A Better Place to Feed

June 3, 2025

Jon Foon noted that the last rains of the rainy season tended to be very dramatic. He said the rain devas were bidding farewell. So we’ll see if this is the last of the rains. When the Buddha described his awakening in the shortest possible terms, it was a principle of causality. When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the cessation of this comes a cessation of that. That’s two causal principles that act together. One pair. When this is, that is. When this isn’t, that is. And it talks about causality in the present moment. You do something right now and the results come right now. You stop doing it, the results stop. Then there’s causality over time. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. You plant a seed now, you’re not going to get a tree right away. It’s going to take time. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. The seed is impermanent, which means that no matter how big and solid the tree may be, it too is going to be impermanent. But we’re not dealing so much with trees, we’re dealing with our own actions. What this means is what you’re experiencing right now is a combination of two things. The results of past actions and the results of what you’re doing right now. Those things that come in from the past, you can’t change. But you can change how you experience them right now. In other words, you can’t go back and undo the original action. But the state of mind that you create right now, that can make a big difference. Bodhi gives the image of a lump of salt. You put that lump of salt into a small cup of water and you’ll be able to drink the water. Because it’s too salty. You put that same lump of salt into a large clean river and you can’t drink the water. Because there’s so much more water than there is salt. Another analogy he gives is a person who steals a goat. If a poor person steals a goat and a fee is imposed on him, because he’s poor he can’t pay back the fee so he has to go to jail. If a rich person steals the same goat and the same fee is imposed on him, he has more than enough to pay so he doesn’t have to go to jail. So what does it mean to be wealthy? What does it mean to have a lot of water in your mind? The Buddha says there are several things. One is developing the attitudes of goodwill. Compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity in a really expansive way. Extending them to yourself and to other people, other beings. He doesn’t say to start with yourself but later commentators say it’s good to start with yourself because all too often we think about goodwill for everybody and we tend to forget ourselves. We think that goodwill means that you have to make lots of sacrifices for everybody else. But as the Buddha said, an important part of goodwill is looking after your true happiness. That’s where your first emphasis should be actually. Unfortunately that’s not a selfish thought because your true happiness, if it’s going to be true and if it’s going to last, it can’t involve suffering for other people. Otherwise they’re going to try to destroy it, which means it’s not going to last. Do you think about what would be your true happiness? And a lot of that has to do with developing the skills to create this state of a large river inside, of wealth inside. Because whatever we have to deal with in life, we have to process it. And if your processing skills are poor, then no matter what good stuff you come with from your past karma, you’re going to make a mess out of it. Squeezing it into that little cup. So work on the skills. This is what we do as we meditate. As the Buddha said, when he describes the steps leading up to suffering, the first thing that happens after ignorance is that you fabricate your experience in ignorance. And because it’s in ignorance, it’s going to lead to suffering. But he also discovered that if you do it with knowledge, you can become part of the path to the end of suffering. So the fabrications he points to are one, the breath, bodily fabrication. Two, the way you talk to yourself, which he calls directed thought and evaluation. It’s when you choose a topic and then you make comments on it, ask questions about it, decide what you think about it. And then your perceptions and feelings, which he calls mental fabrication. Perceptions are the images you hold in mind that identify things. Feelings are feeling tones. Pleasure pain, neither pleasure nor pain. All these things are the things we put together in order to create a state of concentration right here, right now. And you want to remember that, because otherwise you go back to your old ignorant ways, which is why meditation requires your powers of mindfulness. Remember you want to stay here. You can’t give in to the impulses. I’ve thought about that enough. Let me think about something else. It’s not enough. If your powers of concentration are not strong, you’ve got to remind yourself, this is not enough. I’ve got to do more. I’ve got to stay here longer, longer, longer. So when you find yourself slipping off suddenly, ask yourself, what cut your mindfulness? Why is it so easily cut? Can you resist that? This requires alertness, that you watch what you’re doing. And then find the ardency, the desire to do this well. So you work with the breath, and then you think about the breath and make comments about the breath. That’s where it’s at. That’s where you really use your mindfulness and your alertness. Because to make comments on the breath, you have to watch, how is the breath going? How is the mind doing? Is it staying here, or is it going to move someplace else? And is the breath comfortable? What would feel really good right now? Try to breathe in a way that feels satisfying. To the lungs, the heart, the different organs of the torso. And then think of that sense of well-being or comfort spreading out through the arms, through the legs, and the head. So you’ve got a good feeling right here. This requires that you have certain perceptions about what the breath can do. Don’t think of it just as the air coming in and out through the nose. Or the flow of energy in the body. In fact, that’s primarily what it is, from the Buddhist point of view. So these are the skills you need in order to create a good place here in the present moment. To bring some knowledge to the processes that otherwise would lead to suffering. The more aware you are of what you’re doing, the more these different kinds of fabrication actually become part of the path. And as you develop a more expansive mind state here, then it means that whatever influences come in from the past, they don’t weigh so heavily on you. You’ve got something good right here. You want to nurture that, maintain that. So you develop an expansive mind. You expand to fill the present moment. When the mind is small, in other words, you’re focused on one tiny little spot, it’s very easy to slip off into the past or the future. It’s as if the path to the past or the future were a little tiny tube. And if your mind is small enough, your awareness is small enough, it’s going to slip down the tube. But if you fully inhabit your body right here, right now, from the head down to the feet and every place in between, then you would fit down the tube. So stay right here. You might ask yourself, “Well, once it gets good like this, why do you leave?” It’s usually because either something unpleasant comes up, and unpleasant can be just mildly unpleasant. It doesn’t have to be fiercely unpleasant. But today I said, “Well, I understand this. Now let’s move on.” You don’t really understand it unless you’ve stayed with it for a long time. The mind that likes to take a quick sketch and then move, may know a lot of different things, but doesn’t know any one thing really well. So you try to move in. Stay here and see what you learn by staying here. And a lot of the lessons have to do with defending this state of concentration against distractions or pains. If there’s a pain in any part of the body, you don’t make that your primary focus. Try to focus on the parts of the body you can make comfortable by the way you breathe and by the way you perceive how the breath is moving through the body. And then you can use that sense of comfort to spread through those patterns of tension, patterns of tightness around the pains, to loosen things up. This creates another one of the qualities you need in order to keep your mind expansive, which is that you don’t let your mind get overcome by pain. You realize you have tools to use against it. You’ve got your tool with mindfulness and alertness. You’ve got your tool of your perceptions. You can change the way you perceive the pain. Think of the pain as individual moments of pain. And as each moment arises, it’s going away from you. That makes it a lot easier to deal with. You think of the breath flowing through. That makes it easier to deal with as well. And you find that not only distractions and pain, but it remains a threat to your concentration. The pleasure of the concentration itself can become a threat as you lose your focus on the breath and start focusing on the pleasure. So you’ve got to resist that. Let the pleasure do its own work. You don’t have to exclaim over it. You don’t have to wallow in it. You’ve got work to do. But the pleasure will nourish the body. It will give you a sense of well-being right here. And that’s another way that you counteract the effects of bad things coming in from the past. You train your mind not to be overcome by pain and also not to be overcome by pleasure. So these are some of the ways that you can take whatever comes up from your past karma and make something good out of it here. It’s like a cook who knows how to take food that may not be especially good, but make something good out of it. When you have this skill, then you can deal with a lot of problems that you otherwise would have trouble dealing with. When unskillful thoughts come up into the mind, they lose a lot of their appeal. We go for our defilements. Not just out of the force of habit, but also because part of us likes them. We like our anger. And so we run with it. Now we’ve got something better to stay with. A place to stand. We can watch the anger as a separate event in the mind and be more willing to admit that anger has a lot of drawbacks. There is the allure, the sense of power that comes with it, the sense of being right when other people are wrong. But when you have something better to feed on inside, then it’s a lot easier to see that the food of anger is pretty miserable. It makes it easier to remember about the times in the past when you gave in to your anger, gave in to your ill will, and ended up regretting it. You might be more willing to admit this time, “Well, I might be right, but if I act on my anger, it’s going to be stupid.” It’s possible to be right and wrong at the same time. In other words, using your rightness in the wrong way. At the same time, when you have some independent sense of well-being inside here, it makes it a lot easier not to be feeding on your relationships with other people. The sense that you have to depend on them for your happiness. No relationship can withstand that weight. It’s going to crash. But if you have your independent happiness inside, then you don’t have to lean on the other person so much. You don’t have to feed off the other person so much. That means there’s a lot less stress in the relationship. A lot less clinging. It’s the clinging, the feeding, that makes it suffer. So there are a lot of good things to develop. A lot of good things that you can use your concentration to deal with. It’s an important part of the path. Deal with these three kinds of fabrication here in the present moment in a skillful way, in an alert and knowledgeable way. Then you’re like a good cook who can take almost anything and make good food out of it. And when you’ve got good food to feed yourself with inside, then you don’t have to go feeding on unskillful things outside. Unskillful attitudes. So work on these skills. And if you’re the type of person who finds it difficult to get the mind to stay still, learn how to content yourself with small victories. Don’t dismiss them. Because sometimes that’s how you get started, with the little tiny things. You can stay for two breaths. Okay, well, the next time try to stay for three. That’s a 50% improvement. Then make it four, five. And as you build up momentum, then it gets easier to stay for longer and longer times. This is another aspect of learning how to talk to yourself, learning how to talk to yourself wisely. Keep yourself on track. Have a strong sense of your strengths and your weaknesses. And try to use your strengths to deal with your weaknesses. So that the practice comes out balanced. And the skill of meditation becomes all around.

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