

An Island above the Flood

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When the Buddha says to make the Dhamma your refuge, he's very clear about the fact that that means making yourself your refuge. One of the terms he uses, 'to make the Dhamma your island,' means that you make yourself your island. The image, of course, is of an island in a flood, and the flood is fourfold: the flood of sensuality, the flood of views, the flood of becoming, and the flood of ignorance. How do you get safe from these floods? The Buddha gives specific instructions. He doesn't say something useless, like just be in touch with your awakened nature or just be the knowing.

He tells you things that you can do: You establish mindfulness, for example, on the body in and of itself. You stay focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That formula right there tells you how you deal with the different floods. By staying focused on the body in and of itself, you're placing a fence around where you're going to place your attention. Outside of the fence is sensuality. Think of the Buddha's image of the quail who leaves the field where he's safe and gets caught by a hawk, or the image of a monkey who goes into the area where there are human beings and gets caught in a human trap.

In both cases, those unsafe areas represent the five strings of sensuality, as the Buddha calls them: lovely sights, sound, smells, taste, and tactile sensations—the things around which our sensual fascination grows. All our fantasies about sensual pleasures come down to these just five things. So you undercut sensuality by making sure that your focus stays where it should be, as when you're here with the breath, the breath in and of itself. You focus on this aspect of the body; you're not concerned with how your body looks to yourself or to other people. You're concerned with how it feels from within, what the Buddha calls the pleasure of form, which is higher than the pleasure of sensuality.

When the Buddha teaches renunciation—in other words renouncing sensuality—he's not going to leave you high and dry with no pleasure at all. He

says you have to develop this pleasure, an alternative pleasure, a higher pleasure. That's what gives you the strength to resist that flood of sensuality.

As for the flood of views, that has to do with views about the world. In the Buddha's days, the big issues were views about whether the world was eternal, non-eternal, finite, infinite. Now, of course, we have lots of political views. All those are a flood, and if you focus on those things, the mind is at full flood and you get swept away.

So here the Buddha says again to maintain your focus on the body in and of itself. As for any thoughts with regard to the world at all—greed or distress with reference to the world—you put those thoughts aside. You subdue them. *Vineyya*, the verb used here, is a verb that's related to a Vinaya, or discipline. You discipline those thoughts. You don't give them any space in your mind.

Now, there *are* times when the Buddha will have you think in terms of how the world is, mainly for the sake of *samvega*, but also for the sake of understanding action: the power of action. But then you want to realize: Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind, and when you're dealing with the mind you want to look at things simply on the level of name and form: mental events and physical properties. So you've got ardency, alertness, mindfulness; then you've got the property of the breath, and you bring all those together. That forms your island both against sensuality and against the flood of views.

Then there's a flood of becoming, where you take on an identity in the world. If you undercut the world, that helps change your identity. You're now taking on the identity of a meditator. This, too, is a type of becoming but it's not the kind of becoming that'll sweep you away. It's solid, focused, steady, concerned with understanding the mind—realizing that the mind is the problem, not the things outside.

You can make a comparison with a virus that comes in and invades the body. Oftentimes it's the body's reaction that can kill the body. The virus is just the excuse. In the same way, thoughts about the world can come into the mind, and if the mind has a lot of greed, aversion, and delusion, if it has all these floods flowing around inside, it can use those thoughts to drown itself.

So you're stepping out of that kind of thinking, taking on a becoming that can fend those things off. Ultimately, you'll go beyond this becoming as well, but this

is the becoming you need first to fight off the floods of becoming—just as you need right view in order to fend off the floods of wrong view, views that will get you tied up in the world.

Finally, there's a flood of ignorance: not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. This is where mindfulness comes in, because mindfulness remembers the duties associated with those truths. If something unskillful comes up in the mind, your duty is to comprehend it and abandon it, and then to give rise to skillful qualities in its place.

So again, you're not just "being the knowing," you're not just accepting whatever comes. You're applying appropriate attention. Bare attention, by the way, is not appropriate. Bare attention is just aware of what happens but doesn't think about doing anything about it. Appropriate attention realizes there are things you've got to do. When you're focused on the breath, anything that would pull you away from the breath is something you've got to abandon. As for any thoughts that would help with the breath—getting the breath more comfortable, maintaining that sense of comfort, visualizing the body in ways that allow that sense of comfort to spread around so that it saturates and fills the body: That kind of thinking is okay. In fact, it's not just okay. It's to be encouraged. It's part of our duty.

Now, to really go beyond the flood of ignorance, you'd have to become an arahant, but in the meantime, you can take on the four noble truths as right view, as your working hypothesis for building your island.

It's in these ways that the practice of establishing mindfulness does protect you from the flood, lifts you above the flood, and provides you with a safe island, so that whatever comes flooding up in the mind, it's not going to drown you. You have an island above the flood. You provide safety to yourself. You don't become part of the flotsam and jetsam that goes flowing around outside, and you're not subject to the floods that come welling up from within.

It's in this way that you take the Dhamma as your refuge: You practice the Dhamma. There's a verse that says, "The Dhamma protects those who practice it." Of course, it's not as if there's some Dhamma god who's going to come in and shelter you. The simple fact that you've mastered these skills: That's what protects

you from the effects of unskillful action. And when you protect it from unskillful action, nothing can harm you.