

The Possibility of Letting Go

April 28, 2015

There's a passage where the Buddha says one of the secrets to his gaining awakening was that he was never content with skillful qualities. A while back, I received a letter from someone who asked if that was a misprint. Shouldn't the Buddha have been content with skillful qualities? After all, he talks about delighting in developing skillful qualities as one of the customs of the noble ones, and he talks a lot about contentment as one of the basic principles in the practice. But the passage was not a misprint. It's what the Buddha said. He wasn't content with skillful qualities. In other words, he was here to attain a high level of skillfulness. He didn't just stop there and rest on his laurels. He wanted to see if there was something better until he got to the point that there was nothing at all better than what he had found. That's when he stopped.

Skillful contentment has to do with things outside: the material requisites for our lives. In situations around you where you can't make any positive changes, you have to learn how to content yourself with the situation, for the time being at least. Particularly with material things: If you have enough to get by, you have enough. A lot of times, all the extra effort put into making something better, better, better outside, is wasting time that could be applied to the mind. That's the area where you should focus your desires for improvement—because as long as the mind is dependent on outside factors, it's in a position of weakness. It's open to all kinds of changes, all kinds of instability. And "outside" here doesn't just mean outside of you. The body itself is considered an outside factor when we're talking about the mind.

We get this body when we're born. In the beginning of life, it just keeps getting better and better and stronger, more able to do this and more able to do that. We have the idea that it's just going to keep on improving that way. Then we hit a plateau, after which we discover that it's not able to do things that it was able to do before. It doesn't serve notice. And it doesn't explain why. These things just happen. As time goes on, it gets worse. You want to be able to develop the mind so that even though the body gets weaker, the mind doesn't have to get weaker along with it.

This is why we need to make the mind more independent. Its skillful qualities are the things that make it independent. Often they're just simple things—like learning how to keep your mind under enough control to make it think about one thing and not think about something else.

This evening, we had a Thai family come here. The daughters of this woman were concerned that as she got older, she tended to focus on negative things in her life. They kept trying to tell her, “Think about all the good things you’ve done in the past.” Apparently, her constant reply was, “Well, wouldn’t that be greedy to try to make the mind better?” So I had to explain to her that, No, that wasn’t greed. It was wise. Even though it involved desire to make the mind better, that’s a good desire. The Buddha doesn’t condemn all desires. There’s the desire to be more skillful, the desire to cause less suffering—these are all commendable desires. They’re part of the path. So the desire to keep on getting better and better and better in the practice is good because it makes the mind more and more independent, less and less likely to cause suffering for itself—and, as a result, less likely to cause suffering for others.

So look at the time you’ve got. Realize you don’t know how much time you’ve got. It’s not the case that the oldest person here in the room is going to go first—or the one who looks healthiest right now is going to go last. These things are very uncertain. But you do know you have the time right now. What’s a good investment of your time right now? The Buddha said, “Ask yourself, if you were to die tonight, would you be ready to go?” And 99.9% of the time, the answer is no. Well, look at what’s holding you back. What mental quality comes up in the mind that you would miss or that you would latch on to? You’ve got to see that as work to be done—and here’s your chance right now.

The problem, of course, is that many of your attachments go very, very deep and just one meditation session is not going to cut through the issue. But at least you learn how to look at it from a little bit of a distance. It makes it that much easier to let go of these things when you’re forced to let go. All too many people in the world have no practice with letting go at all. When the time comes, things are just suddenly ripped from their grasp.

It’s like an Ajaan Lee story of the person wearing gold chains—which they do in Thailand, people have gold chains around the neck, gold chains in their ears. And he said that when people try to steal these things and they get ripped from you, they don’t just get taken away, they rip part of you as well. The chains in your ears rip parts of your ears. The chains around your neck take part of the neck. You’ve got to look into the mind and see: To what extent are you identifying with these things? To what extent are you feeding on these things? In not all cases are they really good things. There are some injustices from our lives that we really build our identity around. You have to ask yourself, “How much do you want to keep on doing that?” See what part of the mind objects to letting go.

You have to figure who that is in the mind and why you want to side with that voice. Of course, there are attachments we have to the people who we really love,

who really have been good to us. That's something we have to let go of as well. That's really difficult. But it is possible. It's not that you no longer love them, it's just that question of whether you have to feed off of those relationships.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, one of the comments he made that struck me the most was when he said that the whole purpose of the practice is to purify the mind. For the mind to be pure, it can't be going around feeding on things all the time. You have a love for others. You want that love to be pure. Okay, look to what extent you're identifying yourself around that relationship, to what extent you need that relationship—or tell yourself you need that relationship—in order to be happy. Yet that relationship didn't come to you with birth. There are a couple of relationships, such as those with our parents, that were there already. But there were times in our lives when we didn't know a lot of these people. And we were happy.

If you feel that you would be untrue to them, or disloyal to them if you decided to create a little more independence, that's not the case at all. In fact, the less you're feeding off a relationship, the better the relationship becomes—and the more you're able to see it with clarity.

So wherever you find that there's something that's a really bad sticking point in the mind, just let it go—at least for the time being. Think about putting it down. Think about putting it down. Allow yourself to think that thought. Sometimes we won't even allow ourselves to think that thought. Allow yourself to think it. Then see that there's a part of the mind that would still be okay. Learn how to focus in on that part of the mind, because the part of the mind that just watches, watches, watches all the time is your safe spot.

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells about the time when Ajaan Mun passed away and he was feeling lost. Who was he going to go to now to help deal with the problems in his mind? He thought, "Well, what are some of the things that Ajaan Mun said while he was alive?" One of the pieces of advice that kept coming over and over again was that if you see the mind latching on to anything that might be dangerous, just go back to that sense of the knower inside—the part of the mind that's just aware. And whatever else there is in the mind, just let it pass, pass, pass. "And no matter what," he said, "as long as you stay there, you're safe."

Now, that's not the end of all problems, but at least it puts you in a place of safety. You want to work toward that if you don't have it yet. If you have it already, then you dig deeper. But it is something to work toward: because it's a safe place in the mind. It helps you look at all the other issues in your life and realize that some things are not going to come to closure—or some things are going to take a long time. There's a part of the mind that's okay with that. It gives you a place to look at the other parts of the mind that are not okay with that, and

not identify with them quite so strongly. Even if you can't let go totally, learn how to loosen up your attachments a bit so that they don't weigh so heavily on the mind and they're not so permanently there.

We can't expect to deal with all our defilements in tonight's meditation session, but we can learn to loosen things up a bit inside. Anything you see in the mind that's particularly strong, what can you do to learn how to step back from that? Don't just tell yourself, "Well, it's always going to be there, so I'm just going to give up on letting it go." Loosen it up a bit. Question it. Get the mind solidly with the breath so that it has a sense of feeling okay, safe right here in the present moment, not threatened by things, not threatened by the idea of letting go. Then test that. You get to know your mind really well this way. See the ways in which it's creating unnecessary stories, unnecessary things to weigh you down. For a lot of us, the past weighs us down heavily; the future weighs us down heavily. And there's just one little moment here in the present to receive all that weight. How is it going to bear up under it?

Try to see your thoughts of the past as things that are happening right now. "This is a thought of the past happening right now." Don't get into the thought. Step back from it. The same with thoughts of the future. Learn to question those narratives. Even if the narratives are true, the question is, are they worth holding on to? Like that question about speech, "Is it true?" "Yes." Then the next question is, "Is it beneficial?" "Well, maybe not." Or even if it is beneficial, "Is this the right time and place?" You can learn how to cut through a lot of really heavy, heavy thoughts this way.

The whole purpose is so that you don't weigh the mind down unnecessarily. If there's anything weighing the mind down, it's not necessary. Keep repeating that to yourself when you find that something really is getting to you. This becomes an absolute truth for people who've been able to let go—who've had a taste of the noble attainments. But even for people who haven't, it's good to keep that in mind as a possibility. There are too many things in life that get in the way of letting us even think of that as a possibility. Well, learn how to cut through those thoughts. There's a part of the mind that doesn't have to suffer. And if it is suffering, it's not natural. It's unnecessary. Always keep that in the back of the mind. It creates a lot of safety, even if it just has the status of a possibility. It's a good possibility to keep in mind.