The Snake & The Raft

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There’s a sutta where the Buddha has some interesting images on skillful holding on and skillful letting go. For the most part, people interpret them as images on letting go, without realizing there’s some holding on that needs to be done as you practice. One of the images is of the raft. Most people focus on the image of the raft on the other side of the river. But in the meantime, the Buddha says, you have to use the raft to get across the river. That means you have to hold on to it and you use your feet to kick to get across to the other side. As long as you’re in the river, on the raft, or right next to the raft, you have to hold on. You can’t let the raft go, because otherwise you get swept away. The raft, of course, is the path. You’ve got to hold on to the path until it gets you to the other side. That’s when you let it go. There’s actually a Mahayana sutta that talks about getting across by letting go of the raft, but I still haven’t figured out how that works. This parallels a lot of what the Buddha had to say about your sense of self, conceit, and desire. All these things require holding on as you’re following the path. It’s simply a matter of learning how to hold on to the right things, hold on to them in the right way, and then let them go when you’re done with them. But don’t let them go until you’re done with them. For instance, as we’re practicing concentration, there’s a certain sense of “I” that has to be involved in getting it together. This is what heedfulness is all about. You have to have a sense of, “I will be here to reap the rewards of these actions further down the line, so I want to work on them now.” That’s a skillful use of your sense of self, and it’s something you want to hold on to for the time being. Other selves that come up in the course of the meditation, you want to let go. The self that says, “I want to think about something else,” or when the mind finally settles down, the self that says, “I’m bored.” You have to question that. This, again, is where the image of the committee of the mind comes in useful. There are some members of the committee that have to question the self that says, “I’m bored.” Okay, what are you bored about? Part of the mind likes to have a problem to solve, and once you get that problem solved, the mind is settled down and you think you’re at the end of the problem. That’s not the case, of course. You have to ask yourself, “What’s the next problem to solve?” That is, now that you’ve got the mind here in the present moment, can you watch it to see what it’s going to do? Because it will do things. It’s doing things to keep the concentration going to begin with. That’s something to watch if you can detect it. Or sometimes the voice that says, “I’m bored,” knows that something’s going to come up that it doesn’t want to have revealed inside. And so it’s trying to deflect you. So watch out for that. But you hold on to the sense of self that wants to figure things out, figure out the boredom, figure out the voice, or figure out what it’s trying to hide. Or to figure out what else is going on here. There’s all kinds of fabrication going on to keep the concentration going. Try to look into that. See the ups and downs of your concentration. And if they’re subtle, okay, that means you just have to pay that much more attention. So there’s a conversation that goes on, even around your concentration. You can get into very strong states, or just fine. Focus on one object and not thinking much about anything else. Other times you slip back a little bit and look at what you’re doing. There’s kind of a back and forth between these two. The first is concentration simply for the sake of having a comfortable abiding, and the second one is concentration for the sake of discernment. Developing more mindfulness, more alertness, developing more insight into what defilements in the concentration itself are. So these are things that you hold on to while you practice. That sense of self that wants to do things well, the sense of self that’s heedful. And that’s where other senses of self, you won’t let them go. This is where the other image comes in. It’s holding on to the snake. You hold on to the snake in the right way, in the right place. In other words, you hold on to the Dhamma not to argue with other people, but you do have to hold on to it. I read some people say that the Buddha doesn’t want you to hold on even to his own teachings. Well, I’ve never seen him say that. He would let go in the end of all his teachings on how everything deserves to be let go of. Those are teachings he gave to people who were on the verge of Arahantship. And the rest of the path had done its work. So you do have to hold on, like with the snake. Why would you want to hold on to a snake to begin with? Well, maybe you want to get the venom out of the snake so you can make an anti-venom. So you take a forked stick and put it around the neck of the snake so the head can’t do anything or go anywhere. Then even though the snake may be writhing around you, you can get what you want from the snake. But if you say, “Well, I’m not going to hold on to the snake at all,” well, you can’t get the venom from the snake that way, and you can’t make the anti-venom. So you hold on to the Dhamma to get what’s of use out of the Dhamma. You don’t hold on to it for other purposes. In your case, in everybody’s case, we’ve got our own diseases we’ve got to treat. We want to focus on those. What’s wrong with the mind? What can the Dhamma teach us so we can treat what’s wrong with the mind? Sometimes the Dhamma will come up against our defilements and we don’t like it. That’s a sign that we’ve got some work to do there. Hold on to the Dhamma. Don’t say, “Well, now’s the time to let go of the Dhamma and be non-judgmental or non-dual or whatever.” It’s when the Dhamma comes up against our defilements that we can learn the most. This way, hold on to it, whether you like it or not, because you know it’s good for you. You know you can get something good out of it if you approach it properly, hold on to it properly. So these lessons in holding on, part of them have to do with timing. Knowing when’s the time to hold on to something, when’s the time to let go. Another has to do with your motivation for holding on. You’re holding on because there’s a benefit that you can get from the Dhamma, and you focus on that benefit. And as for other things that don’t relate to that genuine benefit, just let them go. So the image of the raft and the image of the snake, they’re in different parts of that discourse, but they go together because they’re both lessons in proper holding on, proper letting go, so that you can get the most out of the Dhamma.

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