Holding On to the Path

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This passage with the Buddha reduces the path to two things, developing and letting go. You let go of the cause of suffering, and you develop the factors that lead to the end of suffering. Notice you don’t let go of everything, at least not right now. There are things you have to develop, things that you work on. And there’s a way in which you could say that, things you have to be attached to, things you have to desire. Desire does play a role in the path. It’s a part of right effort. You have to want to let go of unskillful qualities, and you have to want to develop the skillful ones. It’s written into the definition. And as for attachment, even though the Buddha doesn’t say that you have to be attached to the path still, you have to really want to work on it, you have to really stick with it. And to that extent, it’s an attachment. As Ajahn Furman once said, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well, really sticking with it, really holding on. So it’s important that you realize the distinction. Otherwise you let go of the path, and the path never gets developed. Like the breath, you want to hold on to the breath in all your activities. You can call that an attachment. But it’s a useful attachment. It’s a tool. And this is the important criterion. When you find that holding on to something leads to greater happiness, greater stability for the mind, more insight, more freedom, hold on to it. As for the things that you hold on to and they lead to problems, those are the ones you want to let go of. You need the wisdom, you need the discernment to know which is which. This is one of the reasons why you have to hold on to concentration, because it’s only when the mind is really still that it can see things clearly enough. You get a really good sense of what’s working and what’s not. Because you can’t just go by your intuitions. Insights may come in the course of the meditation, but you have to test them to see what results they give in the mind. And it takes time and repeated observation to refine yourself. You need a sense of judgment. So being devoted here to the practice, even though it may seem like a type of attachment, it’s an important attachment. That’s the only way that the path gets developed. You look at the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. They fall into four sets. One centers around the body. One centers on feelings. Another one centers on mind states. And the fourth centers on qualities within the mind. There’s a common pattern that runs through all of them. You settle in. You try to develop a sense of ease, a sense of comfort, stability. And that’s a balancing act right there. Because sometimes when there’s a sense of comfort, it’s not all that stable. You phase in and phase out, because it’s so easy to leave the breath and go wallowing in the comfort. So you have to figure out a way to be both stable and comfortable at the same time. In the first tetrad, the first set of teachings focused on the body, the Buddha has you get sensitive to long breathing and short breathing. And then be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Because as you get more sensitive to the breath, adjust it with more and more precision, there’s going to be a good sense of ease that’s coming. And you need full body awareness in order to stabilize that. Otherwise, if the range of your awareness is too small and the breath gets more and more refined, you just zone out. Which may be comfortable, but it doesn’t accomplish anything. So you need full body awareness, and you may find that even that is not enough to keep you stable. So you keep focused on one spot as your primary focus. It can be the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, any place where you find it easy to have a good, strong focus. And then think of your awareness spreading out from that spot, like the light of the candle here in the front of the room. The flame of the candle is in one spot, but its light fills the whole room. That’s the quality of awareness you want to develop in the body. Once that’s developed, then you can allow the breath to grow more and more still. In other words, you get more sensitive to even the slight stress or the slight burdens or the slight dis-ease that comes. As you see more and more clearly, when you’re breathing, there’s an intentional element as well. And that intentional element, which is based on your perceptions and your ideas about the breath, may be actually making it worse, adding unnecessary stress, unnecessary dis-ease to the breathing. So you allow that to calm down. So that’s the pattern of settling in, enjoying, but being clear enough so that you can see where there’s unnecessary stress. The same pattern is followed in the next tetrad, where you’re aware of ease, you’re aware of rapture, and you get sensitive to how your feelings and how your perceptions have an effect on the mind. The last step in that section is to allow those to be calmed. In other words, any feeling or any perception you find stirring up the mind, you allow it to go. In other words, rapture, after all, begins to seem kind of gross. So you let that go. And then even the pleasure that comes after that, that seems too gross. So you let that go. You’re left with equanimity. And at the same time, your perception of the whole process changes. You begin to see the breath in the body not so much as in and out. Breathing is just the quality of energy that fills the body. So you change your perception as well. And the third set is when you aware the mind. You begin to notice when the mind needs stabilizing, when it needs gladdening, as they say. Then you find ways of using your perceptions, using the breath, to stabilize the mind, using them to gladden the mind. In other words, this is breath meditation over time. As you learn more and more skill, you start reading what the mind needs and then providing it. And then finally there’s releasing the mind. You see what factors in the mind cause an unnecessary burden, so you let those go as well. But before you let them go, you have to stabilize things. You have to learn how to treat the mind to a sense of ease and well-being. And then, of course, there will be an element of attachment there. The Buddha actually says in one sutta, “Indulge in that sense of ease.” It’s part of the refreshment that you need in meditation in order to keep the practice going. As the Chan Fueng once said, “If you don’t have this sense of ease and rapture, it’s like an engine that doesn’t have any lubricant. It begins to dry out after a while, and then it seizes up.” So it’s okay to develop this, to have a strong sense of attachment to it. As long as you don’t let the ease blur out the clarity of the mind. Because it requires clarity to see where there’s still unnecessary stress, unnecessary activity in the mind, where the meditation can be made more refined. The fourth set, you start out by being aware of inconstancy. This, too, is a perception. Again, it’s something that shapes the mind. But this particular perception weighs very little on the mind. You’re not asked to analyze what’s going on so much. You just notice that whatever comes up is inconstant. And you look at the inconstancy and you begin to see the stress in it. When you see the stress in it, you begin to realize it. Even in these great states of concentration, you can’t really claim them as being totally yours. You have some control over them, but not total control. At the same time, even in very subtle states of concentration, there’s still an element of stress. That’s when you begin to realize that you’ve let go, even of the concentration. You let go of the craving for the concentration at that point, the attachment. That’s when they finally say, “Total relinquishment.” That’s the last step. That’s when you let everything go, both the good and the bad. But notice, the total letting go doesn’t come until you’ve really developed things. Up to that point, you have to work hard at developing the path. You have to get that proper balance between finding the ease that gives you your lubrication and the stability that allows you to see things clearly. As long as the mind still needs these things, don’t let them go too quickly. Total letting go comes only when the path is fully developed, when you’ve done all the work. A lot of people want to let go from the beginning. As John Lee says, it’s like poor people letting go of their fancy possessions. Well, they don’t have the fancy possessions to begin with. They’ve never gotten any use out of them. So that letting go doesn’t really accomplish much. It’s when you develop these qualities, and they do their work on the mind. They change the mind. As one meditation teacher once said, it’s like cooking the mind. You stick with these qualities over time, and the quality of the mind changes. In the same way that rice changes as it’s cooked. It starts out hard, and it’s like these little pellets. But as you cook it, it starts to change. It softens up, and then you can eat it. And when you eat it, you’re full. Then you don’t have to eat anymore for that day. As you soften up the mind through getting used to having this inner sense of ease and well-being, you finally get to the point then where you really can let go of everything you have. Even the good things in the path, ultimately, you can let go of. Now, that doesn’t mean that you don’t have them to use anymore. It simply means that you no longer identify with them. You’re not attached to them. Your well-being doesn’t depend on them, because they’ve delivered you to another place, something that’s totally unconditioned. This applies to all the good qualities in the path, even the qualities of goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. They’re not part of the mind’s inherent nature. They’re things you develop, things you work on as you develop the path. But you don’t have to identify with them, ultimately. As you’re on the path, you often will identify with them. But true freedom lies when you don’t have to. After all, suppose that you had, as your basic nature, that you were compassionate. Compassion has to be directed at suffering. That would require that there are people who are suffering. So your basic nature would require that there’s suffering in the world. Otherwise, something wouldn’t feel right. You want to be compassionate, but there’s nobody to be compassionate for. But from the Buddha’s point of view, compassion is something you use both for your own good and for the good of others. When you’ve completed your own good, you reach a state of mind that lies beyond. When you’re dealing with other people, there’s still room for compassion, and you’ve developed it well enough so that it’s always there. At the same time, your own issues of your own happiness have been settled. So you’re not looking at other people’s suffering and happiness through the lens of your own suffering. You’re not trying to derive any happiness out of them. You’re just looking at the way you treat them, because you’ve already got all the happiness you need. That kind of compassion is a lot more reliable. Ultimately, the mind does get to a point where it doesn’t need to be attached to anything, even the good things it’s developed. But that doesn’t mean they go away. They’re still there. They’re tools. You’ve used them to cook the mind, as we say. Once the mind is cooked, then you can use them for helping other people to cook their minds. But that’s the point where you don’t need to hold on. Until you reach that point, though, hold on tight, because these things really do carry you through all kinds of dangers, all kinds of problems. Each of them is a kind of protection. Generosity is a kind of protection. The precepts are protection. Concentration, discernment. These things are all protection for the mind. As long as it needs protection, they provide it. So hold on to them. Work at them. Develop them. Don’t be too quick in trying to let them go. As Ajahn Lee once said, you reach a point when they’ve completed their work, and then you don’t have to tell the mind to let go. It sees fully that it doesn’t need them anymore. But you can get to that point only by holding on tight. As long as you realize that these are tools, you’re fine. That kind of attachment is not a problem.

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