Letting Go (outside)

September 24, 2017

When you come out to a quiet place like this, the Buddha has you reflect on the fact that all the disturbances of living at home, living with other people, are not here. If they are here, they’re here in your mind. You’ve carried them in with you. Which means there’s nothing here to force you to hold on to them. You can let them go. The only outside disturbances are the sound of the leaves blowing in the wind, maybe a few bugs walking around. The inside disturbances are the body sitting here breathing, so you focus on that. As for anything that’s not related to the breathing, you’re perfectly free to let it go. This is one of the basic principles of the Buddhist teachings. When you’re suffering from something, it’s because you’re holding on. It’s not like anyone is sticking a burning ember into your mind. It’s not that things outside are imposing themselves on your awareness. You’re the one that’s pulling them in. So if you don’t want to suffer from them, you let them go. Give them their freedom. Any issues of the day, you just let them go. Issues of yesterday, last week, last month, let them go. Next week, next month, let them go. Just be with what you’ve got right here. Just the disturbance of the breath coming in, going out. The question is, how can you minimize that disturbance? How do you make the breath so that it’s actually comfortable? You watch it for a while. When you picture the breath to yourself, what kind of picture do you hold in mind? Is the breath something you have to pull in? That can make the breath more burdensome than it has to be. Think of the breath being there already in the body after all the breath. When we talk about focusing on the breath in the body, it’s the energy flow in the body that we sense most directly. Remember, that energy flow starts from within. You can think of it starting down around the navel and spreading up and allowing the air to come into the lungs, go out of the lungs very smoothly. That perception is calming, calming to the body, calming to the mind. When you find something that’s calming like that, that’s something you hold on to. After all, the mind is not a place yet where it can totally let go. So you hold on to something good, something that’s not disturbing or something that has very little disturbance. So that if the mind starts to go out to something more disturbing, you know. You’re sensitive to that. If you’re constantly holding on to whatever, you lose track of all the different things you’re holding on to. But if you see there’s something you can let go and maintain a sense of ease, okay, let that go. The things that if you let them go there’s dis-ease or lack of stillness, okay, hold on to those. It’s not like the Buddha has you let go of everything all at once. There are things we have to develop. We have to develop mindfulness. We have to develop concentration. These things are not there on their own. There are potentials there in the mind, but we have to develop them. Mindfulness is the ability to remember something. In this case, you’re remembering to stay with the breath. Alertness, watching what you’re doing. And then ardency, trying to do this well. These are things you have to develop. It’s through developing these qualities that the mind can settle down. So those are things you hold on to. You can think of the Buddha’s image of a raft. We all know the story. You get to the other side of the river, you don’t need to carry the raft with you. But what we forget to notice is when you’re crossing across the river, you have to hold on to the raft. Just make sure you don’t hold on to things that will pull you downstream, because things will come floating by. Logs floating down the stream. If there’s been a flood, leaves and all kinds of things come floating down the stream. If you hold on to them, they pull you away. You’ve got to hold on to the raft. Be selective in what you’re holding on to. John Chah has a nice example. He says it’s like coming back from a market. You’ve got a banana in your hand. Someone comes and asks you, “What are you going to do with the banana?” You say, “I’m going to eat it.” “Are you going to eat the peel, too?” “No.” “Then why are you carrying the peel?” And he asks, “How would you answer them, or with what would you answer them?” The answer has two levels. The first level says you answer with desire. In other words, you have to want for there to be discernment for the discernment to arise to give the right answer. The second level, of course, is the right answer. It’s not time to let go yet. When the time comes to eat the banana, that’s when you let the peel go. Otherwise the banana becomes mush in your hands and you can’t eat it. Same way with the mind. If you let go of your mindfulness, let go of your concentration object, your mind becomes mush. You can’t do the things you want it to do. To learn to hold on selectively, let go selectively. Anything by which you’re burning your own mind, let that go. This is one of the reasons why it’s good to come out into the wilderness like this. You begin to realize that the issues at home, the issues at work, are not all-encompassing. There’s something out here that’s outside of those issues, and you can step outside as well. With the breath as your friend, you’ve got a good place to step, a good place to stay. So if anything comes up while you’re here with the breath, you let it go. No matter how important it seems to be, or how interesting, or how insightful, if it’s not related to what you’re doing right now, let it go. It’s a disturbance. As we do this, we’re getting accustomed to looking at things in terms of the Four Noble Truths. Because after all, what is the first truth? It’s the truth of suffering. The Buddha didn’t say life is suffering. He simply said the way the mind is feeding on things, that’s why it’s suffering. He uses the word “clinging,” but the word “clinging” in Pali also means to feed. That’s why you suffer. It’s not the things outside that make you suffer, it’s how you’re clinging. This makes you turn around and look. Where is the problem? Where is the real disturbance? The disturbance is inside. What can you do to abandon the cause of that disturbance? Any perception you’re holding in mind, you let it go. That’s the basic pattern of the Four Noble Truths. So regardless of the issue and regardless of who’s involved, or what was said or what was done, or what will be said or what will be done, learn to leave it just where it is. You don’t have to bring it into your mind. When you bring it into your mind, then you make suffering. The problem is the mind needs to feed, so you give it something good to feed on. That’s why we do the practice of concentration. Breathe in a way that feels good. It energizes and releases stress, releases tension in the body. This puts you more in control. You learn to let go of the things that should be let go of, and you hold on to the things that you need to develop until they’ve done their work. That’s when you let everything go. If you try to let go before then, as John Lee says, it’s letting go like a pauper. Someone who has nothing at all. Say, “I don’t have a Cadillac, so I let go of my Cadillac.” What that means is you don’t have anything at all. If you work hard enough so you can buy the Cadillac, then you’ve got the Cadillac. Then we either hold on to it or let it go. It’s still there. You don’t have to carry it around with you. It’s there for you to use. And when you don’t need to use it, you can put it down. The Cadillac here, of course, stands for a mind in concentration, a mind that’s discerning. It’s something you develop. It’s something you work at. So the concentration can do its work. It can soothe the mind, calm the mind down, energize the mind when it needs to be energized. It can be a good food to feed on so that when it starts looking at the other things that it does to cause a self-disturbance, it begins to see right through them. You don’t need them anymore. You can let go. When the concentration has done its work, that’s when you let it go as well. But you don’t let it go until it’s done its work. And you don’t let it go before you’ve developed it. This is something you work on. And working on the concentration, you become more and more sensitive to what those disturbances are in the mind. And you see they’re not worth it. You can let them go and hold on to your concentration. And if you find the concentration itself is a disturbance, well, there are many layers of concentration that get more and more subtle, more and more solid, less disturbed. But to find those layers, it’s the same principle. See where you’re causing yourself unnecessary disturbance. In this case, the cause might be a perception, an image you hold in your mind, or a word you’re holding in your mind. You let it go. And if when letting it go you lose your concentration, you pick it back up again. It’s not time to let it go yet. Let it go and find the mind goes to deeper concentration, fine. Appreciate that concentration, then notice it is free of the disturbance that used to be there. You keep this up until there’s nothing really disturbing the mind at all, because you’re not causing the disturbance. Things outside will still be things outside. The senses are still there, you still sense what’s going on, but you’re not trying to feed on them anymore. And that way you don’t get indigestion. They’re there, you’re here. So even though there are sounds and whatnot, there are people and whatnot, you’re not using them to disturb your own mind. And that’s the skill we’re working on here. Outside disturbances are there, but when you don’t pull them in, they’re not there. That’s not a problem. When you can think in this way, you’re free and the rest of the world is freed from you. Your insistence that it has to be like this, has to be like that. Both sides can live in peace.

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