is that they tend to show only the good side of whatever that situation may be or that person may be, and they hide all the other sides. This is why we found out we came into this human world. The human world has its appeal. But as we’ve seen going through the years, it has its downsides as well. And we weren’t paying attention to that at the moment that we came into the human realm. All we saw was what was attractive, what was appealing. And do you want to fall for that again? That’s one kind of craving. Another kind of craving is simply wanting to be somebody. You see things beginning to fall apart. You’ll grab at whatever identity you can assume. Again, it’ll be based around a desire of some kind. But the emphasis here will be less on the desire and more on your identity. Often this goes together with sensuality. There’s that famous poem where a nun is going through the forest and this goldsmith’s son comes up to her and starts a proposition. His propositions are all about the beautiful person she will be and the lovely place she’ll get to live if she goes with him. In other words, he’s trying to build fantasies not only of sensuality, but also of what she would become. Like a golden goddess, like a golden doll, he says. That will appeal to her. Fortunately, she was a nun-returner, and she could see right through it. There’s that famous story where she asks him, “What is it in this body full of all these disgusting things that you find attractive?” He says, “Your eyes.” He goes on and on about her eyes. There’s one translation where he comes out as being pretty blunt and the kind of man obviously no one would want to go anywhere with. In the original Pali, though, he’s a real smooth talker. But again, she’s not fooled. She says, “You like my eyes? Well, here’s one.” She plucks one out. Of course, that scares him. A woman brave enough to pluck out her own eye. So he leaves her alone. The story ends when she goes to the Buddha again and her eye grows back. But the thing to notice there is how much our fantasies about sensuality also involve fantasies about becoming, who you would like to become, what you would like to be. Again, you would think that if you had died and followed your cravings, you’d probably want to become only good things and find only good things. But sometimes craving can be like the Buddha’s image. It’s like the wind carrying a fire. And the wind can go all kinds of directions. And if you feel really desperate at that point, you can just grab anything. It’s basically craving to be snuffed out. You’ve been through a lot of pain. You look back on your life and it’s been pretty miserable. I have a student who gained a memory of ten past lives one time, and at the end of each life it was, “Oh, the suffering. Oh, the suffering.” And it’s very easy, when you’re thinking about that, to say, “Well, I’d just rather be nothing at all.” But that just takes you to a blanked-out state, which is still a state. It’s a state of becoming and coming back again. So these are the directions you could go. It’s important to remember that the Buddha, when defining the cause of suffering, singled these three out as being the ones that are going to grab you. So be on the lookout for them. Sometimes you hear it said that the cause of suffering is wanting things to be different from what they are. The Buddha was never foolish enough to say that, because after all, the desire to gain awakening, the desire to develop skillful qualities, that’s basically wanting things to be different from what they are. And that’s part of the path. So we do want things to be different from what they are. It’s simply that we want to learn to direct things in the right direction. So instead, focus on the fact that those three kinds of craving pretty much cover how you’re going to cause yourself more suffering. So be particularly on the lookout for them. And if they don’t seem particularly strong, this is one of the reasons why some people go into the wilderness and subject themselves to hardships and various conditions. Just to say, “Would my mind go in that direction? Would it start fantasizing about different kinds of food?” You go to a place where the food is pretty poor and you find yourself dreaming about food. Okay, there you are, sensuality craving. You go to a place where people don’t recognize the good things about you that your friends have recognized. I noticed this when I went to Thailand. All of a sudden, my identity became a total cipher. I was just this strange Westerner. I was fortunate that Chan Phuong took me on. Then there was no outlet for several years. There was no outlet for the talents I had developed as a layperson. And it felt challenging. I found that I had to establish a new identity. But there I was, going for another identity. So this is one of the reasons why we push ourselves. And this is why it is being a good friend to yourself, to push yourself. Because you learn to admit to yourself that these cravings do exist. And you want to get familiar with them so that you don’t fall for them. And you want to learn about them while you’re still strong and able. So you can withstand them not only with concentration but also with discernment. What’s the allure? Why would you want to go for that? You learn the mind’s reasonings and you can start seeing through those reasonings. And when you’ve seen through them, then even when you’re physically weak, you realize, “Okay, that’s a bunch of lies.” And you’re a lot less likely to fall for them. That’s why the Buddha said sometimes you have to practice with pain. When pain comes up, how do you relate to it? Can you learn how to see it in such a way that it doesn’t overcome the mind? Because that’s one of the big things that drives people to sensuality craving. Because the only alternative they can see to pain is sensual pleasure. The Buddha says, “No, there’s a better pleasure. There’s a pleasure of concentration. Even better than that. There’s a joy that comes when you can learn how to see that,”Oh, I’m seeing the pain as the same thing as my leg, but if I change the perception, all of a sudden either the pain goes away or at least it doesn’t weigh the mind down.” And you wouldn’t have learned that if you hadn’t sat with the pain. So learn how to push yourself so that you can understand your cravings. Otherwise they go underground or they stay under the surface. The Buddha compares them to a river, and you can think of them as the beasts that lie under the surface, or the strong currents that lie under the surface. And you’re not going to see them until you put up a dam. You’re not going to sense how strong they can be. So learn to be a friend to yourself. Don’t just give up. Give in to your desires for comfort, your desires for things to be easy and not too challenging. It’s through challenging ourselves that we learn things about ourselves we otherwise wouldn’t know. Look at the Buddha. He challenged himself for six years of self-torture and realized that that was the wrong path. But in the meantime, he had learned a lot. That’s why he didn’t say that austerities were all bad. Some people, he said, have to go through some pretty austere practices for them to admit what’s going on in their minds. Other people don’t require that much austerity. But then you can’t decide ahead of time which type of person you want to be. You have to find out who you are as you test yourself in the practice. These are things you can learn right here, as you’re aware of what’s going on in the present and where the mind tends to go, and how you can keep it from going places that you realize are unskillful. Do the strength of your concentration, the strength of your discernment, to do your best to maintain your focus right here. Because that’s where things will open up and reveal themselves.

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