Letting Go Skillfully

November 2, 2023

Phap Dung, one of Ajaan Mun’s early students, once said that the Dhamma is one thing clear through. He didn’t say what that one thing was. But if you look at the teachings of the Four Ajaans, and one theme that they talk about from the very beginning to the very end, it’s all about giving up, letting go. You start out with generosity, but you learn in giving up that it’s not just dropping things and doing without. First you have to develop certain qualities to hold on to. Like when you give a gift, you have to talk to yourself about what’s good about giving a gift. Because you’re going to be doing without something you’ve had. And there’ll be a part of the mind that objects. That’s a lesson that’s often very hard for little children to learn, but it’s one of the first things they teach in Thailand. You’ve got to give in order to be happy. And so you have to talk to yourself to appreciate the qualities of the mind that develop, because otherwise you don’t see them. But if you think about how good it is to be a generous person, that you’re not just an empty weight on the world, and there are other people that are made happy by your gift, you find you hold on to that. And it’s a pleasure of a higher order. When you can appreciate that, you’ve started on the path of the Dhamma. The Buddha would often start his Dhamma talks with the topic of giving. And if there were people who didn’t respond, that would be the whole topic of the talk. Other people, if they did respond right away, they’d move on to virtue and the higher levels of the practice. So it’s a big type of gift. The other thing you realize as you’re giving gifts like this, in addition to developing good qualities, both before you give the gift in order to be able to give it and then after the gift so you can appreciate it, you’re also getting something in return. That’s an important lesson to learn. You’re not just depriving yourself. You’re actually learning. There are higher things that you gain. It’s a trade-off. So with virtue, the Buddha says, it’s a gift. You’re giving safety to other beings. And if you make that safety universal—in other words, there’s nobody you’re going to harm by breaking the precepts in any circumstances—then you have a share in that universal safety. You’re not harming others. There’s no opening in yourself for them to harm you. The image the Buddha gives is of a hand holding poison. If you’ve been behaving in unskillful ways, it’s like having a wound in your hand. And then if you try to pick up poison with that hand, it can seep in through the wound. But if there’s no wound, there’s no place it can seep in. So you gain. You develop good qualities in the mind. And you realize that the renunciation, the giving up, is a trade. I’ve told you about that time when Ajahn Suwat was teaching at IMS in Massachusetts. And after the second or third day of the retreat, he commented, “You notice how grim everybody is about the meditation?” He looked out across the room and people were looking pretty grim. Then he attributed it to the fact that they hadn’t had practice with the more basic parts of the practice that can give you some joy in giving up. Because when you’re sitting here meditating, there are a lot of things you can do. You’re not giving up. You’re not looking at your iPhone. You’re not looking at your television. You’re not chatting with other people. You’re not engaging in unskillful thoughts. And above all, you’re not engaging in sensuality, the mind’s fascination with thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. You’re going to find the pleasure of form as you’re breathing. It requires abandoning quite a few things. The Buddha himself said that when he realized that he was going to have to give up sensuality in order to get the mind to settle down, that his heart didn’t leap up at it. This is an important part of giving up. It’s not just that you reason with yourself that it’s going to be better to give up. It’s part of the heart that has to respond, realizing that it’s going to grow by giving up. I don’t know how many letters I’ve received from people who talk about their practice, and it’s all very intellectual. They’ve read all the right books, applied all the right perceptions to their practice, at least as far as they can see. And yet the insight doesn’t go very deep. It’s because they approach it purely as a matter of the mind. As the Buddha teaches, when he uses the word citta, it’s not just mind, it’s heart. And there has to be a part of the heart that appreciates that it can grow by giving up unskillful activities. But there will be parts of the heart that say, “No, only so much, and that’s enough.” So you have to keep coaxing it. It’s a conversation between your reasoning in terms of cause and effect, and it’s one thing to realize that, yes, the mind does get more quiet, but it gets more still as it gives up certain things. And it’s another to make the heart willing. This is where you have to analyze things. When the Buddha talks about locating your craving, what is it about the things you’re trying to hold on to that you really crave? You may tell yourself, “Well, I crave X, X, and Y, and Z.” But do you really crave X, Y, and Z, or do you crave your perceptions about them? Do you crave the way you’ve been thinking about them? Do you crave your identity as it forms around those things? Think about those commercials they have, say, for the Ford Experience or the BMW Chell. It’s not so much about the car. It’s about how you feel about the car. How you feel about yourself owning that car. So you can say, “Well, I can let go of the car.” But there’s something inside that still holds on, because the car wasn’t the focus. The focus was something else. So this is where you have to dig around. And the best way to find out about these things is to give them up and see what part of the mind objects. Giving up, letting go. When you give up something, it’s not necessarily the case that you give it up forever. You give it a try. So try and see what happens. And with letting go, it’s not the case that your mind has a hand that grasps things. It has habits that it repeats over and over again. And again, those habits, those thoughts, those cravings and clingings, they have their focal point. And you want to try to find that. When you can locate it, then you can reason with yourself. Because you see that by holding on to this thing, whatever it is, you get only so much pleasure, and it can offer only so much. But there’s a lot more that can be gained by letting it go. And so we learn about the mind. So we put the mind in a position where it can reason with itself more, and where the heart is more willing to let go of things, i.e., the state of concentration. You’re here. You’ve got the mind settled down. There’s a sense of ease, well-being, that come when you learn how to listen to the breath. Make the breath your friend. This is a friendship that you’re going to hold onto for quite a while. So learn how to make the mind and the breath get together, get along together. Because it’s one thing, again, to force the mind to stay here, and it’ll stay for a while. But if it doesn’t find any real satisfaction out of it, it’s going to go wandering off. It’s going to get bored. So you have to learn how to appreciate the state of the mind when it can settle down, remembering the Buddha’s injunction that there is no happiness other than peace. The mind has lots of other ideas about where happiness is going to be found. So you’ve got to coax it again, urge it on, say, “Look here, here’s something really good. And learn to appreciate it.” Here again you may have to talk to yourself about what a good thing it is to be settled in right here. So the mind will get more and more amenable to wanting to stay here. Then we’ve got a good place to stay like this. Then you can look at the things you’ve been doing repeatedly and ask yourself, “Do we really have to do them?” It’s when you see that you don’t have to do them, and you’re better off not doing them, that’s when the mind can let go. So look into that sense that, “I have to think certain ways. I have to focus certain ways. I have to demand certain things out of my environment.” It’s interesting when the Buddha talks about the different levels of impurities that can take hold of the mind and prevent concentration. Some of them are pretty blatant. Some of them are subtle. And it’s interesting what the subtle ones are. The desire not to be despised. The desire that people not look down on you. Look into that for a while. See why you hold on to that one. Because there are a lot of things that you hold on to as a result of that one, too. Someone says something, someone does something, and you suspect that they don’t respect you. And you grab hold of that. There are areas where you feel that you’ve been treated unjustly. The strongest sense of self is located right there. But you have to ask yourself, “By holding on to this, I’m making myself miserable. If I let go of it, I may feel that I’m not standing up for myself, allowing other people to treat me like a doormat.” But it’s making you miserable. Do you really want to think in those ways? Can you find some way of thinking that allows you to be above that? There’s a dialogue in the canon. There’s actually a debate. The devas and the asuras have been fighting. They finally decided that they were going to settle the battle not with a physical fight but with a debate. The debate was over the issue of when other people mistreat you, what do you do? The king said, “It’s through forbearance.” In other words, you’re in a position of power. You could punish someone else, but you don’t do it. The asura says, “Well, they’re going to think that you are weak. They’re going to take advantage of that.” The deva says, “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you hold by the Dhamma.” So look at the subtle things that get in the way of the mind really settling down and having a sense of really belonging right here and not having any issues in the world that you have to hold on to. You really do benefit when you let go. And you really do develop good qualities. You have to develop good qualities before you let go. And then, in the letting go, those qualities get developed further. As John Foy once commented, people say, “It’s all about letting go, letting go, letting go.” But there’s also developing. An important part of the practice is seeing that by developing certain qualities, putting the effort in to develop certain qualities, gives you something better to hold on to. And if you let go properly, it’s always a trade-off.

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