

Skillful Attachments

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The mind has a very deeply ingrained habit, which is to latch on to things, and for the most part it latches on to the wrong things—things that cause it pain, things that cause it distress. And because you can't teach the mind just to drop everything all at once, the basic strategy of the path is to give you better things to latch on to, and basic to this strategy is the realization that you have more choice in the matter than you might have thought.

For most of us, whatever comes up in our minds, whatever comes up around us, we've got to latch on to it. Good, bad, indifferent, it doesn't seem to matter. Whatever presses itself most vehemently on our senses, that's what we latch on to. But if you realize that you have other choices, you can find better things to latch on to and cause less suffering. Otherwise, you latch on to things, and they basically take over, push you out. A feeling comes up, you latch on to it, and all of the sudden the feeling seems to occupy your whole body, and you have no room in the body. You're pushed outside. This is one of the reasons why a lot of people are really out of touch with their bodies. They've let all these other things take over.

So we first have to clean out the body: in other words, work with the breath. Try to notice what way of breathing feels good, what way of breathing doesn't feel good, and realize that you have the choice. If you want to breathe in a painful way, you can go ahead and do it, but it doesn't really help anything. It's much more productive to find a comfortable way of breathing, a way of breathing that feels refreshing or soothing—energizing if you feel tired, relaxing if you feel tense. Often that requires a major re-sensitizing because you're so used to blocking out how the body feels so that you can think about other things. So you have to consciously reopen this area of your awareness.

Explore how the breathing feels in the back, how it feels in your legs, because it does relate to every part of your nervous system. The breath is what keeps the nerves going, keeps them sensitive, and there are many levels and layers of breath in the body. There's the in-and-out breath. There's a sense of energy that flows up as you breathe in. There's another sense of energy that flows down as you breathe in. There's a sense of breath energy that goes throughout the whole body, all along all the nerves, all the blood vessels.

Try to sensitize yourself as much as you can to these things. Focus on whatever breath sensations you already feel, and the longer you stay with them, the more you begin to see how there are subtler sensations in the body as well. This way, you

get to reoccupy the body in a more comfortable way, a more solid way, and this is something good you can latch on to—the sense of ease filling the body, the sense of energy filling the body. Once you reclaim the body in this way, then when other thoughts and feelings come in, you recognize them as intruders and you’re in a better position to choose which ones you want to focus on and which ones you don’t.

All too often we blindly take on whatever comes in, but as you stay with the breath, you get a greater and greater sense of the mind as being a committee, with lots of different voices in there. There’s really no reason that you have to identify with any of them. If you want to, you can, but again, you’ve got more of a choice in the matter than you might have anticipated, you might have believed. Crazy voices, childish voices, angry voices, lustful voices: You can look at them and realize you don’t have to identify with them.

This is one level of the Buddha’s teaching on not-self. Just because a thought comes into your mind doesn’t mean you have to believe it. It doesn’t mean that you have to claim it as yours. As the Buddha realized, our sense of self is something we do. It’s something we make. We make a self out of things. For the most part, we make it out of cardboard and sticks and little bits of string. In other words, we don’t have any really solid and lasting raw materials here: just feelings and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness and the form of the body. If you really look at these things carefully, you realize that there’s nothing there that’s solid or lasting. And when you look at that fact from the point of view of a well-concentrated mind, instead of being depressing or disturbing, it’s liberating.

You really have the choice of what you want to latch on to, if you really want to latch on. Otherwise, you can latch on to your state of concentration for the time being, but you can do it more consciously. You can do it more clearly, with a better sense of purpose while you’re doing it. If a thought comes up, you can ask yourself, “Where is this going to lead me? If I were to jump in with this thought or to take it on, where would I end up? What would the results be?” That way, your tendency to latch on gets better and better informed, and actually serves a much better purpose. You can choose the thoughts you want to think, and can put aside the ones you don’t. You don’t have to make a self out of them.

As you’re more deliberate in how you choose to latch on to things, you see much more clearly what this process of I-making and my-making is all about, where it comes from. You begin to question it more and more: “Do you really have to do this? Do you have to latch on to these things?” Your sense of the things that you would like to latch on to gets more and more restricted—in other words,

more restricted to more skillful ways of identification. You begin to see that this whole issue of making a self is really a strategy for happiness, and for the most part it's a very ignorant, blind, and poorly thought-out strategy.

What we're doing as we practice is putting the mind in a position where it can be a lot more clear-eyed about what it's doing. As the sense of ease and well-being becomes more and more established, more and more solid in the practice, you find fewer and fewer things you want to identify with. This doesn't mean you don't think at all. You still think when you want to, but your relationship to your thoughts is different. You see them more as tools, things that you hold on to briefly while you need them and then you just put them aside. That puts you in a much better position.

Ultimately, you get to a point where you don't need to hold on to anything. That's when you can totally let go and be really free, because you've reached the kind of happiness that doesn't need to be preserved. It doesn't need to be looked after. It's just there. It doesn't require any making of any kind at all. And when it's already there, you don't need any more strategies to work toward it. It's just there. But as long as you're on the path, you have to hold on to your strategies. It's simply a matter of replacing unskillful ones with more skillful ones, and being very clear about what your choices are.

When you think about your self, learn to think about it as a process, something you do, something you make. It's a whole series of strategies. One of the reasons why the mind is so difficult to train is because we have so many different strategies—a lot of different selves. Often it seems that you train one, and another one starts getting acting up.

This is why meditation doesn't follow a nice clear linear progression. It goes up and down, up and down, because there are lots of little selves in there that have to be trained. But you find, after a while, that there is a finite number, and the more you can get the mind to settle down and identify with a state of concentration, it helps bring a lot of those different little selves in line. When they're standing in line, you can pick them off one by one by one. But until you're done with the job, you're going to have to hold on to something, so try to hold on to this state of concentration. As the Buddha said, it's a harmless pleasure, a blameless pleasure, and it puts you in the position where you can see things really clearly in the mind. That's why it's the central part of the path.

So if you're going to hold on, hold on here. You're on a raft crossing over a stream. Don't let go before you've reached the other bank, and don't let anybody tell you that the really skillful practitioners are the ones who can jump off the raft in the middle of the stream. Just hold on right here. This is the attachment that

actually is helpful. Not every form of attachment, not every form of desire is a problem. There are skillful attachments and unskillful ones.

Ajaan Maha Boowa gives the analogy of climbing a ladder. Before you let go of a lower rung, you have to hold on to a higher rung. Once you're holding on firmly there, then you can let go of the lower rung and hold on to one that's still higher, and so on up the ladder. Ultimately, you get up on the roof and then you can let go of the ladder entirely, but don't let go before you've reached the goal. Take this ingrained habit you have of latching on to things and first put it to good use.