

## *The Raft of Concepts*

*August 3, 2007*

When you start out meditating, you have to think—but in a skillful way. In other words, directed thought and evaluation are factors of right concentration on the level of first jhana. Even if you can get into concentration really quickly, it requires some thinking to get you there. And if you get into concentration slowly, you've got to learn how to think your way into the concentration. So think about the breath; visualize the breath in the body. Think about how to make the breath more comfortable. Once it's comfortable, think about how to spread it around in different parts of your body. Think about the way you understand the breath. There are various levels to the breath, you know. There's the in-and-out breath. There's the breath energy flowing along your blood vessels, flowing along your nerves. There's a still breath in the body. There are lots of breaths you can think about. And these thoughts, if you use them properly, are all meant to help the mind get settled down.

The Buddha once said that after all his years of false starts and dead-end alleys, he finally got onto the path when he realized that he should divide his thoughts into two types: skillful and unskillful. This meant that he judged his thoughts by the results they gave. He didn't say that all thinking was bad. He did say that if you thought skillful thoughts for 24 hours, the drawback would be that the body and mind would get tired, so you want the mind to learn how to rest from the thinking. But he never said that the conceptual mind is bad. It's simply a matter of learning how to use your concepts properly. That's the path. It's part of right view and right resolve. These factors of the path involve thoughts.

So we can't condemn thoughts entirely. We just need to learn how to think in new ways, in ways that are actually skillful, that help free the mind. Ultimately you do get to a place that's beyond concepts, that goes beyond words, but you need concepts and words to help get you there.

This is a point that a lot of people misunderstand. They think that in order to get beyond concepts, you just drop concepts immediately. It's like the old simile of the raft. The version in the Buddha's teachings is that you take the raft across the river. Then, once you get across the river, you don't need the raft anymore. You can put it aside. Thoughts of right view and thoughts of right resolve are part of the raft. You hold onto them while you're crossing the river, and only

then do you put them aside. However, in the Diamond Sutra's version of the simile, you get across the river by dropping the raft to begin with. But that version of the simile just doesn't work. If you drop the raft before you've reached the other shore, you get washed away. So learn how to use the raft.

This issue goes way back to the time of the Buddha. There's a story in the Canon about Anathapindika, who was out walking in the morning. He said to himself, "It's too early to go visit the monks; why don't I go visit the members of other sects?" So he went to a place where the other sectarians were having their debates. They were debating whether the world is eternal or not; whether it's finite or infinite; whether the soul is the same thing as the body or something different from the body; whether an enlightened being exists after death, or doesn't exist, or both, or neither. Those were the hot issues of the day.

The sectarians saw Anathapindika coming and said, "Hey, let's be quiet for a while. This person is a follower of the Buddha. The Buddha's followers like quiet people. Maybe if we're quiet, he'll come over and talk to us." So they fell quiet. When Anathapindika came, they asked him: "So. This Buddha you're a student of: What are his views?" And Anathapindika said, "I really don't know the total extent of his views." "What about the monks? What are their views?" And he responded, "I don't know totally what their views are, either." "Then what about you?" they asked him. "What are your views?" And he responded, "Well, I'll be happy to tell you my views, but I'd like to hear your views first."

So they told him their views. One man said, "The world is eternal. Only this is true; everything else is false and worthless." Someone else said, "No, the world is not eternal. Only this is true; everything else is false and worthless." And so on down the line.

Anathapindika's response was: "Those who hold to any of these views suffer because they're clinging to the view. The view is conditioned, and whenever there's clinging to anything conditioned, there's bound to be suffering. So they're clinging to stress." The sectarians then said, "Well, what about your view?" And he said, essentially, "All views are conditioned. Whatever is conditioned, you have to let go of." They said, "Well, then, by your logic, your view too is a cause for suffering, for you're clinging to something conditioned." And he said, "No, this is the view that leads beyond suffering, because it teaches you ultimately how to let go of everything conditioned, including views."

According to the story, this left them abashed. They just sat there with their heads drooping, at a loss for words. So he got up and left. When he told the Buddha what had happened, the Buddha said, "This is a good way to deal with those people."

So this is the Buddha's approach. Not all views are a cause of suffering. Right view leads you away from suffering because it allows you to do two things. First,

you can use it as a tool to uproot your clinging to everything else. Then, because it teaches you to recognize all your attachments wherever they are, it teaches you how to turn around and let go of right view itself.

People often come to the Dhamma thinking that we're here to get beyond concepts. But they run into concepts in the Buddha's teachings, and therefore they feel that the Buddha's being inconsistent. What's inconsistent, though, is their misunderstanding. The Buddha never says that we have to drop concepts from the very beginning. He says you use concepts to get beyond concepts.

Many people in the modern world come to Buddhism suffering from their conceptual framework. They're raised in a materialist worldview whose basic concepts—that life comes from nothing and returns to nothing, with a brief chance to pursue pleasure in the interim—are pretty dismal. They believe that if they could free their minds from these concepts and simply dwell in the present with no thought of what happens at the end, they'd be happy. They'd be able to squeeze as much pleasure out of the present as they could before the inevitable hits.

So they look for a way to be free of all concepts. When they come here, though, they run into concepts. They see the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth, and they say, "This is invalid; you can't make presuppositions about these things. Nobody knows anything about what happens before we're born. Nobody knows anything about what happens after we die. Doesn't the Buddha say that you have to prove things before you can accept them? All we know is that you can blot these issues out of the mind and be in the present moment without any concepts, and that's happiness." So that's what they want the Buddha's teachings to be. They don't realize that they're judging the Buddha's teachings by the very concepts that are making them miserable. The idea that we can't know beyond our immediate sensory experience, so therefore we just try to heighten our immediate sensory experience: That's a concept itself, and although it may aim at going beyond concepts, it doesn't really get you there. The Buddha's concepts, though, actually give results. They're very open about the fact that you have to use concepts to get beyond concepts, and their idea of what's there when the path has freed you from concepts is more than just a pleasant oblivion in the present. It's another dimension entirely.

That's what right view is all about. It's there for you to judge the concepts you're bringing to the path, to see which ones fit into the strategy of the path to that dimension—nibbana—and which ones don't. The Buddha never says that he can offer an empirical proof of the teachings on kamma, rebirth, or nibbana. But he says that if you do adopt these ideas, they're very helpful in taking you beyond suffering. In other words, he offers a pragmatic proof: He has you look at these concepts in terms of what they do, where they lead. If you find that they

lead you to wanting to train the mind so you can get rid of the craving that leads on to future rebirth, they've performed their function.

Then as you sit down here to meditate, you can put the concepts that are not immediately relevant to your meditation aside. If you find that you're having trouble sticking with the meditation, you can call up those concepts again to remind yourself of why you're here, to induce a feeling of *samvega*, a dismay over the pointlessness of life as it's normally lived; and a feeling of *pasada*, or confidence that if there's any way out, this has got to be it: training the mind, learning how to watch the mind so you can see where its misunderstandings lead it to suffer, where its misunderstandings lead it to crave things that are going to cause problems on down the line. And as for the teaching on nibbana, it reminds you that freedom from suffering isn't just a total blackout. It's the highest happiness there is.

In this way, you can use the Buddha's insights on these topics to give more impetus to practice. After all, we're doing something important here. We're not just trying to hang out in the present moment and squeeze as much intensity out of it as we can. The Buddha says that our intentions, if they're unskillful, stand in the way of the ultimate happiness. So we're here to watch our intentions. This is where the teaching of kamma is always and immediately relevant to your meditation, and why the Buddha stresses the issue of kamma over and over again.

The early Buddhists often made the point that their teachings on kamma were what set them apart from all the other teachings available at the time. For instance, the Buddhist take on kamma isn't the deterministic view that some people held to at that time. And it's not a view of total chaos, either. It's a nonlinear pattern. And the important element in that non-linear pattern is that part of your experience is shaped by past intentions and part of it's shaped by your present intentions. You can't do anything about past intentions, but you *can* change your present ones. So you focus there. That's why we're focused on the present moment: to look at our intentions. When you have right view, you realize that that's why we're here.

This helps give focus to your meditation. Once the mind is still, you intend to *keep* it still. That's a skillful intention. Then you can start looking at the process of intention in a deeper way, to see exactly how intention happens, how much it shapes your present experience, how you fabricate your breath, how you fabricate thoughts, how you fabricate feelings and perceptions. You want to look into that. That's how discernment is developed. You're not going to maintain this kind of focus unless you have a real appreciation that, yes, your actions really are important in this issue of creating suffering—not only now but on into the future. This is how the proper use of concepts gives focus to your meditation.

A while back, I was giving a talk to a group of people on kamma. They'd been meditating for quite a while, so I tried to make the point that an understanding of kamma really focuses your meditation in an important way. It helps focus you on the issue of what you're doing that's skillful and what you're doing that's not skillful, and realizing how much your "doing" does shape your experience.

They all gave me a blank look. Then I realized that they'd been taught that there is no such thing as skillful or unskillful, good or bad in the meditation. It's simply a question of hanging out in the present moment, squeezing as much non-conceptual intensity out of the present moment as you can—which is an idea the Buddha never advocated. That's not what we're here for. I mean, there *will* be times when you notice that being very mindful in the present makes experiences more intense. You're less caught up in your thought worlds, and the pleasure in the breath grows stronger. Everything becomes more immediately felt. But that's not why we're here. You want to look deeper: What is it about intention that makes the difference in the present moment? Always look for that, because that's where freedom is going to be found—in being sensitive to your intentions. When you're totally sensitive to them and totally understand how they cause stress, you can let them go. This is what the Buddha calls the kamma that leads to the end of kamma.

This is why an understanding of causality is so essential. If everything were deterministic, your experience would have been totally decided by some outside being or some impersonal fate a long time ago. There would be no point in practicing. There would be nothing the practice could accomplish. If, on the other hand, everything were chaotic, you couldn't be sure that the lessons you learned yesterday would give any guidance in knowing what to do skillfully today. But the fact that things are nonlinear and not totally determined by the past—that part of your experience is being determined by what you're choosing to focus on, what you're choosing to do and say and think right now: That leaves an opening for the practice, because you can change what you intend right now. And the fact that things follow a pattern allows your knowledge of what's skillful to grow over time. When you believe that, you act on it. You try to make your intentions more and more skillful.

So when we come to the practice, we learn to adopt new concepts that have a good impact on the mind. That's the test—a pragmatic test. In the beginning, you begin to see that this belief does help here, it does help there, so you pursue it more and more persistently. Then ultimately you discover that it's a big help in putting an end to suffering. That's your real proof that the concepts work—and only then do you get beyond concepts.

Even when you're in concentration, once you drop directed thought and evaluation, you still have perceptions. In fact all the states of concentration up to the dimension of nothingness are based on a perception—the label you hold in mind that keeps you in that state of stillness. Even though there's no discursive thought, there's still a concept there.

So the practice is a matter of learning how to use your concepts wisely, picking and choosing which ones are helpful and which ones are not. Knowing when you need to think discursively, when you can drop discursive thought and just be with one perception: That's a skill based on right view.

If you learn how to make your views right and then apply those right views to understanding how the mind creates suffering, that's how views ultimately take you beyond views. Your right view will show you how to let go of right view when you need to. But don't be too quick to drop it. Don't be the sort of person who leaves the raft on the near shore and tries to float through the air over the river. Use the raft when it's helpful. That's why the Buddha left it behind for us. That's what it's for.