

The Second Noble Truth

November 13, 2015

When we meditate, we're creating an island for ourselves in the middle of a large, fast-flowing river. This island is our refuge. The Buddha says when you develop the establishings for mindfulness, you're making yourself your island. You're making the Dhamma your island. It's your way station to get across the river—your safe place, in the meantime, before you reach the other side.

This image applies both to mindfulness and to concentration. The Buddha doesn't make a clear distinction between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. In fact, the establishings of mindfulness are, in and of themselves, the themes of right concentration. You stay, for instance, with the body, in and of itself, as you're ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The mind gets more and more absorbed in the body, to the point where mindfulness, alertness, and ardency shade into jhana, or right concentration. The breath, for instance, gives you a sense of solidity so that you're not constantly flowing away.

Because that's the main warning in the image of the river. Its flow carries you away to danger: whirlpools, rapids, and underwater predators.

The river here, of course, stands for craving. It keeps going someplace else. The water's never staying still. It's always moving on, on, on, and pulling you along with it. If you try to find some safety in the things of daily life, remember the Buddha's image of being swept down by a river. You see grass and other plants on the bank of the river and you try to grasp onto them, but they tear away in your grasp. In other words, they get uprooted and pulled along with you. Many times, they'll cut your hand in the process. Some of the grasses the Buddha mentions in his analogy have sharp-edged blades that, if you try to hold onto them, will slice deep into your hand.

Of course, the grasses are nourished by the water of the river. The grasses here stand for the aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, mental fabrications, and consciousness at the senses. We try to grab onto these things, to pull ourselves to safety, to find some place to rest, because as the Buddha said, it's only when there's peace, when there's a sense of resting, that the mind has any real happiness. And yet, this is all that the river can grow: these grasses that pull away and cut into your hand.

I was reading recently a nature writer whose writings I usually like. She tends to bring not only poetic sensitivity but also a lot of science to her writing. But in one of her books she was reflecting on various ways of looking at the day at dawn, and one day she happened to notice two little dead birds. She thought about how little they had seen of life, and how sad it was in one sense. But then she started thinking about bird-dom as a whole, and she said it was like skin. The skin keeps creating new layers. The old layers slough off, but new layers keep coming. She ended up with saying that empathy is what makes it possible, and love makes it worthwhile.

I suppose you could try to tell that to the little birds to see if they felt it was worthwhile that they had to die as part of this sloughing off process, but I doubt that they'd go along. I mean, it's one thing to be skin cells and be sloughed off. But to be a living being and to be sloughed off so cavalierly by nature... The question is: Is it really worthwhile? And is empathy really what makes it happen?

As the Buddha said, craving is what makes it happen and it's inevitably going to cause suffering. In other words, it's not worth it. Nothing makes it worthwhile. If you see the skin as having some larger purpose, then you have to put up with whatever suffering is needed to attain that purpose. But as the Buddha said, the universe doesn't have a larger purpose. We don't have to keep coming back. We don't have to keep following the craving to try to grab onto something in hopes that it's going to be of some rest, some refuge, some respite for us, only to find that it keeps disappointing us in the end. We have the freedom to say that we want out, and to take the way out, because craving can't create anything but these clumps of

grass that give us a little bit of a handhold, but not much. Inevitably, they're going to end, and there's always going to be suffering involved as they tear away.

This was another theme in that author's writings: that we have to put up with the suffering because otherwise we wouldn't be involved with life's great adventure. But as the Buddha said, suffering in a pointless universe is not really worth it. There's nothing noble about it. The bigger adventure is finding a way out: to understand the craving, to understand the cause of the craving, and to learn how to outgrow it so that we're not slaves to it, so that we're not being constantly swept along.

So it's good to think about how the Buddha defined the cause of suffering. He says it's the craving that leads to further becoming. Now "becoming" here means a sense of identity in a particular world of experience. Both the identity and the world are based on desire, a little kernel of a desire around which we create a sense of who we are and of the world that's relevant to that desire.

Say that you have a desire for chocolate. There's a world that's relevant to that desire for chocolate and there are worlds that aren't relevant. A lot of things in the world outside at that moment are truly irrelevant to the desire, so they get blotted out of your chocolate world. Your sense of you as the person who's going to enjoy the chocolate, and the sense of you as the person who's going to be able to get the chocolate and eat it, and all the other aspects of you that are relevant to that: Those, too, go into that chocolate level of becoming.

Then either you gain the object of your desire or you don't. Sometimes when you gain the object, you move on to something else. Or, even when you don't gain it, you may decide, "Well, maybe there's even something better I can get, or something else that I'm more likely to obtain." Once you drop that chocolate level of becoming, you create another type of becoming. Or you may come up with conflicting desires that lead to conflicting states of becoming at the same time: You may want chocolate at the same time you want to outgrow your sensual craving, which creates a conflict. In every case, though, the becoming is always based on craving. It keeps pulling you in its direction. If the cravings conflict, they can pull you apart in many directions. This can happen on the level of sensuality, or sensual desires; or on the level of what they call form desire: the desire to stay in a form—like what we're doing right now. As we stay with the sensation of the breath, we're inhabiting the body from the inside: That's called form. Another level of becoming is on the formless level. Once you get the mind into deeper stages of concentration, based on a perception of infinite space or infinite consciousness, that's formless.

All three of these levels count as states of becoming and they're all based on craving. The literal translation for craving, *tanha*, is "thirst." The Buddha goes on to say that these states of becoming come from craving accompanied by delight and passion—*nandi-raga*—or, in Ajaan Suwat's terms, the things we like. These cause suffering. We go for them, in the Buddha's words, "delighting now here, now there." That "now here, now there": That's the aspect of craving that keeps moving on, moving on—creating little spots, little nuclei around which worlds develop through desires that we then inhabit.

As the Buddha said, there are three kinds of craving that lead to becoming. First, there's craving for sensuality. That's our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. Notice, the problem is not so much the sensual objects, it's our fascination with thinking, "This is a sensual pleasure I like, and I'd like it like this and this—or maybe like that and that." And we can fantasize about these things and create all kinds of stories around them as we keep tweaking them in ever new ways. That fascination leads to suffering, because it's always accompanied by the hunger to get sensual pleasures. They don't just come your way on their own. You've got to go out and fight other people for them, because the nature of sensual pleasures is that they're based on objects or people or relationships that, when you gain, somebody else has to lose. Or they gain; you lose. So, there's a constant struggle, constant conflict. And the mind gets weaker and weaker as it decides that it can't survive without having this pleasure or that pleasure. The more you depend on the environment to be just so, the weaker you become. This pulls the mind down.

The second craving is craving for becoming itself. We like to take on certain identities. There's the self-image we enjoy of being this particular person who's mastered these skills

in gaining what he or she wants. This sort of thing can range from finite to infinite things. But that, too, is going to lead to the kind of grass that you try to grasp as craving sweeps you along and it's going to get pulled out of the bank or it's going to wound your hands, because these identities can't last.

Then, third, there's the craving for no becoming. That's the paradoxical one. You would think that the craving for no becoming would be something that would put an end to becoming, but actually to put an end to becoming directly, you have to take on an identity as the destroyer of becoming. That becomes your new identity, with a new becoming around it.

This would seem to leave you trapped, but, as the Buddha said, there's a way out. Instead of trying to put an end to things or trying to hold onto things, he said, you learn how to watch them as they come into being, and then you don't—to use Ajaan Lee's terms—weave them any further.

To do this, you have to put the mind into a state of concentration like we're doing now. This is your island in the river. It is a state of becoming, and you are inhabiting the body from within, and there is a desire to get the mind to settle down, but it's strategic. As you master this type of becoming, seeing the stages of what's involved in getting the mind to focus on one object and keep it there, you come to a greater and greater understanding of all the processes around becoming: how your sense of who you are as a meditator depends on the body and on the mind.

You work with the energies in the body. You work with the events in the mind. This helps you to see the process of becoming more and more clearly. As you learn how to pull out of the distractions that lead away from concentration, that, too, helps you understand the process of becoming. You get quicker and quicker at seeing the stages of how a little stirring comes right at the boundary between what's mental and what's physical, and then you slap a label on it. But now you can ask yourself, "What kind of craving was behind the label I placed on this?" You can catch the process more and more quickly.

So, even just trying to get the mind to settle down and dealing with distraction, you're learning something about becoming right there. Then when the mind is really settled in, you can use that settled mind to see more clearly how the process of becoming happens and how you can just let it go.

In other words, something comes up and you don't have to continue with it. Raw material comes in from your past kamma, but you don't make it into present kamma. You simply see potentials from the past as they have become, and that's it. You don't get involved in the further becoming. There's a sense of dispassion that comes when you see this. And because the delight and passion accompanying the craving are what keep the process of fabrication going, then when you no longer feel any hunger or thirst to do these things, they stop on their own. They stop without your having to go out and put a stop to them. They just stop. The causes stop, and so the results fall away.

So this is the Buddha's analysis of why we suffer. Some of the terms are fairly abstract, but when you gain a sense of this process of becoming and you can see the craving that keeps feeding it—and how it keeps sweeping you along, sweeping you along—then at the very least, you can say, "It's not worth it. Love doesn't make it worthwhile. Empathy doesn't make it worthwhile." That's when you're beginning to get your head above water.

As you come to meditate, you're beginning to develop an island. You haven't crossed over yet, but at least you've got a relatively safe place, something you can hold onto that's not going to pull out of your grasp or to cut into your hands. You've got a place where you can stop and breathe, to take stock of things, because this is an important part of meditation: It puts you in a position where you can step back from your cravings and regard them with less interest and less hunger, less of a compulsion to go along with them. You've got something else to hold onto that's firmer, safer.

So make use of this. Try to develop this island, because it's the only way to safety.