Developing & Letting Go

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When the Buddha was asked what kind of teacher he was, he said he was someone who taught karma, taught action. That was the big issue he addressed because he said it’s because of our actions that we suffer, but it’s also through actions that we can put an end to suffering. Because the reason we suffer is not because of things outside. The world may be a miserable place. You read every day about stupid things that people do, harmful things that people do. But as the Buddha pointed out, that’s not enough for the mind to suffer. We suffer because of our own actions, how we relate to things, both inside and out. And there’s a skill in how to relate, which is why we come to meditate. The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means to develop. There are certain good qualities we have to develop, like mindfulness, alertness, ardency, calm, insight, discernment, concentration. These are all things that need to be developed if we want to see the problem clearly. And solve it. Sometimes you hear that meditation is a matter of letting go, letting go. And there’s a lot you do have to let go. But there’s also a lot that you have to develop. When I stayed with the Chan Fuan, it was very rare that he would talk about mistakes that other people make and teach in the Dharma. But one of the mistakes that he did underline was that, just this one, that people say that in meditation all you have to do is let go. He said you have to develop. In a John Lee’s phrase, if you simply let go, let go, the drop of a hat, everything is inconstant, stressful, not self. You let go like a pauper, someone who doesn’t have anything at all. You let go of the Cadillac that you don’t have. But that doesn’t accomplish anything, because you still can use it. What you want to do is learn how to let go like a rich person. The rich person lets go of his or her wealth, but still has lots of wealth to draw on when necessary. It’s like having a good bank account. It means you don’t have to carry your wealth around with you. It’s not a burden. When the time comes to use it, it’s there. In the same way we have to develop the path, starting with right view and all the way through right concentration. And only when it’s fully developed and it can do its work, can you let it go. When you let it go, though, it doesn’t go anywhere away from you. Think about the Buddha. After he gained awakening, on the path he developed virtue, concentration, discernment. And when the time came to let go of even skillful things like the path itself, so he gained awakening. Still after his awakening, he had those qualities there. They didn’t leave him. He didn’t need them for his own sake. Although the texts say that it was a pleasant abiding for him to contemplate how the aggregates were inconstant, stressful, not-self. It was pleasant to practice concentration. But his relationship to these things was disjoined from them. He didn’t have to feed off of them. As far as his own well-being, that was already taken care of. But he could use his virtue, concentration, and discernment in teaching others. Which means that when you develop good things like this, and then let them go, they don’t run away. They’re so solidly with you that you don’t have to hold on to them. It’s when they’re not solid, that’s when you have to hold on. And as for letting go, you have to learn how to let go in stages. The first thing you do is let go of unskillful mental qualities. Things like thoughts about sensuality, thoughts on ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. You realize that these things just pull you down. They get you into trouble. So you learn how to drop those. And at the same time, you learn how to develop concentration, to give the mind something good to hold on to. In the course of developing concentration, you also develop some wisdom. Because what is wisdom or what is insight? Seeing things in terms of how the mind fabricates them. Your mind’s own role in creating your experience. And it gets expressed physically in the breath, verbally in terms of directed thoughts and evaluation. Mentally in terms of feelings and perceptions. These are the things with which we create our experience of the present moment out of the raw material that comes from the past. And as we work in meditation, we get to see these processes really clearly. The things you know best are the things you learn how to use, to make. And so you’re making these types of fabrication all the time. That becomes a source of insight into the mind, the workings of the mind. So when the inevitable comes, when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, you’ll be sure to know how to keep these things from causing you trouble. Because these are the things that can make you suffer if you don’t do them right. The way you breathe can get you all worked up. The way you talk to yourself can get you worked up. The perceptions and images you hold in mind, the feelings you focus on, if you’re not skillful, these things can get you really worked up. And you can suffer. But if you learn how to use these things skillfully, for instance, you know what kind of thoughts you should think and what kinds of thoughts you shouldn’t think. And when a thought that you shouldn’t be thinking comes into the mind, you know how to effectively deal with it so that it doesn’t take over. Then you’ve got an important skill. Because what is it that makes people suffer, say, as death approaches? Their minds are all over the place. They don’t want to think about the fact that death is coming. So they’ll grab at anything. And they decide that they miss this sensual pleasure or that sensual pleasure. Or they’re afraid that they’re going to go out of existence. Or else they think they’ve been suffering so much from this life, they would rather just bury themselves in oblivion. All these forms of craving are the causes of suffering. They’re also causes for how you’re going to be reborn. When you’re really desperate, you’ll take birth as anything. But when you learn how to keep your thoughts under control, tell yourself you’re going to stay focused on something that’s really useful, in this case stay focused on the breath. You’re going to get focused on understanding how the mind relates to the breath. Then you learn the skills you’re going to need to keep the mind under control even as more difficult things happen. So we’re not here just to rest the mind. We’re here to learn about it. Now the best way to learn about it is to make it quiet. And then once it’s quiet, to see what kind of subtle movements it has. When you’ve got it well trained, you can see that this thought is going to go there, that thought is going to go here. And you can decide whether here or there are good places to go. And then you can decide, is this a thought to be encouraged or this is one to be cut away? And you have experience in cutting away your thoughts. Most people just assume that anything that appears in the mind is what they think and they run with it. But the Buddha points out, no, you don’t have to run with these things. You have the choice. It’s because you have the choice that you can choose not to suffer. So it all comes down to the skill with which you look after the actions of the mind here in the present moment. There’s a way of acting that will lead to suffering. There’s a way of acting that will lead to a happy rebirth. And then there’s a way of acting that would lead to the end of action altogether, where you reach a happiness that’s so secure you don’t need to do anything anymore. All these kinds of action are available to us. And it’s the way we act that will determine whether we suffer or whether we don’t suffer. I mean, the fact that we’re born means that inevitably there will be some aging, there will be some illness, there will be some death. But it doesn’t have to mean that there’s going to be suffering. The suffering is optional. And freeing the mind from suffering, that’s an option too. So learn to explore your options and learn how to train the mind so that once it recognizes a good option, it sticks with it and doesn’t allow itself to get waylaid. It’s your ability to set a good goal for yourself and then learn how to stay focused on that goal. Without getting distracted. That’s how you find true happiness in life. In other words, it comes from the skills you develop within. After all, the problem comes from within. In our lack of skill. Other people can teach us about skill, but we ourselves are the ones who have to learn how to master the skill. Once we’ve done that, then all the Ajahns and all the great Arahants can guarantee that that’s the end of the problem. The end of all problems that come way down the mind.

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