Tenacity

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The dog is devoted to barking. If we could be as devoted to our breaths as he is to barking, we’d go quite a ways. In Thailand, they have these red ants, very large red ants, and if you get anywhere near their nest, they come out and they attack you. They bite you. And as you try to pull the ant off of your arm, sometimes you find that you pull the body and the head is still biting. They’re that tenacious. It’s an analogy that’s frequently used in the Thai tradition. Hold on to your meditation object with the same tenacity as red ants when they bite. It may sound paradoxical. After all, this is a teaching where we’re told to let go, let go, that suffering is clinging and the end of suffering is found in letting go. That’s only part of the story. As the Buddha once said, it’s a basic principle in the culture of the noble ones, the customs of the noble ones, that you delight both in developing and in letting go. In other words, you let go of unskillful mental habits, but you work on developing the skillful ones. This takes work. This takes dedication. It takes tenacity. It requires that you hold on. You hold to the precepts. That’s the whole point of having precepts. You make a promise to yourself. We all have precepts to some extent in our lives. The basic principles that we hold to, we’re not out there killing all the time or stealing all the time. It’s the lapses that are damaging. When you take on the precepts, you promise yourself you’re not going to have any lapses. You hold to the precepts in the same way those red ants bite. There are even cases where you would rather die than break your precept, because you realize the precept is much more important than the body. When you come to the practice of meditation, the same tenacity is required. And you stick with it. The Buddha said it’s not always going to be an easy path. He says grief actually plays a part in the path of the practice, realizing that there’s a goal that you haven’t yet attained. The sense of frustration or the sense of sorrow, whatever, that comes from realizing that there is a goal, there is an end to suffering, and you’re not there yet. That’s an important part of the practice. It’s an important impetus. Otherwise you don’t let yourself get bogged down in the grief. You use it to spur yourself on to practice. At the very least, the grief of knowing that you’re on a path and haven’t attained the goal is a lot better than the grief of not being on a path, the grief of simply missing certain pleasant sights and sounds and smells and tactile sensations. That’s endless. It comes and it goes again, comes and it goes again, and then it comes back again. It doesn’t go anywhere. At least the grief that comes from being on a path where you’re not at the end yet, that serves a purpose. So the Buddha doesn’t want us to wander around like zombies, just being apathetic and saying, “Well, I just won’t have any desires, and that’ll be it.” That doesn’t accomplish anything, though. The path requires work. The skill, of course, in the work is learning how to do it in such a way that you don’t wear yourself out. This is why concentration is the heart of the path. Basic factors—ease, fullness—give you the nourishment you need along the path. This is why it’s important to work with the breath. Figure out what kind of breathing feels good. How else are you going to get a sense of ease in the body if you’re going to simply sit here and wait for it to come? Well, if you wait for it to come, then it’ll just go because you don’t have any control over it. But if you can experiment with the breath, explore the breath, you’ll find that it is a skill that can be mastered—how to breathe in such a way that it feels good coming in, feels good going out, feels good being in your body. In the text, the Buddha talks about different analogies for factors of the path. Concentration is always compared to food. It’s the nourishment that keeps you going—the sense of ease, the sense of rapture, of fullness, the sense of equanimity that you can develop. But it really doesn’t matter. It requires work. As with any skill, it takes time. There are going to be lots of mistakes, but you have to learn from your mistakes and not get discouraged by them. Stick with that determination to see things through. Jon Munn once said in his very last Dharma talk that this is the one thing you never let go of until you reach full awakening, and that’s the determination not to come back and suffer. Simply going around being mindful and apathetic and emotionally blank doesn’t really accomplish anything. You’re just feeding off old karma and creating blank new karma, which doesn’t lead to the end of suffering. It requires a determination, and that you hold to it. There’s got to be a way out, because it requires a lot of ingenuity and a lot of discernment to notice where you’re causing yourself suffering and how many times in the avoidance of one kind of clinging, you cling to something else. The path lies in learning how to take that habit to an advantage. In other words, when you leave one clinging and go to one that’s more skillful, like holding on to the breath rather than holding on to your old ways of thinking, open yourself to the possibility that holding on to the breath really can take you through a lot of things. In the past, you thought you had to worry about this, had to worry about that, had to plan for this, that, and the other thing. In a lot of situations, where simply holding on to the breath, this sense of being in the body, fully inhabiting the body, can provide you with a foundation actually to be in a better position to see what needs to be done. So I want to stress that principle of respect for concentration, having some trust in your concentration. Not that everything in meditation is going to pop into your mind as you sit here. Meditating is going to be reliable. But at the very least, when you’re mindful and centered, you’re a lot more likely to get good responses, good inspirations out of the mind than you are when you’re just running around frantically. So give yourself to the meditation. Then don’t let yourself be dissuaded by whatever difficulties come, because it’s the only way that you’re going to get to the goal. And even if you don’t get all the way to the goal, at least you learn an awful lot about the mind and you become a lot more skillful in how you handle issues that arise, both inside and outside. So the path is a good path. It’s even better to get to the end, but even if you don’t get to the end, it’s a good place to be. So don’t let yourself slip off. Be the sort of person who finds pleasure in being up for challenges, being willing to learn all the time. It’s only through this willingness to learn that you can find something new. The Buddha constantly talks about the path leading to something, to the point where you realize what you’d never realized before. You see what you never saw before. You attain what you’d never attained before. There really is something new, something extraordinary, at the end of the path. But it requires all eight of the factors of the path—everything from right view through right effort to right concentration. It’s a path that can engage all of your mental faculties. It’s one of the few things in life that really is worth holding on to. For most of us, clinging means clinging to things as an end in and of themselves. So the Buddha takes that habit and says, “Let’s switch that a little bit and cling to the path as a means to an end.” Then when you reach the end, you can let go. People sometimes make a big deal out of the paradox that we’re supposed to be overcoming desire, and yet if you want to attain a goal, that means you’ve got a desire. So how can you get there? It’s an infinite request. Remember Ananda’s teaching to the Brahman. The Brahman came to a park one day where Ananda was staying. He said, “What’s the purpose of this practice here?” Ananda said, “One of the purposes is the overcoming of desire.” The Brahman said, “Well, how do you do that?” Ananda said, “Well, develop the basis of success.” And one of the basis of success is concentration founded on desire. The Brahman said, “Well, in that case, it’s an impossible path. It’s an endless path. How can you overcome desire through desire?” He thought he got Ananda there. And there’s that sense of “gotcha” when people bring up this issue. But Ananda wasn’t fazed. He said, “Well, you came here to this park, right?” “Yes.” “And before you came here, didn’t you have the desire to come?” “Yes.” “And once you got here, where’s that desire?” “It’s gone, because he’s arrived.” So you use desire to bring yourself to a point where you don’t really need desire anymore. That’s what’s special about the path. Other things you hold on to life and they leave you wanting, never really fulfilling. And what works about the path is not that you’re just going to forswear desire and pretend that you don’t need it. You use it, you cultivate it, bring all your wisdom and ingenuity and persistence and contentment to this path. And then it gets you to a point where you don’t need desire anymore. The ultimate happiness is that fulfilling. So as long as you’re not there, learn to cultivate skillful desire. Hold to the factors of the path. Not as tools, because without them you can’t get there. With them, you can. Then, when you’ve completed the work, that’s when you put them down for good. Even then, you can still use them, but you use them in a different way. You see, in the life of the Buddha, he still used his concentration, he still used his discernment and his virtue. But from that point, it was for the good of the world. He’d done all the work he needed to do on his own, for himself. Then, for the rest of his life, he used those tools for the sake of the world at large. So whatever amount of effort, ingenuity, difficulty is involved in following the path, it’s all worth it. And don’t think you can get to the end of suffering any other way.

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