

Pull Yourself Up by Your Fetters

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Ajaan Lee often makes the point that people who've studied a lot of Dhamma, when they come to the practice, want to let go of things too quickly—things they actually need to hold on to. They know that at some point on the path they're going to have to let them go, so why not let them go right away?

He talks about how craving is actually good. We know that it's the cause of suffering and that some day we're going to have to abandon all forms of craving. But, as he points out, if you don't have any desire—and the words *craving* and *desire* basically cover the same thing in Pali—if you don't have the desire, you don't have the craving, the path is not going to happen.

Similarly with the three characteristics: Everybody hears about things being inconstant, stressful and not-self, so they want to let go of the five aggregates right away. But we need to hold *on* to the five aggregates in order to develop the path. The things that are stressful, you learn how to make easeful. The things that are inconstant, you learn how to make constant. The things that are not yours, you learn to bring under your control—at least to some extent. It's only when you've pushed against these three characteristics that you can actually find out exactly where they are. You push against them by developing the path, getting the mind into concentration. And it's something you hold on to while you're developing it.

While you're sitting here, hold on to the breath. The image that they give in the Forest Tradition is of a red ant. They have these big red ants in Thailand that live up in the mango trees. If people climb up in a mango tree to get mangoes, the red ants bite them. And they bite hard—so hard that if you try to pull them off, sometimes the head detaches from the body, and the jaws are still holding on. So hold on to your breath with that kind of tenacity. There will come a point where you let it go, but you're not going to get to that point unless you hold on first.

The same principle applies even to some of the fetters. The Canon lists five higher fetters: passion for form, passion for formlessness, restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. Of the five, only ignorance really has no role to play in the path, although Ajaan Lee says that even ignorance has its good side. Once you know you're ignorant, that gives you the motivation to want to find knowledge. But ignorance itself doesn't help. You've got to know the four noble truths from the very beginning to get a sense of what the landscape is and what you've got to do. But the other four fetters have their good points. They're actually useful. You don't let them go until you've gotten some use out of them.

For instance, with conceit, the sense that “I am”: We’re not talking about the conceit of pride but simply the idea that “I am.” I know some people who say that when you’re working with karma, you’ve got to realize that your intentions are simply the result of causes and conditions. They don’t have anything to do with you. But that doesn’t give you any motivation to try to make skillful choices. They say you want to let go of that sense of “I” because it causes you trouble. Well, it’s actually necessary for certain decisions. Their approach is like putting up a ladder on the side of your house, cutting out all the rungs, and saying, “Okay, float up to the roof.” If you cut out the rungs, the two sides just fall apart. You have no way of getting up at all.

There are some things you’ve got to hold on to. Passion for form is what gets you into right concentration. The Buddha himself says that if you don’t have the pleasure that comes from the first jhana or better, then no matter how much you know about the drawbacks of sensuality, you’re not going to be able to let it go. You’re going to keep coming back, coming back. So to overcome sensual passion, you have to develop passion for form.

Similarly with a passion for formlessness: The dimensions of the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness, the dimension of nothingness, the dimension of neither perception or non-perception are levels of concentration you can get into because you enjoy them, there’s delight there—passion, desire, delight. Okay, these are fetters. Think of them as chains. Some chains you can actually use to pull yourself up. Say you’re at the bottom of a well, and you have a chain in your hand. You toss it up, get it wrapped around a bar, and then you can pull yourself up with the chain. When you don’t need the chain anymore, then you let it go.

Similarly with conceit and restlessness: Restlessness is the sense that there’s more work to be done. If you don’t have that sense of restlessness, you’re not going to do the work. That together with your sense of self, the sense of “I am”: Those are really useful for making progress on the path. I’ve heard some people say that the approach of the path is to put the mind at ease: Will it into a state of equanimity; will it into a state of patience and acceptance. But there’s very little thinking that goes into that. In fact, it actively discourages any attempt to think or to figure things out. But that’s not the kind of person the Buddha was.

The Buddha was very inquisitive. He wanted to figure things out. Precisely how do you act in a way that’s going to give good results? And what are these choices you have when you act? When you make a choice, what’s happening there? Do you have freedom? He assumed freedom as part of the path. The types of teachings that said we have no freedom of choice at all because everything is

totally predetermined: Those were not among the options he decided to explore. For one thing, you can't explore that principle. How can you test something like that? He wanted to explore freedom of choice. How far can it go?

If you don't have a sense of yourself as wanting to make progress, you won't put in the work. That's where conceit functions on this level. Think of what the Buddha said about renunciate distress. It's what you need to get yourself out of ordinary householder distress. You think about the fact that there is a state of peace that others have found, and "I'm not there yet." That realization, even though it's a little bit painful and not all that easeful, does make you inquisitive.

That renunciate distress is a combination of restlessness and conceit, and it's what makes you look at the spot in the mind where there is freedom of choice. How does that happen? There are causes and conditions. But as the Buddha said, sometimes there's a cause that comes together with the effect, and then it disappears together with the effect. In the present moment, there's a freedom to choose causes like that. If we can't assume that, then there's no sense in a path of practice at all. But what is that freedom? Where is it? How can we take advantage of it?

That's the big point: How can we take advantage of it? The more you explore it, the more you hover and circle around this point, the sooner you'll ultimately find that it does lead you to a different kind of freedom entirely. It's like going through a black hole into another universe. You're in another dimension outside of space, outside of time. It's there.

That voice that keeps trying to make choices—"what next? what next?"—the assumption of the mind that has that constant "what next, what next, what to do next": It does assume freedom. If it didn't assume freedom, it wouldn't ask the question. That's the whole point. We're asking questions as we practice. And any teaching that discourages questions—especially questions about what's skillful and what's not—has to be put aside. It's not helpful at all.

But our motivation for wanting to ask those questions is that sense of something's wrong: "There still is suffering. There still is stress. Even if it's very subtle, there's still stress. And I want out." That combination of restlessness and conceit is what forces you to ask the questions, and it's going to give you the answers.

So even though these things are fetters—passion for form, for formlessness, conceit, and restlessness—they're the type of chains, as I said, that you can actually use to pull yourself out. Then when you're out, you don't need the chains anymore. You can let them go.

So as you read the Dhamma and try to apply it to your own practice, remember that some things are good across the board and some things are useless across the board. But then there are some things that are going to have their uses at times and have to be put away at others. Learn how to recognize them and get the most out of them. See how far you can take them before you throw them away.