

Steering the Raft

January 23, 2021

It's raining. It's rain that we need. But if we had had our way, it would have come a lot earlier. The weather is there to remind you there's a lot in the world that you can't control. This is one of the things we have to accept as we try to control the world: that there's a lot that lies beyond our powers.

The basic idea of self is that the more you can control, the better. The idea has a built-in frustration as you keep running up against things that you can't control. Left to its own devices, the idea of self would have no limitations at all. That's when it would really be happy. So there's a built-in tension, a built-in stress, a built-in suffering, or limitation, in the idea of self. A lot of people say, "Okay, just accept the fact that there are limitations and work around them, push as much as you can to see what you can control. And keep pushing, pushing, pushing." That kind of self is always fighting. Other people say, "Identify yourself with the world at large, or the spirit behind the world at large, and let it have its way." But that kind of self becomes meaningless. You're defining self with something over which you have no control. And to deprive the sense of self from any sense of control makes it meaningless. So what do you do?

The Buddha says there is a way to find genuine happiness by taking these tools that we claim as our self—all the different aggregates—and fashioning them into a raft that'll take us across the flood to arrive at unbinding. Once you get to the other side, you have to let go of the raft.

So it's good to think of these things in stages. The first stage, of course, is to be very clear about the limitations of the sense of self you have because it's very tenacious, this idea that "If I lose control, what do I have?" The Buddha's not saying "Stop trying to exert control." He simply says to be very realistic about the limitations of what you've got. He points to the five aggregates, starting with the body. What have you got with the body? You've got a nest of diseases.

One of the contemplations the Buddha recommends is called the perception of drawbacks, where you think of all the different diseases the body can have. Ajaan Funn has an interesting interpretation of that. He says there are parts of the body whose diseases *are* those parts of the body. The eye is a disease. The ear is a disease. There's the potential for disease there, simply that other parts of the body keep things in line, keep things in balance for a while, but they're always ready to go out of the body.

I knew a dentist one time in Thailand who told me that he had noticed that when he'd remove teeth and he would put them in an antiseptic place, he'd come back in a couple days, and there were little worms eating away at the teeth. The worms couldn't have come from the environment. They had to be there in the teeth. The potential for them was there. When I think of the drawbacks of the body, that's one of the most effective contemplations. Think of all the little worms and other things inside the body that are not really body: the different bacteria, the different worms. If they weren't kept under control, they would start crawling around and growing and growing and growing. Think of a dead body full of worms. Well, that's basically what you've got here. Even when the body's alive, the potential is there. And this is the tool with which we're going to find happiness. So no wonder our happiness—our ordinary happiness—is limited.

There are similar contemplations for feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. There's a lot about these things that you simply can't control. They come and they go. You can see them coming, and you can see them going. If they were really you, you wouldn't be in a position to observe their coming and going. Things like this, if they're based on impermanent causes, will give results that have to be impermanent, inconstant, unsatisfactory.

But not totally unsatisfactory—if everything were unsatisfactory, we'd have to give up. There is the path, and this is where the Buddha's genius comes in, realizing that we can use the processes of fabrication in the mind to take us to someplace unfabricated. These processes don't cause the unfabricated, but they can deliver us there. So we still use our sense of control as part of the path.

Sometimes you hear, "Well just give up. Accept things as they come and go without trying to do anything about them." But that's just like saying, "Well, don't try to exert any control over your body at all. Don't move it. Don't adjust it. Don't care for it." That would be a huge waste, because the body can be used.

Even though the Buddha has us reflect on the unattractiveness of the body and on the drawbacks of having a body, he doesn't say to try to get rid of the body. He says simply be very clear about what it's good for and what it's not good for. It lends itself to a lot of lust. It lends itself to a lot of possessiveness, a lot of unskillful desires, but it's not good to use it for those things. What it's good for is as a tool to develop skillful qualities in the mind—as we practice generosity, as we practice virtue, as we meditate. So you're using this tool. You're using this raft. Be very clear about the fact that the raft is something just slapped together out of inconstant things, but if you steer it properly, it'll take you to where you want to go, across the stream.

In particular, the steering is with the meditation. Get the mind into concentration. As the Buddha said, as you go from level to level in the concentration, different levels of fabrication fall away. They fall still. The chatter in the mind that you need to get yourself into right concentration can take you to a point where you don't need to chatter anymore. You can develop a perception of the breath energy in the body where you realize the breath is not the air coming in and out through the nose. It's the energy flow there in the body which, if it's full, doesn't need to depend on the in-and-out breath at all. If everything is full and connected inside, the in-and-out breath will naturally fall still. That's when you can see the levels of perception in the mind a lot more clearly. Allow those to fall still as well.

So you're still exerting control. You're steering the raft. You're not simply letting it flow downstream where it can run over a waterfall or crash in the rapids. You're steering it across. You start looking at this issue of control inside, the fabrications inside, a lot more clearly because they come more and more to the fore. The Buddha has you look at this sense of control, this sense of self built around the control, as a series of actions. These, too, are perceptions. It's good to see them that way, because if you ask questions about "What am I? Who am I? Who's exerting control in here? Who's controlling what?" you fall down a rabbit hole. But if you simply ask, "What is the voice of control right now? What is it saying?" and "Is listening to it skillful?" then if it is, you follow it. If it's not, you learn to let it go. That's how you get around that conundrum of what's exerting control over what in this sense of self. You look instead, not at the *what*, but at the *how*.

Instead of thinking in terms of becoming, with a being in a world of experience, you simply look at actions and their results. If that voice inside that's trying to control things is leading to less stress, okay, you follow it. If it's leading to more stress, you drop it. That's steering the raft.

Ultimately, you will get to the point where you have to let go of all attempts at control, because, after all, the unfabricated doesn't respond to control at all. Any attempts at control get in the way because they're fabrications. The unfabricated is very counterintuitive, which is why the Buddha has you reflect so much on the drawbacks of your tools.

When you see that the idea of the self is constantly running into limitations—the quest to find happiness through control is constantly creating its own problems because the tools that are available and whatever it is inside in terms of the feelings and perceptions and fabrications that try to exert control are

inherently limited—you're more and more willing to give the Buddha's approach a try.

So when he says to see the drawbacks of the body, do it in a way that allows you to see that this is for the sake of something better. As you look at the drawbacks of the different aggregates, it's for the sake of something better. The type of control that you exert as you follow the path is very precise. But it's different from all the other ways you could exert control. It's the only form of karma the Buddha says is neither dark nor bright.

When he talks about the middle way, it's not just a middling way. It's very precise in how it looks at the process of control, and how it leads you to a point where you do let go. The letting go is not simply stewing in wherever you are. You're letting go at the threshold of something really big. Of course, you let go of other things along the way. But, as Ajaan Mun said, you hold on up to the very end to the determination that you don't want to come back and suffer again, because any attempt to live in a world where you're trying to exert control over your environment so that you can stay within that environment, will inherently involve suffering.

There's one way out. The world is telling us in spades right now that it's not a really good place to try to stay. So you do good as part of the path. You leave behind some good before you leave, but you're going to something better. Always keep that in mind. Sometimes the path seems long, but remember that the ways of the world that are off the path are a lot longer. And they involve a lot of suffering, whereas the Buddha's path, even though it involves some stress, some pain in the practice, leads you to a happiness that more than compensates for whatever difficulties were involved in getting there.