

Hold onto the Breath

June 22, 2019

Earlier this year I was giving a talk back East, and I pointed out the fact that in terms of the four noble truths, the first noble truth is basically the clinging. We cling to the five aggregates, and the clinging itself is the suffering. Then, later on in the talk, I mentioned that there's got to be some clinging in the path. Someone in the audience said, "Aha." They'd caught me in a weak point. "That means you're saying that there's going to be suffering on the path." And I said, "Of course. It's not the case that once you get on the path everything becomes smooth and Teflon-coated. You're going into battle, doing battle with your defilements. It's going to be tough, and you're going to need some allies."

This is why we practice concentration. All those jhanas are your allies. Mindfulness is your ally. All the good qualities you develop on the path: They're your allies. And you've got to hold onto them, because there's work that needs to be done, the kind of work that's done with patience. In other words, you stick with it, stick with it, stick with it, even when the results are not appearing right away. But you know it's good work, and you learn how to give yourself pep-talks along the way. Those pep-talks are meant to help you cling to what's skillful so that when you let go of what's unskillful, you don't feel threatened. You don't feel like your world is going to be taken apart.

One of the reasons we cling is because we feel we have to cling. Even when we cling in an unskillful way, we feel that we have to for fear that everything would fall apart if we didn't. And, in a lot of ways, things will fall apart when you let go. All the bad things fall apart. But you need some good alternatives to hold onto in the meantime. Otherwise it's hard to let go.

So right now, hold onto your breath. If any sense of well-being comes up, you don't hold onto it directly, but you still hold onto your breath because you know that it's giving rise to that sense of well-being. If the well-being hasn't come up yet, well, just keep holding on. And ask yourself, "What am I doing that's making it uncomfortable?" Because that's another part of the noble truths. We're not

simply on the receiving end of the suffering. We're the ones who are doing it.

Craving is something we do. Clinging is something we do. So if you can't get the mind to settle down in the present moment, what are you doing that's putting all those peas under the mattress? Sometimes they're not just peas under the mattress, they're burrs on top of the mattress. One of the difficulties of the path is that we have to admit that we're the ones who are placing those things there. Again, sometimes it's because we thought we had to. But the message of the Buddha's teachings is that regardless of how bad the world is, and how bad the people around us are, we don't have to suffer from that. From the outside it may look like we're being passive, just accepting things as they are, but we're doing the work inside. Some things outside we can change, but a lot of things we have to let be, so that we can focus on where the real problem is, inside.

Like that telephone line-worker I met in Paris. I was waiting outside the hotel. I was going to be taken to a talk and I suddenly realized, "Here I am, exposed, in the streets of Paris, without a translator. What if somebody comes up and asks me a question?" And sure enough, five minutes later, a telephone lineman saw me and came running across the street, saying, "Marvelous! Marvelous! You're just the person I wanted to see. Does Buddhism make you really happy? Does it give you peace?" I said, "Yes." "That's what I need in my life" he said, "How do you do it?" So I talked about looking inside, developing skills inside, including meditation. "How do you meditate?" I was able to tell him that there was a website. Gave him the web address. He shook my hand.

The reason I was waiting there in front of the hotel was because I was on my way to give a talk on the topic of how we're not here just to be in the present moment or to accept the present moment. Actually we're going to go to something much better by developing good qualities here in the present moment. So I told the people at the talk about the telephone line-worker. He had said he was miserable with his job; he was surrounded by dishonest people. So I said to them, "If I had told him, 'Well, just learn how to accept your job, accept how miserable it is, and accept those dishonest people, you'll be okay,' he would have had the good sense to walk away." We're not here just to accept. We're here to figure out what needs to be done—and what needs to be done is mainly an inside

job.

In Ajaan Fuang's words—in Thai, it was a pun—he said, “There's the external *wat*, which is the monastery, and then there's the internal *wat*, which consists of the protocols of your meditation. Sometimes you have to let the external *wat* be not quite perfect so you can perfect the internal *wat*, the internal protocols, because that's where the real problems are.”

I've seen some monasteries that are spanking clean, everything's run very smoothly, everybody behaves very properly, but people's meditation is a mess. Ideally, of course, you'd want everything to be well-run inside and well-run outside, but if there has to be a choice, you focus on the inside. Because if you don't take care of your inside business, you're not only creating suffering for yourself, but you're making things miserable for people around you.

So, from the outside it may look like we're accepting things and just stopping there, but no, we're not stopping there. We're focusing on where the real problem is, which is inside, that we're creating suffering, and we're trying to solve it. It's a message we don't like to hear—that we're the ones causing our suffering—but again, the Buddha offers us the sense of well-being that comes from being generous, a sense of well-being that comes from being virtuous, and particularly the well-being that comes from getting the mind in concentration, gaining some insight into what's going on. That's the alternative that we hold onto.

And you hold onto it not just as it is. You hold onto it to keep making it better. In Ajaan Fuang terms, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well. This means that you have to be attached to it, obsessed with it. Simply learn how to be attached wisely. Be attached to the causes that give rise to the sense of well-being, and the well-being will have to come.

So focus on what you're doing right here, right now. As you pick up stories from the past or worries about the future, ask yourself, “What am I doing right now? Why am I picking these things up? Isn't there something better I can pick up? Isn't there a better use of my time?” Otherwise, we just waste our time, ruminating over things from the past or worrying about things in the future, even though the past is gone, the future's not here.

One thing you do know about the future is that whatever's going to happen,

you're going to need mindfulness and alertness to deal with the unexpected. And where are you going to get your mindfulness and alertness? You get them by developing them now. And as for tying up loose ends from the past, just leave them loose and dangling. The only real closure there is in the world is awakening. Otherwise, we just go through life and, as we die, we leave a lot of loose ends. Then we get reborn and continue with the loose ends. But even then, we leave more loose ends at the end of the next life. The only place you're going to find closure is here inside. And it is going to appear. The moment it appears will be a right-now moment. It'll take you beyond the present moment, but the opening to that other dimension will occur right here.

So you're looking at the right spot right now. It's simply that you don't see. So try to develop your alertness. Try to develop your mindfulness. Get the mind as still as you can, so that you can see and learn how to ask the right questions: Where is the stress? What is the stress? The stress is the clinging. Why is there clinging? There's craving. Why is there craving? There's ignorance—ignorance of the fact the stress is the clinging and the cause is the craving. But once you know that, make use of that knowledge. Remind yourself, also, that you have better things to cling to, better things to desire. That's how the path takes hold. You've got to take hold of the path.

You hear the stories of the sjaans going into the forest, and they're out there with wild animals and they don't take guns. They don't even think of killing at all. They have to think thoughts of goodwill. As the Buddha said, there come times when you're in the forest and fear comes up, so you think of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Take refuge in them. In other words, you follow the Buddha's teachings and tell yourself, "Okay, I've got to believe, one hundred percent, that this is what's going to protect me." It's the people who've used that refuge who realize how strong it can be.

It's the same with any aspect of the path. It's when you use it that you realize that this really is strong. If you pick it up and put it down, pick it up, put it down, it's not all that impressive. If you pick it up and hold onto it, saying, "I'm not going to go back to my old ways, my old protections. This is my protection now": That's when the refuge really becomes powerful. That's when the path becomes

powerful, as you hold onto it not just as one of many options but as *the* option that's going to get you out.

Whatever stress, whatever difficulties there are in holding onto the path, it's all to the good. It's better than the needless and pointless stress and suffering that we create otherwise. So as long as you haven't yet reached the end of the path, hold onto it. When you come to the end, that's when you let go. Because at that point, you won't need to hold onto anything at all.