

Sensitivity & Skill

October 14, 2020

Today we were talking about the story of flavor-earth. It's the story of how the universe, after it had been going through a period of contraction, begins to expand again. Some of the brahmas—who, during the period of contraction, had been living up in a very high brahma world—come down to this world. But this world at that point was not what it's like now. It was all water.

The brahmas floated through space, self-luminous. They were so bright that you couldn't see the sun or the moon. But then they began to notice a film developing on the water. That was the flavor-earth. One of the brahmas, out of wantonness, thought, "What's that?" He tasted it with his finger. It tasted like wild honey. So he ate more and more. The other brahmas saw this, so they started eating, too. They fell on the flavor-earth, consuming it, and as they did they lost their self-luminosity. The sun and the moon appeared. The stars appeared.

The story goes on to show how, as they got more and more intrigued with lower and lower pleasures, their bodies got coarser and coarser. Their features got coarser. The level of their minds descended until it got down to the level of the human world, as we know it now.

The story illustrates an important part about becoming. Where your desires are focused is going to determine who you are, the identity you take on. The lower the level of the desire, the lower the level of happiness, pleasure and well-being you're looking for—that's all covered by one word in Pali, *sukha*—then the lower the state of your mind.

As we meditate, we're trying to reverse that process. Instead of looking for our pleasures in sensuality, our fascination with fantasizing about sensual pleasures, we're going to go for the pleasure of form. We're trying to get back to that point prior to the flavor-earth where those brahmas were feeding on rapture, as they were self-luminous. We're trying to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of rapture within the form of the body.

Start out by noticing some spot in the body that's especially sensitive to how the breathing feels. Try to protect it as you breathe in so that there's no tensing up in that spot as you breathe in, as you breathe out, or between the breaths. You don't have to mark the spot between the breaths by squeezing it. Just leave it wide open. As you allow the blood to flow there without any interruption, a sense of fullness will develop. It's not much to begin with, but you tend to it like a small fire, and after a while it begins to grow. You can let it run down the different

nerves in the body, run down the blood vessels in the body until eventually everything is filled with that sense of fullness.

You want to learn how to appreciate this because this is a pleasure, a sense of well-being, that doesn't have any drawbacks. You're not harming anybody. You're not harming yourself. And as you care for this, the mind is very clear, which is very different from the pleasures that depend on sensuality. With those, the mind gets clouded with sensuality. And a lot of our desires for sensual pleasures require that we take something from somebody else. When we're nice, we do it when they're willing. But there are a lot of cases where they're not willing at all, and yet we take the pleasure anyhow.

We take that for granted. That's why sensual pleasures lower the level of the mind. But when you lift the mind up to this level, the pleasure that comes from simply inhabiting your body—saturating it with good breath energy and saturating it with a sense of well-being—you begin to get more sensitive. You realize that this is a better pleasure, more constant, filling more of your awareness.

It's also a pleasure that's related to skill. We're not just sitting here on the receiving end of something really nice. We're also developing that sense of accomplishment that comes when you've mastered a skill. The self as the producer gets to produce things well. And as you master this as a skill, you start adopting the four noble truths because they're a way of looking at things directly related to the approach of someone who wants to master a skill. Where are things not going well? What's causing it? How can you attack the cause? And what do you have to do to attack the cause?

In this case, you're trying to develop your sensitivity to well-being, which also requires that you develop sensitivity to pain, stress, suffering. Here again you've got a Pali word that has many ranges of meaning, *dukkha*: everything from really harsh suffering up to a very subtle sense of disturbance or dis-ease.

I was reading a piece recently where someone was saying that there's only one way you can translate *dukkha*, and that's as "suffering." Nothing else captures its essence. But that would mean that there would be no *dukkha* at all in concentration, which is not the case. When the mind settles in with a sense of well-being, there's still some stress there, some disturbance. That, too, is *dukkha*. If you don't recognize that, you think you've arrived. But when you do recognize it, you realize that there's still something wrong. It's still not skillful enough. That encourages you to look for a better sense of well-being, something that's *not* fabricated.

Concentration is about as good as you can get with fabrication. The best bodily fabrication, the best verbal fabrication, the best mental fabrication: They're

all right here in concentration. But concentration is only as good as fabrication can be, and fabrication still has its drawbacks. It comes and it goes. It requires that you maintain it. That involves a lot of the stress or disturbance right there. It requires constant looking after. As Ajaan Lee once said, nibbana is what's easy; it's the pleasures of the world that are hard because you have to look after them. And here, we'd include jhana as one of the pleasures of the world. You have to tend to it. It's always threatening to go away—whereas nibbana, once you've found it, doesn't require any looking after at all.

So as you lift the mind, you make it more sensitive. As it becomes more sensitive, you get more demanding as to what would be a satisfactory source of happiness, what would count as happiness. You get more sensitive to what counts as *dukkha*. It's not just suffering. It's stress as well, disturbance—any slight burdensomeness. Simply the sense that you have a duty—you've got this duty with regard to the path that you've got to maintain it: That weighs on the mind. After you've come fresh from being involved in sensuality and finally get a sense of mastery over the concentration, maintaining the concentration doesn't seem like that much of a burden because it repays you many times over. But as your sensitivity develops, you realize that this, too, is burdensome in that you have to maintain it. You want something better.

It was part of the Buddha's genius to realize that there actually is something better. His teachers were stuck on the ultimate level of concentration. They couldn't drop it because they thought if they dropped it, what would they have? Nothing.

But the Buddha learned that if you bring the mind to that threshold, you get to the point where there's no fabrication. Then another dimension opens, another dimension entirely where there's no *dukkha* at all. It's a sense of well-being that's so unlike fabricated well-being that there are passages where the Buddha says you go beyond both pleasure and pain. There are others, though, where he says nibbana is the ultimate *sukha*, which is enough to communicate the fact that it's not like anything you've known, but it's better.

The mind raises itself to the point where it's worthy of this. That's what we're doing as we practice.