

At the Door of the Cage

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

July 30, 2003

Our practice requires a lot of letting go. We prefer to think that it involves letting go of things that we don't like while allowing us to hold onto the things we do like, but actually it requires a lot more letting-go than that.

Several years back I was leading a day-long discussion on the four noble truths. When we got to the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, the passages we were discussing contained descriptions of nibbana, and the general consensus in the group was that they didn't like the sound of it. It seemed too alien, too foreign to be really appealing. Then we got to the fourth noble truth and we started talking about right concentration. That sounded very appealing: rapture and pleasure permeating the entire body. Those were things you really could get your mind around. They sounded compelling. And that's the way it is with the practice: You have to develop the fourth noble truth, the path of practice, before you can appreciate the third. You have to hold onto right concentration before you can let go into the Deathless.

The Buddha's strategy in teaching us to let go is to give us better and better things to hold onto. For example, he gets you to hold onto states of good concentration. Then when you turn around and look at things that would normally incite your lust, your anger, your desire or passion, you realize that they're not worth it. You'd much rather hold onto the stillness, the state of satisfaction, the state of wellbeing that comes with your concentration. So you burn your bridges behind you and hold onto concentration as your only true happiness in life. Only then, when the Buddha has you cornered like that, does he have you think of the drawbacks not only of the things you've already left behind but also of the concentration you're holding to.

Only when you see the drawbacks of concentration can you realize that the only alternative is the Deathless. The only thing that would really appeal to you at that point is the Deathless. That's when the door opens.

As the texts say, the first stage in insight is to focus on the drawbacks of anything that's fabricated. The next stage is for the mind to incline to the Deathless. Normally the mind will not incline to the Deathless unless it feels that that's the only way out. Otherwise it's always going to find some other place to go, some other corner to hide in. So you need to remember that the teachings on, say, the three characteristics—inconstancy, stress, and not-self—are part of a

course of training, and that the different teachings make sense only in particular stages of the training. Only when you're in the right stage for a particular teaching will it do its intended work.

Ordinarily, we'd like to leapfrog over the concentration to get to the discernment, because we're very busy people, after all. We've got a lot to do in our lives, so we want to get to the main point of this Buddhism thing and then go on to something else. But that's not how the practice works. You have to put your mind in particular states, you have to get attached to particular states, before the teachings can function in the way they're supposed to. If you think about the inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness of things you're not attached to, it doesn't really make an impact. Or if you tell yourself that everything is inconstant, stressful, and not-self before the mind has a safe place to settle down, those thoughts can be really unsettling and disorienting. Only when you're in a relatively stable place mentally, and ready to look for a way out from even the subtle instability there, will those thoughts provide the way out.

Years back I was flying on an airplane where they showed the movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I didn't have the soundtrack to go by, but even without paying much attention I found the story pretty easy to figure out. The hero had a miserable family life, and so when the opportunity came to step onto that humongous flying saucer and go off who-knows-where, he was willing to go. Now, if he had had a happy family life, a satisfactory family life, he wouldn't have gone. He would have been happy to stay home, and the prospect of going off with these weird creatures from outer space would have been too daunting. But the fact that his life was so miserable made him willing to take the leap.

In that case the leap was pretty strange. And, fortunately the Buddha doesn't ask us to be miserable before we leap to nibbana, but he does recommend that we develop a sense of disenchantment—*nibbida*—and that we do it skillfully. He teaches us to get attached to more and more refined states of wellbeing in the mind, and to become disenchanted with everything else. It's like climbing a ladder. To climb up the rungs of the ladder, you already have to be holding onto a higher rung before you can let go of a lower one. Finally when you get to the top of the ladder, when there's nothing higher to hold onto, nowhere else to go: That's when you get off onto the roof or wherever you're headed. That's when you can totally let go. In the meantime you've got to hold on. The same principle holds true in the practice: You let go of lower attachments only when you've got something higher to hold onto.

So when you're practicing concentration don't be afraid of being attached to it. In fact, you *should* get attached here. That's part of the whole dynamic of the practice. Allow yourself to be attached to the breath, get to play with the breath, make the breath a really comfortable, good place to stay. As the breath gets more

refined, you find that the mind goes through more refined stages. The two help each other along. The greater the refinement of the mind, the more refined the breath, and vice versa, back and forth. And you find that your concentration does go through clearly discernable levels. But again, don't be afraid of getting attached to them. The whole point is to want to be there, to want to develop the mastery that allows you to bring the mind to those levels whenever you need them, and to stay centered in them as long as you like. This is why the Buddha — unlike a lot of modern teachers — never warned his students against getting attached to jhana. In fact, his instructions when he sent them off to meditate were always very clear: "Go do jhana." And he wanted them to master it.

Ajaan Fuang once said you have to be crazy about the meditation in order to be really good at it. In the course of the day, whatever spare minute you can find to keep your mind on the breath, you want your mind to head there, again and again. It's almost as if you were addicted to it. They say that when alcoholics go into a house, one of the first things they pick up on is where the alcohol is kept. They're very conscious of that. Their minds incline in that direction, so that without even thinking they can detect the signs. Well, you want to be a breath-a-holic. Wherever there's breath, you want your mind to head there. Of course, you find that it's everywhere if you're really interested, if you really want to pursue it.

Again, it doesn't matter that you're attached to it. There are ways of ultimately prying you loose from that attachment. In the meantime it's a good place to be attached: states of concentration, states of wellbeing in the mind that don't have to depend on circumstances outside. That's a lot better than being attached to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas we're normally attached to. So allow yourself to cling here.

It's like the cages where they put birds. If you happen to open the door while the bird is clinging to the door, the bird can get out. That's what these states of concentration are: They're doors to the Deathless. When we say that the Buddha has you cornered, he's got you cornered right here at the door. If you hang on here, you'll eventually be able to open the latch and you'll be free. But if you're not here, if you're over hanging on the walls, then it's very easy for the person opening the cage to keep you in. Clinging to the walls doesn't get you free.

In other words you might think that you'd like to put an end to all your suffering, but if you're not really in the right place, it's not a door. You keep banging your head against the walls of the cage. But if you learn to hold onto these states of concentration, the time will come when they turn into doors. You'll develop a sense of dispassion not only for ordinary pleasures, but also for the peace you gain from states of concentration. You'll begin to see that no matter how good you are at the concentration, there will always be change, inconstancy

in that concentration. And the time will come when the mind is simply fed up with that. It's had enough. That's *nibbida*, disenchantment. You're no longer enchanted with the concentration. You use it, but it doesn't have the same pull it had before. You want something better. That's when the mind can really incline to the Deathless.

As I told the people in that discussion group, the third noble truth may not sound attractive now, but as you get into the fourth noble truth and develop these states of concentration, you realize that the third noble truth really is better. It may not sound better in words, but when you're disenchanting with the fourth noble truth, you see that the third truth is the only direction where true happiness lies. Ultimately the mind will lean there, will incline itself there, because it's in a position to appreciate it for what it is.

So if you want to know what the Buddha was talking about and see if it really is something better than what we're experiencing now, this is what you work at: these stages of concentration. Direct the mind to the breath, evaluating the breath, really coming to appreciate what it is to be settled down, really coming to appreciate the state of stillness, and not chasing after things that keep running away from you through your senses.

Come to appreciate the sense of stillness you can gain with the breath. When you appreciate this, you'll be in a position to appreciate things that are even better—so that when you incline to something better, you find that you're actually right at the door of the cage. You can fly.