The Skill of Letting Go

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You may know the story of Ananda Bindaga, who was one of the Buddha’s main lay supporters. He was the one who founded Jetavana, the monastery where the Buddha spent more rains retreats than any other place, where he gave lots and lots and lots of discourses. Well, the time finally came when Ananda Bindaga was on his deathbed. So Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Ananda go to see him. Sariputta asks how he’s going. “Are you doing well?” Ananda Bindaga says, “No, I’m not doing well at all.” And Sariputta starts teaching him, “Train yourself. My consciousness will not be dependent on the eye, the ear, nose, tongue, body or mind, sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. Consciousness of these things, contact of these things. I will not cling to these things. I will not let my consciousness be dependent on them.” He goes through the six properties, earth, water, wind, fire, space, consciousness, the five aggregates, the four formless states, anything imaginable that you could have your consciousness dependent on, that you could be clinging to. And Sariputta lets go. Ananda Bindaga starts to cry. Ananda Bindaga says, “Get a grip. Are you sinking?” Ananda Bindaga says, “No, I’m not sinking. It’s just that all these years I’ve been coming to support the Buddha, coming to the monastery, and I’ve never heard a Dhamma talk like this.” Talks like this are not usually given to lay people. So Ananda Bindaga has a request. “Please tell the Buddha to give talks like this to lay people.” Then he dies. He was reborn as a deva, which is a sign that he wasn’t able to follow the instructions in the talk. His emotions got in the way. If he’d followed the instructions, he would have been an arahant. And there may have been a good reason why the Buddha didn’t give a talk like that to lay people, because you tell people just to let go, let go, let go. You’re not giving them the full instruction. You have to tell them how to let go, because it is possible. As you focus down on things in your mind, you tell yourself, “Okay, I’m not going to focus on anything. Anything that comes up, I’m going to push it out of the way, push it out of the way.” And there’s a certain amount of aversion in that. And you can put yourself into a state of non-perception, where everything just blanks out. Letting go is a skill. This blanked out state is not where you want to go. Some people actually think it’s nibbana. It seems like cessation, based on this. They say there is no self, because they don’t sense anything there at all. But it’s just blanking out. The Buddha didn’t teach the big sleep he taught awakening, which is something entirely different. So it’s important that you understand the skill of letting go. The Buddha sets it out in five steps. Whatever it is that you want to contemplate, to get beyond. You have to watch it. What is the origination of this thing? What is its passing away? The origination doesn’t mean it’s simply arising. Origination means that it’s caused, and you’re looking for the cause. And the word origination is usually used to mean causes from inside the mind. So you want to see what’s causing this to come here in the mind. And if the cause goes away, then it will go away too. So those are the first two steps to establish the fact that these things are fabricated. This is the Buddha said, wherever you find arising and passing away, change while things are in existence. It’s a sign it’s been fabricated. It’s been willed by the mind. We hear that so many times. We don’t stop to think about how radical that is. Your experience is willed. It’s something you’ve intended. You didn’t think you were in on the planning too much. A lot of it was presented to you. But what’s being presented to you actually is the result of your old actions. So it’s intended, but it may not be what you intended it to come out as. But that should focus your attention inside. The source is here. Sita. Phenomena are led by the mind, created by the mind, dominated by the mind. So you want to look inside. Then the next three steps have to do with not just the fact of fabrication, but also the value of fabrication. You want to see what is the allure of this thing that I’m attached to? What do I find attractive? So with sensuality, what about a sensual fantasy pulls you in, turns you on? And the details will change from time to time. And they’re not necessarily the details about the body you’re lusting after, or the food that you’re lusting after. It may have to do with your perceptions around these things. Your perceptions of yourself as related to these things. Sometimes you simply crave craving. So look into it. What is the allure? And then you compare that with the drawbacks. When I cling to this, what happens? What are the negative results? This is where the Bodhichitta pulls out. There’s three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self. These things, no matter how attractive they may be, are inconstant. It doesn’t mean they just change. They’re really unreliable. Sometimes the word anicca is translated as impermanent. And you could argue with some things, when they’re impermanent, it’s a good thing. When disease is impermanent, it goes away, that’s good. Bad conditions go away, that’s good. But you think about things as being inconstant, and that’s basically what the word literally means. It’s the opposite of nicca, which means constant. If something is inconstant, you can’t rely on it. And the mind wants to rely, it wants to have something to settle in on. And all of its fabrications are denying that possibility. That’s one of the drawbacks. The other is that it’s stressful. It weighs down the mind, or in the Jamaa Abu’s terms, it puts a squeeze on the heart. If something is inconstant, stressful, why claim it as yours? Why think that it’s you? It’s not worth it. It’s a value judgment. And then we can see that it really is true, that it’s not worth it. You compare the allure with the drawbacks. And the drawbacks weigh outweigh the allure. That’s when you can subdue desire and passion for that object, whatever it was. And that’s the escape. So you’re not just telling yourself, let go, let go. You’re giving yourself reasons to let go. And as the Jhans all say, when you see the reasons, you don’t have to tell yourself, inconstant, stressful, not self. When you see that it’s not worth it, you let go. Now you may remember that the Buddha said there are two causes for stress or suffering. One in which you develop dispassion for it, simply by watching it with equanimity. And the other where you have to exert a fabrication before you develop dispassion. The first are the ones where you haven’t basically been paying attention to why you’re holding on to something when you look at it. Directly, you see quickly that it’s not worth it. Whatever allure it has, you automatically see it and it’s outweighed by the drawbacks. But there are other cases where it’s not so obvious and the allure goes deep. That’s when you have to dig it out by using bodily fabrication, the way you breathe, verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. And mental fabrication, the perceptions, not just the perceptions of inconstant stress, not self. When you really see that it’s not worth it and this desire that you had for that allure just withers away. That’s when you’ve seen with insight that letting go is not because you’ve been told to let go or you tell yourself to let go or force things out of the mind. As the John Furrier once said, “If nibbana can be attained by force, we would have all gone there a long time ago.” There’s no force in this, but there’s a certain, certainly there’s a lot of insight and understanding that goes into letting go. What’s amazing, of course, about those instructions to Ananda Vendaka is how thorough they are. Everything you can possibly imagine. You’re not supposed to cling to it. You’re not supposed to let your consciousness depend on it. You can’t even let consciousness depend on consciousness. It says that several times in the context of the six properties, the context of consciousness of the six senses, consciousness in the aggregates, infinitude of consciousness in the formless states. You have to become really sensitive to the fact that whatever consciousness you have that has an object is really dependent on the object. It’s conditioned by the object and conditioned by your intention to latch on to that object. This is an important insight. It’s something that’s often missed. People say that consciousness has to be unconditioned. The consciousness you have at your senses is unconditioned because how can something conditioned know something else that’s conditioned? That’s what knowledge is. That’s what awareness is. Awareness of objects is conditioned. What the Buddha’s trying to get you to see is what happens when there’s no object at all. When you’ve looked at all the possible objects, you say there’s nothing there at all that you would want. And you’ve seen this not because you forced yourself, but you’ve seen it through understanding. And if everything comes together just right, with all the factors of the past, then you open up to something that is totally unconditioned. And it’s called consciousness, but it doesn’t come under any of the six properties, five aggregates, six senses. It’s not known through any of these things. It has no surface. The image of the Buddha gives us a light beam. There’s nothing to land on, although even that image is limited because light beams go in one direction. But this doesn’t have directions. Napananda Bendiga had followed the discourse that Sariputta gave him that day. That he might have seen that, might have experienced that, reached that, but he let his emotions get in the way. And as a result, he was born as a Deva. The commentaries tell us that he was a special kind of Deva, he and Lady Visakha. And basically, what would it be about to a Deva pass, where they’re going to get to visit all the levels of the Devas, all the levels of the Brahmins, and then leave Samsara. But as the Buddha said, just as a little tiny bit of excrement smells, he says he wouldn’t praise even a tiny bit of becoming. So if you can take this to heart, that eventually you’re going to have to let go of everything, but before then, you have to learn how to let go. You let go in bits and pieces, as you’re sitting here meditating. Sort of discovering the different levels of jhana. In each case, he said, at first his mind didn’t leap up at the idea that you have to give up sensuality. But then as he contemplated the drawbacks of sensuality, his mind was more and more inclined to want to get beyond that. And he wasn’t leaping up at the idea of abandoning directed thought and evaluation. So he looked at the drawbacks. So even just getting into concentration requires that you see drawbacks, and you ask yourself, of course, the opposite question, where’s the allure? So you get practice in letting go through discernment, through understanding, realizing the amount of effort that you put into manufacturing your experience, and getting a sense that a lot of things you manufactured are simply not worth it. So we do that, as I said, bits and pieces first. You let go of something so you can get something better. In the mission that Ajahn Chuh uses of climbing a ladder to a roof, you hold on to one rung, and then you hold on to the next higher rung, and then you let go of the lower one, so you go to a higher one. Up, up, up. And to finally get to the roof, that’s when you let go totally. So as long as you’re on the ladder, you don’t want to let go totally. Because there are things you have to put together, you have to fabricate the path so that it’s complete. And then when the path is complete, then you can let go, safely. But you do it with understanding, because there’s five steps of looking for the origination, the passing away. The allure of the drawbacks, so you can escape. Eventually that gets applied to the five faculties. Which is another way of saying, applied to the path as a whole. You see the allure of the path, and what it’s done to get you past many forms of suffering. But you also see its drawbacks, it too is fabricated. At that point, you can let go safely. But in the meantime, learn how to let go, step by step, as you let go of some things and hold on to others. You get practice in talking to yourself about these things. This is what exerting a fabrication means, that you talk to yourself in these ways. So you get more and more skilled at what actually has to be done, to let go in a way that opens you up to something more than you’ve ever seen before.

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