

Tenacity

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That dog is devoted to barking. If we could be as devoted to our breath as he is to barking, we would go quite a ways.

In Thailand, they have very large red ants. If you get anywhere near their nest, they come out and they attack. They bite you. As you try to pull the ants off your arm, sometimes you find as you pull the body that the head disconnects from the body—and the head is still biting. They're that tenacious.

It's an analogy frequently used in the Thai tradition: Hold on to your meditation object with the same tenacity as red ants when they bite. It may sound paradoxical. After all, this is a teaching where we're told to let go, let go, that suffering is clinging, and the end of suffering is found in letting go. But that's only part of the story.

As the Buddha once said, a basic principle in the culture of the noble ones, the customs of the noble ones, is that you delight both in developing, and in letting go. In other words, you let go of unskillful mental habits, but you work on developing the skillful ones. This takes work. This takes dedication. It takes tenacity. It requires that you hold on.

You hold to the precepts. It's the whole point of having precepts. You make a promise to yourself. We all already follow the precepts to some extent in our lives. These are basic principles we generally hold to. We're not out there killing all the time or stealing all the time. It's the lapses that are damaging. When you take on the precepts, you promise to yourself that you're not going to let there be any lapses. You hold to the precepts in the same way those red ants bite. There are cases where you would rather die than break your precept, because you realize that your precept is much more important than your body.

When you come to the practice of meditation, the same tenacity is required. You stick with it. As the Buddha said, it's not always going to be an easy path. Grief actually plays a part of the path of practice: the sense of frustration or distress, that comes from realizing that there is a goal, there's an end to suffering, other people have gotten there, but you're not there yet. That distress is an important part of the practice. It's an important impetus.

In other words, you don't let yourself get bogged down in the distress. You use it to spur yourself on to practice. He says, at the very least, the distress of knowing that you're on the path and haven't attained the goal is a lot better than the distress of not being on the path, when the distress is simply noticing certain

pleasant sights and sounds and smells and tactile sensations have been taken away from you. That's endless. It comes and goes again. It comes and goes and then comes back again. It doesn't go anywhere. But at least the distress that comes from being on the path, where you're not the end yet, serves a purpose.

So the Buddha doesn't want us to wander around like zombies just being apathetic and saying, "Well, I just won't have any desires. That'll be it." That doesn't accomplish anything. The path requires work. The skill in the work, of course, is learning how to do it in such way that you don't wear yourself out.

This is why concentration is the heart of the path. Its basic factors include ease and fullness. Ease gives you the nourishment you need along the path. This is why it's important to work with the breath, to figure out what kind of breathing feels good. How else you are going to get a sense of ease in the body? If you're going to simply sit here and wait for it to come, then if it just comes, then it'll just go, because you don't have any control over it.

But if you can experiment with the breath, explore the breath, you find that it is a skill that can be mastered: how to breathe in such way that feels good coming in, it feels good going out, it feels good being in your body.

In the different passages in the texts where the Buddha gives analogies for the factors of the path, concentration is often compared to food. It's the nourishment that keeps you going: a sense of ease, a sense of rapture or fullness, a sense of equanimity that you can develop. But it requires work. As with any skill, it takes time. There are going to be lots of mistakes, but you have to learn from your mistakes and not get discouraged by them.

Stick with the determination to see things through.

Ajaan Mun once said in his very last Dhamma talk that this is one thing you never let go of until you reach full awakening: the determination not to come back and suffer. Simply going around being mindful and apathetic and emotionally blank doesn't really accomplish anything. You're just feeding off old karma and creating blank new karma, which doesn't lead to the end of suffering. The end of suffering requires a determination that you hold to, that there's got to be a way out. It requires a lot of ingenuity and a lot of discernment to notice where you're causing yourself suffering, and how the avoidance of one form of clinging often leads you to go and cling to something else.

The path lies in learning how to take that habit to your advantage, as when you leave one clinging go to another one that's more skillful, like holding on to the breath rather than holding on to your old ways of thinking. Open yourself to the possibility that holding on to the breath really can take you through a lot of things that, in the past, you thought you had to worry about, had to plan for. In a lot of

situations, simply holding on to the breath with this sense of fully inhabiting the body can provide you with the foundation actually to be in a better position to see what needs to be done.

This is why the Buddha stressed the principle of respect for concentration, having some trust in your concentration—not that everything that pops into your mind as you sit here meditating is going to be reliable, but at the very least, when you're mindful and centered, you're a lot more likely to get good responses, good inspirations out of the mind than when you're just running around frantically.

So give yourself to the meditation. Don't let yourself be swayed by whatever difficulties come. After all, this is the only way you're going to get to the goal. Even if you don't get all the way to the goal in this lifetime, at least you learn an awful lot about the mind and you become a lot more skillful in how you handle issues that arise, both inside and outside.

The path is a good path to be on. It's even better to get to the end. But even if you don't get to the end, it's good place to be.

So don't let yourself slip off. Be the sort of person who finds pleasure in being up for challenges, being willing to learn all the time. It's only through this willingness to learn that you can find something new. The Buddha repeatedly talks about the path leading to the point where you realize what you've never realized before, you see what you never saw before, you attain what you never attained before. There really is something new, something extraordinary at the end of the path. But it requires all eight of the factors of the path, everything from right view through right effort to right concentration. It's a path that can engage all of your mental faculties. It's one of the few things in life that really is worth holding on to.

For most of us, clinging means clinging to things as ends in and of themselves. The Buddha takes that habit and says, let's switch that a little bit, cling to the path as a means to an end. Then, when you reach the end, you can let go. People sometimes make a big deal out of the paradox that we're supposed to overcome desire and yet if you want to attain the goal, that means you've got desires, so how can you get there? It's an infinite regress.

But remember Ven. Ananda's teaching to the brahman. The brahman came to a park one day where Ananda was staying and asked, "What's the purpose of this practice here?" And Ananda said, "One of the purposes is the overcoming of desire." And the brahman asked, "How do you do that?" Ananda replied, "You develop the bases of success, one of which is concentration founded on desire." The brahman said, "In that case, it's an endless path. How can you overcome

desire through desire?” He thought he got Ananda there—and there is a sense of “gotcha” when people bring up this issue.

But Ananda wasn't fazed. He said, “Well, you came to this park right?” “Yes.” “Before you came here, didn't you have the desire to come?” “Yes.” “And now that you're here, where is the desire?” “It's gone,” because he had arrived.

In the same way, you use desire on the path to bring yourself to a point where you don't need desire any more. That's what's so special about the path. Other things you hold on to and they leave you wanting. They're never really fulfilling. What works about the path is not that you are just going to forswear desire, or pretend that you don't need it. You cultivate it, you use it to bring all your wisdom and ingenuity and persistence and intentness to this breath. That gets you to the point where you don't need desire anymore. The ultimate happiness is that fulfilling.

As long as you're not there yet, learn to cultivate skillful desire. Hold on to the factors of the path as tools, because without them, you can't get there. With them, you can. Then when you've completed the work, you can put them down for good. Even then, you can still use them, but you use them in a different way. You see this in the life of the Buddha: After his awakening, he still used his concentration. He still used his psychic powers. He still used his discernment and his virtue. But it was all for the good of the world. He'd done all the work he needed to do for his own sake. Then, for the rest of his life, he used those tools for the sake of the world at large.

So whatever amount of effort, ingenuity, or difficulties are involved in following the path, it's all worth it. Don't think you can get to the end of suffering any other way.