

## *The Role of Attachment*

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We're often told that non-attachment plays an important role in the practice. What we rarely hear is how important the role of attachment is, but it has its role as well.

There's a discourse where the Buddha talks about the traditions of the noble ones. There are four altogether. The first three are: contentment with the food you get, the clothing you get, the shelter you get. And you'd think, from what we know about the four requisites, that the fourth one would be being content with the medicine you get, but it's not. It's something else. It's delighting in developing and delighting in letting go.

It's the delighting in developing that's important. You develop good qualities in the mind. You like them. When you get something good in the mind, you hold on to it both to see how far it can take you and for the sense of well-being that comes with it. If it's the best thing you know in the mind, hold on to it. Don't let go of it until you find something better. You'll find something better either because you notice on your own that there are better states in the mind, or because someone else points them out to you, or because what you've got begins to develop into something better because you're maintained it. So until you sense that "something better," hold on to what you've got. Sometimes it doesn't seem like much. You sit down and focus on the breath, and there's a slight sense of ease, a slight sense of relaxation. It's not impressive, but at the very least you've let go of your outside entanglements. You're just there with the breath.

Right there is the potential for the first jhana: the happiness, the ease, the pleasure that comes from seclusion from unskillful qualities. And "seclusion" here, means that you let yourself be cut off from those other things. You don't have to think about them; you don't have to carry them around. You stay simply with the good feeling of the breath. Even though it may not be accompanied by bright lights or whistles or confetti, still, it's a nice state, a pleasant state. It may feel like a vanilla state to begin with, but as you stay with it, it starts taking on more flavor.

So hold on to that. This requires, to some extent, that you be attached to it. Otherwise, you let it go before it has the chance to develop into anything. Then you pride yourself on being non-attached, but what you've done is that you've dropped the ball.

So it's good to have a certain amount of attachment to the pleasure that comes in the meditation because that keeps bringing you back, bringing you back. Don't let it go until you find something better.

There's a story told in the Canon about people in a town who suddenly pick up and move someplace else, leaving a lot of their possessions behind. So two men from a neighboring town decide to go into the first town and check it out, to see if the people left behind anything of value. They get to the town and the first thing they see is some straw. Well, they figure, there's some use for the straw; let's carry that away. So they bundle up the straw and carry it with them. After a while, they come across some flax. Now, flax is more valuable than straw. So the first man says, "Let's put down the straw and take the flax instead." But the second man says, "Well, I've been carrying this straw around for quite a while now and I worked so hard to bundle it up, so I'll hold on to it." The first man drops the straw, picks up the flax, and they go on.

And then as they go on, they keep finding things of increasing and increasing value until they finally come across gold. The first man, at that point, has been carrying around some silver he found. So he puts down the silver, picks up the gold. The second man is still carrying the straw that he worked so hard to bundle up the first time around.

The point of the story, of course, is that when you come across something better, you let go of what you're holding on to. But the interesting thing, in the meantime, is that if you don't come across anything better, you hold on to what you've got. This is important. After all, the first man does hold on to the gold, takes that back home, and he benefits from it.

So when you find gold in your practice, you hold on. Even if you find silver in your practice, it may not be the absolute best thing there is out there, but if it's better than whatever else you've got right now, hold on to it. Because the sense of peace, the sense of centeredness that can come from the concentration is a valuable thing, you want to keep it with you as much as you can. You find a place inside you that feels solid, secure, and it's natural that you want to identify with it.

Now, you also know that you're not supposed to identify with things, but don't think of that yet. Stay with this—the sense of ease, the sense of solidity—because that gives you the ballast you need to not get blown around by the world. It gives you a sense of well-being deep down inside so that when you come across other things that ordinarily would have tempted you to react with greed or anger, delusion or fear, you don't see the need to react in those ways. You've got something better right here. You know that if you let go of it, you might lose it, so hold on.

This way, you develop your mindfulness, you develop your concentration—all the good qualities that you’re supposed to delight in developing. They develop through this sense of attachment. Ajaan Fuang used to say, “You have to be crazy about the meditation if you want to meditate well.” In other words, as you go through the day, even though it doesn’t look like you’re meditating, still deep down inside you’re staying with something solid. Nobody else has to know; it’s your own private internal affair.

I know some people who, when they go to meditation retreats and their minds get into good deep states of concentration, they’re afraid to tell the teacher for fear the teacher will tell them to let go of it—which, of course, aborts whatever they might get from the concentration.

There’s a rhythm; there’s a season for letting go. But until the concentration is developed fully, you don’t want to let go of it. You hold on to it until it’s really solid and secure. It involves work, but then one of the words for meditation, *kammattana*, means basically the work you have to do: your duties as a meditator. But here it’s a duty with pleasure, a sense of ease, a sense of solidity. You hold on to it. Allow yourself to get attracted to it, to realize its various advantages. The day will come when there’s something better that you can hold on to, but in the meantime, hold on to what you’ve got.

The image they often use in Thailand is of a red ant. They’ve got red ants that live in the mango trees. Apparently, they live off the sap because they certainly don’t live off the mangoes. They build their nests in the trees, they’re quite large, and they have fierce bites. If someone climbs up the tree, it’s almost like the ants are there to protect the mangoes because they immediately come crawling all over the person climbing the tree. They bite so hard and so insistently that when you try to pull them off, sometimes the body will detach from the head, and the head is still biting.

Ajaan Fuang used to say to hold on to your meditation object the same way that a red ant bites. Hold on insistently no matter what happens. Come hell or high water, you hold on right here. Or, come hell or high wind—like we had the other night—you still hold on to your breath.

You realize that this is the most important thing you have. You have to change your priorities, and this is one of the things that concentration does. Things you use to hold on to, saying, “I need this to live, I need that to be happy”: When you’ve got this sense of solidity inside, if you allow it to develop, if you stay with it long enough, you begin to realize that those other things are not all that necessary. If you have to do without them, you can. You’ve got something better deep down inside.

So attachment has its place in the practice. The desire to hold on to the attraction and delight you find in the meditation is a healthy thing. Without it, the concentration wouldn't evolve; the mindfulness wouldn't develop. Meditation would become a chore.

I actually know people who think that meditation is suppose to be a chore; you're not supposed to like it. But that kind of meditation gets very dry very quickly, and the sorts of insights you may get from it are also very disorienting and very dry. For solid insights, you want to put the mind into a state where it feels solid inside, where it has something really valuable that can take as its nourishment.

You feed on the concentration. It's one of the sources of strength for the mind. Once you have that strength, then when insight hits, it doesn't knock you over. In fact, it actually allows you to let go in a way that's balanced. In other words, when you find something better, you hold on to the insight. You work with insight until you find something better than the insight, then you let go of the insight. You don't have to hold on to anything at all at that point.

But in the beginning, you have to hold on. It's like climbing a ladder: You have to hold on to the rungs of the ladder if you're going to get up to the roof. If you decide to let go midway, just to show that you can let go, you get back down on the ground pretty fast. Don't let go until you're up on the roof. Then you're secure. You can let go of the ladder. You don't lead the ladder anymore. In the meantime, you go from one attachment to a higher and higher one.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about this. As you go up the various levels of jhana, each one gets more and more refined until you get to the highest level of jhana. The Buddha calls this the ultimate clinging. This is the highest and most excellent attachment. And, in the course of the sutta, he takes you from one level up to the next, up to the next. Then Ven. Ananda happens to mention that this is a beautiful way to practice: The path goes from one attachment to the next, to the next and to finally get to the point where you don't need those attachments. You don't need to cling; you're not dependent on those things anymore. But until you get to that point, hold on. You've got something valuable here. It may not yet be gold, but it's copper or silver, which is still pretty good.

Look at the other things for which you might let this go, when you focus your attention on other issues when you go back home: What have you got? You've got straw; you've got flax. If you carry those things around, you're crazy.

The nature of the mind is that—as long as it's not totally free—it's got to hold on to something. So you give it something good to hold on to, something that will allow it eventually to open up.

This is why states of mindfulness and concentration are so important. They allow you to see more clearly when something is better, so that you recognize that “something better” when it comes along.

So the principle here is you hold on to the best thing you experience in the meditation. One: to see if it really is good. Like we had the story, the other day, of the parts of a vision that may appear. If there’s a sense of peace and well-being, you don’t have to hold on to the meaning of the vision, because that could get the mind all worked up. The questions—Is his true? Am I crazy? Am I getting special powers?—all get the mind worked up. But if you stay close to the ground, there’s a feeling of ease here, so focus on that feeling of ease. There’s no question about that. Try to keep close to the ground. That’s where it’s stable. Stay away all those levels of interpretation that come when you have to put a story on things, or evaluate in terms of a worldview. You’ve got the simple sensation; you’ve got the simple feeling. That’s something useful. Instead of taking the flax or the straw, that’s at least silver or copper. Take that with you.

Where the analogy falls apart is that sometimes the silver or the copper, when you hold on to it, turns into something better. But take whatever seems good and hold on to it—both for the sense of ease and well-being it gives you, and also to really get to know it well.

We’re so quick to label things as they happen in the meditation. “This is good. That’s bad.” Try to withhold those labels and tell yourself, “Well, I’ve got time, let me watch. Let me follow this for myself to see if it really is good.”

There’s a story about Ajaan Sao teaching meditation. A layperson comes, wanting to practice meditation, so Ajaan Sao gives him very basic instructions. The student goes off, practices at home, and comes back and says, “Okay, when I practice, these are the results that happen. Am I doing it right?” And Ajaan Sao says, “Well, whether it’s right or wrong, just keep at it.” Now, it was said that Ajaan Sao was a man of very few words, but it’s an important technique in teaching. Each meditator has to watch for him or herself. You have to learn how to watch and evaluate on your own; otherwise, you simply believe what the teacher tells you and you don’t get to exercise your own judgment, which is where the discernment comes from: in exercising your own judgment, getting a sense of what’s better. What is deeper? What is more refined? What kind of pleasure is more stable, long lasting?

One of the reasons we’re here to meditate is to develop these powers of judgment on our own, so that we don’t have to go running to the teacher or to the books all the time.

Learn to develop a steady gaze so that you can gauge things on your own and learn how to trust your judgment. Because your judgment becomes more trustworthy the more consistent and the more steady you are in your gaze.

So we hold on to what's good, both for the sense of the well-being it gives and to test how really good it is—to see if, maybe, there's something better. Because, by definition, as long as you're holding on, there still must be something better. But hold on to what you've got until that “something better” comes along.