

Against the Grain

July 5, 2021

There's a story in the Canon of a brahma named Baka. The Buddha sees that Baka has some wrong view. Baka is just a brahma, he's subject to birth and death, but he thinks that he's not. He thinks that he's found a permanent state. So the Buddha goes to, as they say in Thai, torment him to show him that he hasn't reached an undying state. Baka is very resistant, though. And by the end of the sutta, we're not really sure: Even though the Buddha has shown that he has superior knowledge, superior powers, we don't really know if Baka changes his mind.

Mara appears in the story, too. He tells the Buddha basically that there were people in the past who thought they were awakened but they really weren't and they fell from that attainment. The Buddha's not fazed. So then Mara says, "Well in that case, don't teach. Those who were awakened in the past, when they taught others, were reborn in a coarse body, while those who didn't teach were reborn in a refined body." But as the Buddha said, he's not going to be reborn at all. He knows. And then he leaves.

The story is very symbolic. Baka, of course, represents those who have attained high states of concentration and get satisfied. Mara represents the attitude of those people who were satisfied with whatever ease they've found. They don't want to hear that there's anything better. Whatever work they put into getting that concentration, they feel that's plenty work enough. As for the ease they've found, they don't want to be told that there's anything better.

So it's a cautionary tale. When you gain some ease in the meditation, when you gain a sense of well-being, don't rest satisfied.

If you really want the Dhamma, you have to not only be committed to developing right concentration but you also have to be very reflective. Is this really as good as it gets? The natural response is Yes. And the fact that we're trying to fight that natural response shows the extent to which the practice is unnatural. After all, what is the way of nature? Samsara goes up and down. And then up again and then down again and around. People work, work, work to get a better situation and then they finally get something that they think is good enough. And for a lot of people it's not even the jhanas, just the sense of ease and well-being that comes from attaining sensual pleasures, from having wealth. They get satisfied

there and then they get careless. They do things that lead to their fall. We see this all around us.

There are others who are more perceptive and realize that you need something that's going to be much longer lasting, much more solid. They train the mind. But then they reach a sense of well-being in the meditation. In some cases, you can relax into a sense of well-being and decide that's enough and you don't want to be told that there's something better. In fact, you tend to look down on those who say there's more work to be done.

I've heard some people say, "What kind of path would lead to true peace that requires work? Causes should reflect results, they should be the same, so the path to true happiness should be a happy path, the path to the ultimate relaxation should be a relaxed path." But there are a lot of things in life where the causes don't resemble the results at all. The blackest coal gives rise to the brightest fire. The road to the Grand Canyon goes through a plateau where everything's very flat, but you drive along it and you finally get to the Grand Canyon—and it doesn't resemble the road there at all.

So it's not the case that ultimate peace where there's no more effort should require an effortless path. Ajaan Lee has a good analogy. He says it's like fresh water in salt water. There is fresh water there in salt water but if you were to take the salt water out of the ocean and put it in a bowl by the shore, the salt wouldn't settle out, leaving just the fresh water. You've got to distil it. The fire of the distillation: That's an image for energy of right effort. Sometimes it's a refined energy. Sometimes it's gross, heavy effort. But there is an effort in seeing that when there's a state of well-being, you have to check it again.

Here we get to the principle where the Buddha said that if you want to find the Dhamma, one, you have to be committed to it and, two, you have to reflect. Our power of reflection is what allows us to see there's something better, there's something wrong with the state of ease that we've got. If we're looking for something that's totally reliable, there's got to be something better.

And how is it that we can reflect? It's because the mind, as the Buddha said, is bright. That teaching sometimes is interpreted as saying that the mind is naturally awakened and you just have to let the clouds of defilement pass away on their own and you'll reach its awakened nature. But when the Buddha says that the mind is luminous, luminosity is not the same as being awakened. The mind can get luminous in states of concentration. The mind is luminous in an everyday sense

simply that it can watch itself. And it's this quality that allows us to watch the mind and reflect on what it's doing: That's what we have to use, and we have to bring it out at times when we may be very disinclined: when the mind is resting it's found a state of ease.

That was the Buddha's insight: to see that that reflection is part of the path. His earlier teachers had told him that states of concentration were the goal and it was only a matter of finding the most refined state of concentration and staying there. But it was the Buddha's great insight to realize that concentration is part of the path: You have to convert it to a higher end.

So even though there is some danger in getting stuck in concentration and we've been stuck there many, many times, still we have to master it. Think of the Buddha's knowledge on the second watch of the night when he saw beings passing away and re-arising. Up and down, up and down, up and down: This is the natural way of samsara. What's unnatural about the path is that you get to a high attainment and you don't let yourself rest satisfied. That, the Buddha said, was the key to his awakening: that his effort was relentless, and even then he didn't let himself rest content with his skillful attainments.

So the path is not one of simply relaxing. At the same time, just because people get deluded by the ease of concentration doesn't mean we shouldn't try to get the mind into concentration. That's not the path after all. The path requires that the mind get really, really still so that it can observe itself. If you push, push, push the mind without letting it get into concentration, it'll go into a state of non-perception, where it just blanks out. When people return from that blank state—if they happen to be re-born in that blank state—they come back kind of loopy because they've repressed their memories for so long.

So even though there are temptations to rest in concentration—you just want to stay there, unwilling to hear people who tell you that there's more work to be done—still you have to ask yourself: Do you want to go down again? Because that's the problem with concentration: It lasts as long as the conditions are ripe but if you simply eat the conditions up, then when they're gone, you have to fall.

The right attitude is that we're going to get here and then we're going to watch it. We're going to use this for a higher purpose, which may go against the grain. But then again we've been going with the grain for who knows how long.

I was reading the other day about someone saying he wanted to try something impossible because all the possible things had been tried, and look at the world

we're in. You can change the words around a little bit: You want to find something unconditioned because you've been through everything that is conditioned and look at where we are.

So even though Baka Brahma wanted to regard the Buddha's attainment as something impossible, something unnatural, why let yourself be limited by nature? Why let yourself be limited by what you've found possible so far? The path is not impossible. It's just that our laziness makes it look impossible. And, of course, it's not work all the way. We do get to enjoy states of concentration. It's simply a matter of not letting ourselves get deluded by what we enjoy. Even though that goes against the grain, it's a good way to go.