

Holding On to the Path

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There's a passage where the Buddha reduces the path to two things: developing and letting go. You let go of the causes of suffering, and you develop the factors that lead to the end of suffering. Notice that you don't let go of everything, at least not right away. There are things you have to develop, things that you work on. And there's a way in which you could say that there are things you have to be attached to, things you have to desire.

Desire does play a role in the path. It's a part of right effort. You have to *want* to let go of unskillful qualities and you have to *want* to develop skillful ones. It's written in the definition of right effort. As for attachment, even though the Buddha doesn't say that you have to be attached to the path, still, you have to really want to work on, you have to really stick with it, and to that extent it's attachment. As Ajaan Fuang once said, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well: really sticking with it, really holding on.

So it's important that you realize the distinction. Otherwise, you let go of the path, and the path never gets developed. Like the breath: You need to hold on to the breath in all your activities. You can call that an attachment, but it's a useful attachment. It's a tool. And this is the important criterion: When you find that holding on to something leads to greater happiness, greater stability for the mind, more insight, more freedom, hold onto it. As for the things that you hold on to and they lead to problems, those are the ones you want to let go of. You need the wisdom, you need the discernment, to know which is which.

This is one of the reasons why you have to hold on to concentration, because it's only when the mind is really still that it can see things clearly enough to get a really good sense of what's working and what's not. You can't just go by your intuitions. Insights may come in the course of a meditation, but you have to test them, to see what results they give to the mind, and it takes time and repeated observation to refine your sense of judgment.

So being devoted here to the practice, even though it may seem like a type of attachment, is a necessary attachment. It's the only way that the path gets developed.

Look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. They fall into four sets. One centers around the body, one centers on feelings, another one centers on mind states, and the fourth on qualities within the mind. And there's a common pattern that runs through all of them. You start by settling in. You try to develop

a sense of ease, a sense of comfort, stability, through the processes of fabrication, and that's a balancing act right there. Sometimes when there's a sense of comfort, it's not all that stable. You phase in and you phase out, because it's so easy to leave the breath and go wallowing in the comfort. So you have to figure out a way to be both stable and comfortable at the same time.

The first tetrad, the first set of teachings, focuses on the body. The Buddha has you get sensitive to long breathing and short breathing, and be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out, because as you get more sensitive to the breath, adjust it with more and more precision, there's going to be a good sense of ease that results, and you need a full-body awareness in order to stabilize it. Otherwise, if the range of your awareness is too small, then when the breath gets more and more refined, you just zone out, which may be comfortable but it doesn't accomplish anything.

So you need full-body awareness and you may find that even *that* is not enough to keep the mind stable. So you keep focused on one spot as your primary focus. It may be the tip of the nose, the middle the chest, any place where you find it easy to have a good strong focus, and then think of your awareness spreading out from that spot, like the lit candle here in the front of our room. The flame of a candle is in one spot, but its light fills the whole room. That's the quality of awareness you want to develop in the body.

Once that's developed, then you can allow the breath to grow more and more still. In other words, you get more sensitive to even the slightest stress or the slightest burdensomeness, or the slightest dis-ease that comes, as you see more and more clearly that when you're breathing, there is an intentional element as well. The intentional element, which is based on your perceptions and your ideas about the breath, may actually be making it worse, adding unnecessary stress, unnecessary dis-ease to the breathing. So you allow that to calm down.

So that's the pattern: settling in, enjoying, but being clear enough so that you can see where there's unnecessary stress, and then calming things down.

The same pattern is followed in the next tetrad, when you're aware of how to breathe in a way that induces a sense of rapture, a sense of ease, and you get sensitive to how your feelings and your perceptions have an effect on the mind. The last step in that section is to allow those feelings and perceptions to be calmed. In other words, any feeling, or any perception you find stirring up the mind, you allow it to go. For example, rapture after a while begins to seem kind of gross, so you let that go. And even the pleasure that comes after that: That comes to seem too gross, and so you let that go, too. You're left with equanimity.

At the same time, your perception of the whole process changes. You begin to see the breath in the body not so much as in-and-out breathing, but as a quality of energy that fills the body. So you change your perceptions as well.

In the third set, when your focus is on the mind, you sensitize yourself to the mind, you begin to notice when the mind needs gladdening, when it needs stabilizing, then you find ways of using your perceptions, using the breath to gladden and stabilize the mind. This is breath meditation over time, as you gain more and more skill in reading what the mind needs, and then providing it.

Finally, there's the releasing of the mind. You see what factors in the mind are causing unnecessary burdens, so you let those go as well. But before you let them go, you have to stabilize things, to treat the mind to a sense of ease and well-being.

And of course, there will be an element of attachment there. The Buddha actually says in one sutta to indulge in that sense of ease. It's part of the refreshment you need in your meditation in order to keep the practice going. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you don't have a sense of ease and rapture, it's like an engine that doesn't have any lubricant. It begins to dry out and, after a while, it seizes up. So it's okay to develop this, to have a strong sense of attachment to it—as long as you don't let the ease blur out the clarity of mind. It requires clarity to see where there's still unnecessary stress, unnecessary activity in the mind, where the meditation can be made more refined.

The fourth set starts out by being aware inconstancy. This, too, is a perception, something that shapes the mind. But this particular perception weighs very little on the mind. You're not asked to analyze what's going on so much, just notice that whatever comes up is inconstant. As you look at the inconstancy, you begin to see the stress in it, and when you see the stress, you begin to realize that even these great states of concentration you can't really claim to be totally yours. You have some control over them but not total control.

At the same time, even in very subtle states of concentration, there's still an element of stress. That's when you begin to let go, even of the concentration. You let go of the craving for the concentration at that point, the attachment. That's what they describe as total relinquishment. That's the very last step. That's when you let everything go, both good and bad.

But notice that the total letting go doesn't come until you really develop things. Up to that point, you have to work hard at developing the path, getting that proper balance between finding the ease that gives you lubrication and the stability that allows you to see things clearly. As long as the mind still needs these things, don't let them go too quickly. Total letting go comes only when the path is fully developed, when it's done all the work. A lot of people want to let go from

the beginning. As Ajaan Lee says it's like poor people letting go of fancy possessions. They don't have those fancy possessions to begin with, they've never gotten any use out of them, so that letting go doesn't really accomplish much. It's when you develop these qualities and they do their work on the mind until they've changed the mind: That's when you can let them go.

There's one meditation teacher who once said it's like cooking the mind. You stick with these qualities over time, and the quality of the mind changes, in the same way rice change as it's cooked. It starts out hard, little pellets, but as you cook it, it softens up, and you can eat it. When you eat it, you're full, and then you don't have to eat any more for that day.

So as you soften up the mind through getting used to having this inner sense of ease and well-being, you finally get to the point where you really can let go of everything. Even the good things in the path ultimately you can let go of.

Now, that doesn't mean that you don't have them to use anymore, simply that you no longer identify with them. You're not attached to them, your well-being doesn't depend on them, because they've delivered you to another place: something that's totally unconditioned.

This applies to all the good qualities in the path. Even the qualities of goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy are not part of the mind's inherent nature. They're things you develop, things you work on as you develop the path, but you don't have to identify with them ultimately. As you're on the path, you often will identify with them, but true freedom lies when you don't have to.

After all, suppose that you had it as your basic nature that you're compassionate: Compassion has to be directed at suffering, which would require that there be people who are suffering. So your basic nature would require that there be suffering in the world, otherwise something wouldn't feel right. You want to be compassionate but there'd be nobody to be compassionate for.

But from the Buddha's point of view, compassion is something you use both for your own good or for the good of others. When you've completed your own good, you reach a state of mind that lies beyond. Then when you're dealing with other people, there's still room for compassion, and you've developed it well enough, so that it's always there, but at the same time, your own issues of your own happiness have been settled, so you're not looking at other people's suffering and happiness through the lens of your own suffering. You're not trying to derive any happiness in the way you treat them because you've already got all the happiness you need. That kind of compassion is a lot more reliable.

So ultimately the mind does get to a point where doesn't need to be attached to anything, even the good things it's developed. But that doesn't mean they go

away. They're still there, as tools. You've use them to cook the mind, as they say, and once the mind is cooked, then you can use them for helping other people to cook their minds. That's the point where we don't need to hold on.

Until you reach that point, though, hold on tight, because these things really do carry you through all kinds of dangers, all kinds of problems. Each of them is a kind of protection. Generosity is a protection, the precepts are protection, concentration, discernment: These things are all protection for the mind. As long as it needs protection, they provide it. So hold on to them. Work at them, develop them. Don't be too quick to try to let them go. As Ajaan Lee once said, when you reach the point when they've completed the work, you don't have to tell the mind to let go. It sees fully that it doesn't need them anymore. But you can get to that point only by holding on tight. As long as you realize that these are tools, you're fine. That kind of attachment isn't a problem.