Skillful & Unskillful Clinging

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We practice to bring the mind to a point where it no longer needs desire, clinging, or craving. And yet we have to use these things in order to reach that goal. If you had no desire for true happiness, you’d have no motivation. If you didn’t hold on to the path, you’d get swept away, like that image of the raft. We take the raft to go across the river. And while you’re on the raft, crossing the river, you have to hold on to the raft. Because, as the Buddha says, down the river there are monsters and whirlpools and all other kinds of dangers. So you have to cling to the raft. And so the trick in the practice is learning how to tell what is skillful clinging and what’s unskillful clinging, what’s skillful desire and unskillful desire. And this you have to test. In other words, anything you know for sure that’s going to cause harm, you don’t follow it. So there are areas where it’s hard to tell. Would this be harmful? Would this be helpful? And if you don’t know, you try to figure out from looking at other people’s experience, people you trust. Try to figure out from your own past experience. Particularly with the level of sensuality, there are some pleasures that are actually helpful on the path. The Buddha talks about going off into the woods. This was probably the strictest of his students. He also talked about the pleasures of going out into the wilds, appreciating the beauty of wilderness, because it’s a good place to help the mind to settle down. We need time away from our ordinary, everyday concerns. We need to find places that are refreshing. So, as the Buddha said, the guideline here is that you don’t try to weigh yourself too much down with pain. But if you find that by indulging in a particular pleasure, unskillful qualities develop in the mind. That’s an unskillful pleasure for you. Then he says you have to exercise yourself with pain in areas like that. And this is an area where each of us has to learn, for him or herself, where the borderline lies. As for holding onto the path, that’s something you want to hold onto for dear life. The one area where this gets unskillful is where you want to hide out in states of concentration and don’t want to deal with the world. As if the problem were the world. The problem is not the world. The problem is in the mind. The things of the world just do their own thing. There’s gain and there’s loss. Status, loss of status. Praise and criticism. Pleasure and pain. And these things don’t have to be poisonous for the mind. We turn them into poison because we try to feed on them. We try to hold onto the good side and try to push the bad side away. And in the holding on, the grasp of the mind there is what turns these things into poison. So you have to look at the grasping, look at the clinging. To what extent are you feeding on these things? To what extent are you trying to make them behave? In ways that are impossible for them to behave. So the problem there is not the world. It’s the mind. It’s the habits of the mind, what it does to the raw material of the world. In other words, say, the danger of concentration. People talk many times about the danger of strong concentration. The real danger comes from wrong view, wrong mindfulness, the concentration of the mind. Concentration in itself is pretty neutral. It’s our attitude toward it that can turn it into something dangerous. So we have to be careful. Try to keep our views in line. This is why right view is listed as the first factor of the path, because it helps us understand what we’re doing. It helps us understand the strengths and the limitations of the path factors and what they’re all about. Like when the Buddha talks about understanding the first noble truth, understanding the truth of suffering, he points to the five aggregates. He points out that the aggregates have their element of fabrication. It’s something we create. We create form out of the raw materials, the potential for form. The same with feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. So you always want to keep that in mind. To what extent are you shaping things in an unskillful way? What’s the potential for shaping them in a skillful way? Because that’s what you’re doing as you work on right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. It’s not that we’re sitting here just watching things come and go of their own. We’re trying to figure out to what extent are we shaping them in a skillful and unskillful direction. And if it’s unskillful, what can we do to turn it around and make it more skillful? This applies to the sensations of the body, it applies to our feelings, mind states, and all our frames of reference. It’s good to keep that in mind. So when you’re watching things arising and passing away, it’s not simply that you’re coming to some ultimate level of reality where things just arise and pass away without any interference on your part. You’ve got to see exactly where are you interfering, and to what extent are you turning these things into suffering, and what qualities can you develop so you don’t do that. Because after all, the Buddha says you want to be mindful to develop right view, you want to be mindful to develop right mindfulness, and all the other factors of the path. That’s something you want to keep in mind. And this, of course, builds on right effort, which means generating the desire to do things skillfully and to abandon any unskillful habits you may have. If all of these come together, then the mind gets more and more concentrated. Again, here you want to keep right view in mind so that the concentration doesn’t turn into simply an escape. But it becomes the foundation for allowing you to see more clearly what’s going on in the mind so you can continue the work of the path with more refinement, with a greater sense of strength and endurance, that you have the nourishment you need in order to step back from your unskillful habits and admit when you’ve been making mistakes. So the mind has a freer hand in developing more skillful qualities. So these are the things you hold on to. You want to hold on to right view. There will come a point when you let it go, but you don’t want to forget it as you’re taking that raft across the river, because it applies to all the aspects of the path. It helps you understand what you’re doing. You can begin to make that distinction between skillful desires and unskillful desires, sensual pleasures that are actually conducive to helping the mind. Find a sense of ease and a sense of well-being, and the extent to which sensual desires get in the way. We have this tendency to want to have a clear-cut set of instructions that we can follow, where we don’t have to use our own discretion. In other words, we want a foolproof path. But the problem with a foolproof path is that you still end up being a fool. This is a path that requires that you develop your discretion, that you develop your discernment. You have to look carefully at what’s really working and what’s really not. This is how the path works. It’s forcing you to develop your powers of discernment. Staying with Ajahn Fuga, I found this. It was almost like he would set up these tests for me. Simply in the way I would look after his hut, wash his robes, all the duties that I had at the monastery. It wasn’t just that you learned the right and the wrong way of doing things and just did the right way without having to think. Things would change. Or there’d be times when he wouldn’t tell me what I should be doing. I had to figure it out on my own. And if I didn’t get it right, he’d let me know. But he wouldn’t tell me what the right way would be. The whole purpose of this was to get me to be willing to take a stab at things, to experiment, knowing that there’s a possibility that it would make mistakes, but I’d have to learn from the mistakes. Nobody likes to be put in a position where it’s possible that you can make errors, but hey, this is the world, this is the human world, this is the way we are. So you want the attitude that says, “Okay, I’m willing to learn from mistakes. I’m willing to develop my discernment.” Because that’s the only way it gets developed. So the path is not foolproof, but it does train you so that you don’t have to be a fool. It forces you to exercise your discernment. So you can put your foolishness behind.

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