

Hold on for All You're Worth

January 29, 2018

We had those chants on the brahmaviharas just now to put us in the right frame of mind to meditate. We have goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for other beings. In other words, for ourselves we want a happiness we can trust, one that's worth the effort that goes into it. At the same time, we have goodwill for others. We don't want our happiness to harm anyone else. That means it has to be a happiness that's found inside, which is why we're meditating.

Compassion: We think about all the suffering there is in the world and the suffering we cause ourselves and other people through our own ignorance, the fact that our mind is not trained. And so we meditate.

Empathetic joy: Where there's a sense of well-being in the body, sense of well-being in the breath, we're happy to maintain it. Some people, when they find a sense of well-being coming from the meditation, feel they don't deserve it, feel uncomfortable with it. Often that comes from the fact that we're jealous of other people's happiness, which makes us feel not good about our own. So for the people who are already happy in the world, who are doing things that lead to happiness, you try to cultivate an attitude of happiness for them, so that when you find yourself giving rise to a sense of well-being with the breath, well-being with the meditation, you're perfectly fine with it.

And then equanimity. That's the reality check, realizing there are a lot of things in the world we can't change: people for whom we have goodwill and yet they're not willing to act on the causes of happiness; people for whom we have compassion, yet they can't seem to get out of their troubles. But there are areas where we can make a difference, and the big area where we can make a difference is with our own minds, so we meditate.

Equanimity doesn't mean total indifference. It means realizing there are some things that are beyond your powers to change, and if you spend your time focusing on those things, you use up the energy that you could have had to change something you could have changed. So it's a wise husbanding of your resources. Your resources are best used getting the mind to be trained, because everything comes out of the mind. Your thoughts, your words, your deeds: They're all produced here. So you want to get some control over it.

We do that first by focusing on the breath, taking a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body, because that's what we're going to be focusing on: the sensation of energy, the flow of the

energy. Where is it most prominent right now? Focus your attention there. Then the next question is: Is it comfortable? Watch it steadily for a while, and sometimes simply watching it steadily will make it more comfortable. Sometimes not, in which case you consciously ask yourself: Would longer breathing feel better? Or shorter? Deeper? More shallow? Focus your effort on the in-breath. Let the out-breath take care of itself. As you get more sensitive to the rhythms of the body, the body itself will tell you when you need to start breathing in again. And if the mind slips off, you bring it back. It slips off again, you bring it back again.

An important part of concentration practice is maintaining a frame of reference—in this case, the breath—and not wandering away from it. If other things come up in your awareness, try to relate them to the breath. In other words, there may be pains in the body or feelings of pleasure in the body. How do they relate to your breath? Because when the breathing is comfortable, you can start thinking of spreading that comfortable sense of energy around throughout the body. Don't go focusing on the pains right away, but as the comfortable sense of energy begins to develop, you can think of it sending it through the pain. See if that helps, keeping your center of awareness with the comfortable part.

So you want to hold on: "breath, breath, breath," all the way through the hour.

An image they use in Thailand is of a red ant. They have these big red ants over there that bite, and once they start biting, they hold on so firmly that when you pull the body to pull them off your skin, sometimes the head will detach from the body and its jaws will still be biting you. They're that tenacious. So you want to have that kind of tenacity as you stick with the breath. And learn to encourage yourself. If you find the mind slipping off lots of times, don't get discouraged. It's normal. Each time you catch it, you're training yourself in the right habits, and over time you find yourself catching yourself more and more quickly, to the point where you can sense when the mind hasn't yet left the breath but is about to leave, and you can stop it. You can stay right here. In the meantime, learn to give yourself pep talks. This is an important skill in the meditation.

You read the Dhamma talks of the great ajaans in Thailand, and a lot of them are just that: encouragement, encouragement, encouragement. Here they were children of farmers in one of the poorest parts of Thailand, and as far as the Thai society was concerned, there was nothing you could expect much from these people except to exploit them, but they didn't let themselves stay on the receiving end of other people's ideas of what they were capable of. They saw that the Buddha's teachings were teachings for human beings. They were human beings.

“If human beings can do it, we can do it.” That was their attitude. And so the ajaans would encourage their students with that same attitude.

I myself ran across this one time. I was giving a talk in New York City, and the person who had introduced me mentioned that I was born on a potato farm out on the eastern end of Long Island, so I qualified as a real New Yorker. After the talk, a woman came up and she said “You know, I have a vacation home out in Cutchogue. I go out there every summer. Just the idea that a little boy from a potato farm out there could end up going to Thailand, that’s just really amazing.” And my initial reaction was to take offense. Why look down on farm boys? Farm boys are human beings. Human beings can do this. We’re all human beings. This is something we all have in common. Our desire to end suffering doesn’t depend on where you are in a particular culture or what culture you’re from.

Someone visited Ajaan Fuang, my teacher in Thailand, one time and noticed that there was a Western monk in the monastery. “That’s really strange,” he said to Ajaan Fuang, “How is it that Westerners can ordain?” Ajaan Fuang’s comment was, “Don’t westerners have hearts? Don’t they feel suffering?” If you’re a human being, if you’re tired of suffering, this is for you, this practice. So learn to encourage yourself to stick with it. This is an aspect of right effort, which is part of right concentration: learning how to motivate yourself and how to stick with it. Once you’ve got something good, you stick with it. If there’s something unskillful, you figure out what you can do to get past it. But once you’ve got something good, you want to maintain it, hold to it.

Sometimes you actually see people who have a very scholarly or simplistic attitude toward the meditation. I read a monk one time—yes, this was a monk—saying that getting the mind into concentration requires a strong sense of self, i.e., that this is something you can do and you’re the person responsible for this. But we all know that Buddhism is about getting us past our sense of self, so willed concentration is bad. That was his conclusion. There was another monk who said when you’re concentrated you’re holding onto one object, well that’s attachment. Attachment is bad, so you should just let things come and go and just sit there watching them come and go and that’s it.

If those are your attitudes, you’re never going to get anywhere on the path, because the path does require that you learn how to stick with one thing. So even though there may be some attachment and there may be some sense of self, it’s a required part of the path. It’s one of the principles of right effort.

Sometimes to motivate yourself you have to use a quality of mind that may not be totally enlightened, but you use the motivation you’ve got. You use the sense of self, however skillful you can make it. You use what you’ve got. Once you’ve

gotten to the point where you don't need it anymore, then you can put it aside. There are places where the texts themselves talk about having conceit as a necessary part of the practice. In other words, the sense that other people have done this. They're human beings. I'm a human being. If they can do it, why can't I? Which strictly speaking counts as a kind of conceit.

Craving, too, is part of the path, if you do it right. In this case, it's craving to learn how to give rise to skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. And craving to know what is it when they talk about nibbana. That would be a great thing to know. All of this is a good part of the path, because the path is not a process of cloning awakening. You hear that awakened people have gone beyond their sense of self, and so you say "Well, I'll just drop my sense of self." That doesn't work. You have to use your sense of self until you don't need it anymore. Then you put it aside.

The classical image is of a raft. You take the raft across the river, and while you're crossing the river, you've got to hold on to the raft. Once you've gotten to the other side, that's when you let it go—but you don't let go in the middle of the river. The ajaans have their own way of making the same point. Ajaan Fuang's image was of a rocket booster. You want to send a capsule to the moon. The capsule can't go on its own. It's got to hold on to the booster. It's only when the booster's done its work, that's when it falls away.

Ajaan Maha Boowa's image is of a ladder. When you climb a ladder up to the roof of a house, you hold onto each rung, and you don't let go of one rung until you've held onto one higher than it. Then you let go of the lower one. You grab onto one that's even higher. You keep crossing, in the image of the Canon, crossing over the stream going from one dependence to another, or in Ajaan Maha Boowa's image, getting to the roof by clinging to one rung after another. Once you get to the roof, then you can let go of the ladder.

Ajaan Lee's image is of the difference between letting go like a pauper and letting go like a wealthy person. The pauper says "I have no wealth, I'll let go of it and say I have no desire for wealth." But then the pauper doesn't have anything to eat, doesn't have anything to use. Whereas the wealthy person, having made a fortune, can let it go, and the fortune's still there. It doesn't run away anywhere. You don't have to carry it around with you all the time, but the good things are there to use, for your own purposes and the purposes of others. If you don't have a Cadillac, there's no way you can lend a Cadillac to somebody else. If you haven't learned about the practice through the practice, then all you have to share with others is what you've read or heard.

So this process of holding on, working on things, having a sense of self that makes you reliable, makes you dependable, makes you confident that you can do this: That's something you want to hold onto. The desire to do this well is something you hold onto. And the result is that you get this sense of well-being, stability, that comes with right concentration, that allows you to understand the mind a lot better because you've learned how to master the mind.

You can read about the five aggregates. You can read about the different types of actions that the mind engages in, but the best way to really know about them is to try to master them through getting the mind to settle down. Once you've done that, you've learned everything you need to know about how the mind fabricates and shapes its experience. You've learned how to shape it into something that's still and good at the same time, so you can watch it carefully—something right up close, so you can see all the processes as they're happening. This is how the Buddha's insight becomes your insight, because you've created the conditions inside your own mind by mastering your own mind.

So whatever things you need to hold onto in the meantime, hold onto them. Don't let them go. Have that sense of confidence. Have that sense of capability. Have the sense of desire that wants to do this well and the sense that you're responsible for this, too, because you can't sit there and just let it happen on its own. You've got to want this to happen. So it's a skillful attachment. It's a skillful clinging. And once it's done its work, that's when you let it go, but don't let it go until then. Hold on for all you're worth.