Climb the Ladder Safely

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We’re all familiar with the Buddha’s image of a man whose head is on fire, or whose turban is on fire. As the Buddha said, you devote all your mindfulness and alertness and relentless effort to put the fire out. And it gives the impression that you have to really push things and try to get things done as quickly as possible. But there is such a thing as trying to go to the practice too quickly. And Mahapabhu has an interesting insight that when you try to push, especially for insights before the mind is really ready for them, it’s a form of restlessness. It can actually get in the way of your practice. So instead of focusing your effort on doing things quickly, you want to focus it on doing things precisely and scrupulously, paying careful attention to what you’re doing. Each breath of each breath, try to make it something you can focus on skillfully. And remember that even though we may know all about the practice, we’ve read about it in many books, there comes a point where you have to put all of that aside and just focus on what you’re doing right now. When Chan Phuong used to say that the people he’d like to teach best were the ones who had almost no background in the Dhamma at all. They had a few general notions. Then he’d tell them to do this, and when they’d done that, he’d say, “Do that.” And then after they’d done that, he’d say, “This is the next step.” In other words, he’d teach things one step at a time, and not show you the whole path all at once. Our problem is that we’ve read so much that we can try to anticipate everything, and sometimes we get ahead of ourselves. So right now, we have to get ahead of ourselves. The practice is to get the mind still. And as for the insights that are going to come from getting the mind still, have the confidence that the more still the mind is, the quieter it is, the more subtle things it’s going to see. At the same time, you’ve got a sense of well-being. And that’s really important because a lot of the insights you’re going to get cut away at your sense of who you are, things you’ve relied on. And if you don’t have some other place to stand, you’re going to knock yourself over. Again, in Jhammahabhava, he says a good image for the practice is climbing a ladder. To let go of one rung, you have to be able to hold on to the higher rung. Then when you’re firmly there, you let go of the lower rung and reach for a higher rung. Hold on to that one really tightly, and then you can let go of the other hand. In other words, you have to have something to hold on to when you’re going to let go of things. It’s only at the very final stages of the practice that you let go of everything. And even then, you don’t do it with a sense of putting yourself in danger. It’s more the realization that everything you’ve practiced so far can only go so far, and you want something better, and you’re ready for it. So try to recognize the voice inside that’s pushing, pushing, pushing for results, especially when you tell yourself, “I’ve only got two weeks here. I’ve only got a couple of days here. I want to get the results as quick as I can and take them home.” That kind of voice is a defilement. Whatever energy you’ve got, don’t put it into pushing and putting it into focusing really precisely and carefully, as meticulously as you can, on what you’re doing. Because the insights come there. Concentration gets boring. It’s because you’re not paying careful attention. And when you’re not paying careful attention, there’s no way that discernment is going to arise. Because a lot of our insights have to come into seeing how we act in some habitual patterns that we bring to the practice of concentration. So everything you need is right here. So you want to stay right here and not be too anxious to move on. The fruit gets ripe not by moving from branch to branch up the tree. It stays on the same branch. Then it gets what nourishment it can from the branch. And then when it ripens, it falls. Remember that the practice has to be one that’s safe, so that when you cut out a particular defilement or a particular attachment, you’re not threatening your sense of well-being. In fact, there comes a sense of ease, release, a sense of a burden lifted, not a sense of pushing, pushing, pushing, until you break through. And John Fung used to say, “If we could all push our way to nirvana, we would have done that a long time ago.” Anybody can push. It takes patience and equanimity out of the cooler virtues and the more solid ones to see the subtle things that are going on in the mind. And it’s the subtle things that are like threads in a tapestry. You pull the right thread and everything just unravels. So when you find that your desire to know this or understand that starts taking over and saying, “Back up,” what you really want to understand is your sense of awareness with the breath. There was a famous Zen master, Dogen, who’d teach koans, but he’d also teach the fact of sitting here as a koan. In other words, the thing that you’re trying to understand, the problem you’re trying to understand. What is it for the mind to be sitting here with the breath? What’s going on? We talk about focusing on the breath in one spot, but there’s also another kind of awareness that fills the body. What’s the relationship between those two? It’s what you’re doing right now. That’s going to give you some insights. You’re learning how to question what you’re doing right now. If you want to get the insights that tease apart the various ways you build on a desire into craving, and from craving into a sense of who you are and where you are and what you want out of who you are and where you are, this is happening in the concentration. You have the desire to get the mind to be still. First you get it still, and then you ask yourself, “Well, what does it mean to be still with the breath? How does that happen?” So the concentration is not so much a stepping stone to some higher step. John’s always compared it to a fruit that ripens. The fruit doesn’t go anywhere. It just stays there in the same place. But it gradually ripens. And you can understand things better and better as you do it again and again and again. So the stillness allows for the subtlety of your perception and also allows for the stability of your sense of well-being as you’re doing this. It is a form of self, a form of becoming. But it’s your strength so you can let go of other forms of becoming that are less skillful. It’s only when you’ve perfected that ability to let go of other things that you start turning in on the concentration itself. So don’t be too quick to push on to the next step. Learn how to do this, what you’re doing right now, really, really well. And the insights will gradually appear right here. If you rush to the next step, there’s a lot of stuff you’re going to miss. Instead of climbing the ladder the proper way, you try to jump from the base up to the top. And if you do succeed on grabbing hold of one of the rungs up top, it’ll pull you down. You’ll pull the whole thing down. But if you go up step by step by step, being very careful about how you place your feet, how you place your hands, you make it to the top of the roof. And then when you’re securely on the roof, then you can let go of the ladder. You want to maintain this sense of security all the way through. The Buddha was not the sort of person who would teach something that was dangerous. As he said, his duty as a teacher for the people who sought refuge in him was to provide them with safety, provide them with protection. And your concentration plays a huge role in keeping you safe and protected. So don’t be in a hurry to rush through it. Whatever energy you’ve got, put it into doing it well.

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