

Let Go Like a Millionaire

April 10, 2017

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Hold on to the breath. Whatever else comes up in your mind, don't let go of the sensation of the breathing as the breath comes in, the breath goes out. Try to make yourself interested in the breath, to see what kind of breathing feels good and what kind of breathing is good for the body and mind. If you're tired, what kind of breathing will give you more energy? If you're wired, what kind of breathing will calm you down?

As you begin to see the effect that the breath has on the body and mind, that's going to get you even more attached to the breath—which is a good thing. Our minds have a habit of latching on to whatever comes by. And for all the Buddha talks about letting go, not everything is let go at once. One of the customs of the noble ones is that you delight in letting go but you also delight in developing. There are certain things you've got to work on, certain things you have to bring into being, to give you something good to hold on to as you start learning how to let go of other things that are really weighing down the mind.

If you look at the duties of the four noble truths, the first three all revolve around dispassion. You comprehend the clinging-aggregates. Well, to comprehend them means that you overcome passion for them. You try to abandon craving by feeling dispassion for it. And then the cessation of suffering is the actual dispassion for craving. But when you get to the path, you have to generate some passion because you've got to build these things: You've got to build virtue, you've got to build concentration, you've got to build discernment, so that the path can do its work—and so that you have something good to hold on to in the meantime.

In Ajaan Lee's phrase, the Buddha doesn't set you adrift. When the time comes for you to let go of everything, you let go not like a pauper who doesn't have anything to let go to begin with. You let go like a rich person. A rich person lets go but the rich person still has all the wealth and all the other things that he or she amassed. It's just they're not holding on to it all the time. It's there for them to use. The Buddha and his noble disciples developed virtue, concentration, discernment, yet even after they let go of these things, they still had them to use.

So again, it's not like you're being set adrift. By learning how to hold on to the breath, you can start looking at your other attachments with a little more objectivity and a little more dispassion. You don't feel quite so desperate in hanging on to things. It's not that everything is going to be easy to let go. But you have to understand, why does the Buddha have you let go of things? After all, you might think it's okay to latch on to things that are going to outlast you. But then the fact that *you're* impermanent, inconstant, means that you're setting yourself up for a fall.

I've been reading some books on the noble eightfold path. And one of the strange things is that when they define right view, they all tend to define it in terms of the three characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. They start out with these three characteristics interpreted as metaphysical principles: that there's nothing permanent in life, there's no permanent self. Then, in the context of those principles, they place the four noble truths. In other words, people suffer because they don't understand the truth of no-self. But when you understand that truth, they say, you stop suffering.

But that's not how the Buddha taught. To begin with, he didn't teach the three characteristics as metaphysical principles. They're perceptions that you apply to things. You apply them *strategically*, in line with the duties of the four noble truths. And you also apply them *selectively* as you work on the path. Like when you're working on your virtue and your precepts: You apply the three perceptions to anything that would pull you away from your virtue. For example, you learn to see your wealth, your relatives, and your health as impermanent things. So wherever concern for those things gets in the way of observing the precepts, you apply these perceptions to see that these things are not really worth holding on to. The precepts are much more valuable, so you hold on to those.

The same with concentration: When you're doing concentration, you're actually working against the three characteristics. You're trying to get the mind under your control, make it solid, constant, and steady, and give rise to a sense of well-being. You apply the three characteristics in this instance to anything that would pull you out of concentration—or, as you're getting deeper into concentration, to anything that would take you back to a weaker level of concentration.

Even when you're working on discernment, you've got to hold on to these three perceptions for a while, as you apply them to everything including the concentration. But then there ultimately comes a point where you let them go, too, along with everything else. At that point, you're no longer strategic or selective. You let everything go. Up until that point, though, the perceptions are there as tools for helping with the duties of the four noble truths. So always keep that in mind: that the four noble truths provide the context, and the three perceptions function within that context.

This becomes important when you find yourself holding on to things that you think are constant. You have to tell yourself, "Even if it's constant, the fact that I'm holding on means there's something wrong." Because being in the position of clinging—which the Buddha defines in terms of feeding on things—the fact that you have to feed on something puts you in a weak position, a position where there's suffering, because you have to be concerned, "How much longer can I feed on this?" The activity of clinging is in and of itself the suffering.

Now, it may sound like this applies only to the higher levels of the path, but it's good to keep this in mind from the very beginning, in case you run across something that seems permanent in your meditation and you want to hold on to it. You have to ask yourself, "Is this

worth holding on to right now?” Notice that question: It’s time-sensitive and it’s a value judgment. All too often we hear that insight is all about having no judging at all. But that’s not the case. You have to decide if you’re going to cling to something or not cling to something. There’s an alternative. In some cases, it’s worth it, and in some cases it’s not.

So you’ve got to learn how to pass judgment on things in a skillful way. See the allure they have: Why do you like holding onto them? Then look at the drawbacks of holding on. If you see that the good things that come from holding on are actually worth it, okay, you hold on for the time being—but with the realization that eventually you’re going to have to let go of everything. Until then, you want to let go strategically.

There are some things, of course, that we know are impermanent and we still hold on. They’re very difficult to let go. The Buddha’s way of dealing with that is twofold: one, that reflection that we chant often, “I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, all I have is my karma,” that fivefold contemplation. In the original sutta, it doesn’t stop there. It goes on to remind you that *everybody* is subject to these things. Everywhere you go: aging, illness, death, separation, people and other beings who have nothing but their karma.

When you can learn to reflect on your particular attachments in the light of the universality of this principle, it helps to take some of the sting out of letting go. It lets you see these things in perspective, realizing that you don’t know how many lifetimes you’ve been holding on to things and being forced to let go. You hold on to things that you really love and can’t imagine living without, but then still you’ve got to let them go. If you don’t let go, they’re ripped from your grasp. It’s happened over and over and over again. On the one hand, you’ve suffered all this; and on the other hand, however, you’ve survived.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, the mind is an expert survivor. But still, it’s creating a lot of unnecessary suffering in the course of surviving. You have to ask yourself, “Have you reached the point where you’ve had enough?”

This is where the second fold of the Buddha’s strategy comes in. You’re in a much better position to ask that question when you’ve really learned how to hold on to the path that you’re developing right here. You realize that it is something good. So when you let go of other things, you’re not totally set adrift because you’ve got this path to hold on to—which is one of the reasons why we work at this again and again and again, so that your concentration gets reliable, and you can gain experience in seeing how it will help you through difficulties.

Your virtue, your concentration, your discernment: These are the things that protect you. These are the things that will shore you up when everything else falls away. But that’s true only if you’ve worked on them well enough.

Which is why it’s okay to be attached to the concentration. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you’ve got to be crazy about meditation if it’s going to work. You’ve got to get to the point where it’s almost like an addiction: You find a few spare moments here and there, and you

focus on your breath. It's like a person who's addicted to cigarettes: If you find a few spare moments, you light up a cigarette. But here's an addiction that goes in a good way.

The Buddha calls this a devotion to pleasure that's actually skillful. You remember the statement at the beginning of his very first sermon, that devotion to sensual pleasures is one extreme. But then there's the devotion to the pleasure of concentration: That's something else entirely and it's actually good. It's part of the path. It's part of the middle way, a pleasure that's actually conducive to developing clarity and discernment in the mind.

So work on your concentration to make sure that it's something you can rely on. Work on your virtue, work on your discernment so that you can hold on to them with confidence.

When the Buddha says that the self is its own mainstay, that's true only if you're able to make yourself a reliable meditator. So hold on here, learn how to hold on well. And hold on in a way that helps you remain unaffected as things come and go in life. You learn that you can be okay with their coming and going because you've got something a lot more reliable inside.