Untangling the Tangle

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Our practice is one of both developing and letting go. Because you have to develop good things to hang on to before you can let go of things that are not worth hanging on to. You have to have those good qualities of mind that’ll enable you to let go. Step back and look at the things that are causing you suffering, that are causing you pain, and let go of the cause. All too often we’re impatient. We see some suffering, we try to push it away, or we try to drop it. But it’s as if it were stuck to our hand. Remember how much we try to shake it off, it still stays stuck. That’s because you can’t just push it away. You can’t just drop suffering. You can’t just let it go. You have to understand it. That’s why the Buddha said, “The duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it.” Understand what it is, how and where it’s happening. And then when you can see it come and go, you also see that there are other things in the mind that come and go along with it. The word cause or origination, samudiya, actually means arising together. There’s something that arises, and at the same time as it arises, there’s going to be stress, there’s going to be suffering—either subtle or blatant. But these things come together. And you can’t see what’s coming together with the suffering unless you look at it very carefully. And to look at it carefully requires good, solid qualities of mind. So we work on the concentration, we work at mindfulness, we work at right effort, we work at right view and right resolve. All of these things come together as we’re practicing right here. You focus on the breath, and you have to ask yourself, “How can you stay with the breath?” Well, it’ll last for a while. You’ll stay with it for a while, and then you find yourself losing some of your oomph, and you start to drift away. So you’ve got to make the breath interesting. You’ve got to make it a place where you really want to stay. So on the one hand, you try to breathe in a way that’s comfortable. It’s pleasant to stay here. Then you start noticing how that comfortable breathing has an effect on different parts of the body. If you have any areas of the body where you tend to hold in tension, see if the breathing can bathe those parts of the body and gradually, gradually, gradually soften them up. One of the problems with meditation, of course, is that we’re all often too in a hurry. We want things to be this way, we want things to be that way. If there’s a problem, we want it to be solved right away. Right now, because we have other things we want to do in our lives. But some problems take a lot of time. They’re complicated. I mean, if suffering were not complicated, the Buddha wouldn’t have taught dependent co-arising. As he said, it’s like a tangled nest or a tangled skein. Have you ever seen people weave, and the skein of the thread gets all tangled? You know what I mean. It’s a mess that can be. While suffering is very complex, the causes leading up to it are very complex. So that’s one of those problems you have to watch patiently, so you can pull out the different threads that are getting all tangled. And you can’t expect that everything will fall apart with just one thread being pulled out. You pull this thread out, well, it’s still tangled. You pull that thread out, well, it’s still tangled. And it’s very easy to get discouraged. It seems like it’s never going to get anywhere. But it so happens that you keep pulling out the threads, and after a while, the tangle is gone. You will come to the one thread that’s holding everything together, but don’t expect it to be the first one you pull. So in the meantime, you learn how to settle in to the present because it’s your ability to stay here in the present and not get pulled off that allows you to watch the suffering simply as that, as an instance of suffering coming and going. So in addition to making the breath pleasant, you try to make it interesting by noticing how it has an effect on the different patterns of tension in the body, how it can nourish different parts of the body. When you’re hungry, how do you breathe in a way that kind of sways your sense of hunger? When you’re feeling tired, how can you breathe in a way that gives you energy? When you’re feeling tense, how do you breathe in a way that relaxes that tension? Sometimes it has to do with the rhythm of the breathing. Sometimes it has to do with your concept of what the breath is doing, where you have breath, how the breath comes in, how it goes out. So there’s a lot to explore right here. There’s a lot going on. It’s like one of those factories that they cover up with grass and trees so that satellites can’t see them. But they keep churning out whatever it is they’re trying to produce. Well, there’s a lot going on here in the mind, and yet we don’t see it. It’s all covered up. Just the mind, just the body. Nothing much is happening. We think about this, think about that, and we’re not paying attention to it. What is this factory that keeps churning out these thoughts? What are the stages in the manufacturing process? What’s going on here? Now can we turn that factory into good uses? So it’s not just churning out suffering, not just churning out idle thinking. You want it to churn out useful thinking, thinking that’s actually part of right view and right resolve. So learn to think in ways that allow you to get interested in the present moment and to really enjoy being here. It feels good to be here, and you start figuring things out. How the mind puts this together, how it puts that together, how the breathing can have an impact on the mind, how the mind can have an impact on the breathing. How they can have an impact on the body. There’s a lot to untangle here. So you develop the concentration so you can have the foundation you need in order to stay here patiently and work through the tangle. And when you see what’s holding the tangle together, that’s what you let go of. If you just tell yourself to let go of the tangle, it’s still going to be there. So remember your duty. It’s to comprehend the suffering and then abandon its cause, abandon what comes along with the suffering. So you have to ferret out which threads are the suffering and which threads are the cause. This is patient, painstaking work. But it doesn’t have to be painful. Painful work. A lot of the pain in the work comes from your impatience. So try to get your gaze steady, get your hand steady, so that you can pull out the threads accurately, precisely. And ultimately the tangle will get unraveled. And whatever it was that was causing you to suffer, that’s what you let go. And when the cause is gone, the effect is gone as well.

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