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Sabbadanam Dhammadanam Jinati
The Gift of Dhamma Excels All Other Gifts

On Becoming and Stopping

By Pasanno Bhikkhu

Dedication

*This booklet dedicated to Luang Por Chah for his
devotion to the Dhamma and to all beings*

On Becoming and Stopping

By Pasanno Bhikkhu

This evening is the New Moon. There are just two weeks left in the winter retreat. I'd like to encourage everybody to make the best use of the time that is left in this retreat period.

After the recitation of the *Patimokkha*¹ today, Ajahn Amaro gave reflections on the “becoming mind” and encouraged us to pay attention to it. I think this is a really important area of our practice to understand. We need to make a concerted effort in these next two weeks to try to get an understanding of, a handle on, the nature of the mind that is constantly moving to “become.”

The word “becoming” is an innocuous little term. It doesn't really evoke much of an image or much

¹ The fortnightly recitation—on the new moon and full moon—the monk's 227 rules of training.

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feeling. But the reality is that it is because of the nature of becoming that we continually experience suffering. It is why we continually experience conflict. It is why we are continually dissatisfied. Becoming is why we continually opt to be scattered, confused and stupid rather than peaceful and wise.

We can't resist becoming; we're suckers for becoming; we're slaves to becoming. We don't resist it, nor do we know how to resist it. We look for ways to justify becoming, to make it a bit more palatable, so that we are actually doing something. But all we are doing is setting ourselves up for more suffering, more becoming.

It is important to recognize that the nature of becoming is generated through the force of desire, *tanha*, of craving—craving for sensuality, craving for being—for a sense of self, to be somebody, to be something, or craving for non-being—that sense of pushing away, of aversion,

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of negation. The becoming mind then seeks an object that is either internal or external.

What does that seeking look like? If it seeks an external object, we focus our attention on becoming something. We look for something pleasant or unpleasant to focus our attention on, to generate a view or an opinion about, to generate a sense of importance around the sense of “I,” “me,” and “mine.” Or, the becoming mind seeks an internal object, a subjective sense of “me” being something, me being a success, me being a failure, or at least me being somebody. But all of this – internal or external—is in the realm of becoming.

We need to be able to recognize that the movement to becoming is suffering, and to not be enticed by the voices of reason, the voices of justification, or the voices of habit and the emotional pull towards being and becoming. We need to be able to let go of the fear of letting go, the fear of not being something, not getting what one

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wants, not being what one thinks one should be or would like to be or have to be, have to get, have to become. There's a tremendous, almost primal fear, of actually being peaceful, of really letting go, of putting stuff down, of putting identity down, of putting the compulsions down. We want to be able to watch the fear, to see it, and to identify it, to know "*that* is the source of suffering" the becoming towards, the pull towards becoming and being.

I believe that is the insight Sariputta expressed when he said, "Nibbana is the cessation of becoming." Nibbana is not an ethereal realm someplace or an idealistic goal off in the future of an attainment of something or other that is idealized or intellectualized. Nibbana is the freedom from suffering, and, to paraphrase Sariputta, "Freedom from suffering is the cessation of becoming." That's the whole purpose why we come here, why we live here, why we study the teachings, why we practice the teachings. It is for the cessation of becoming, for the cessation of suffering.

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If your goal is to create more suffering or perpetuate suffering, you've come to the wrong place. Then again, I doubt that anyone has come here with that intention. I don't think that anybody's here with the conscious volition of something along the lines of, "I think I'll be here for the winter retreat to suffer. I think I'll be an Anagarika, I'll ordain as a monk to extend my suffering." But that is exactly what we do when we are not willing to challenge becoming.

This is the frustrating part. On the one hand, we are dedicated and we give up a lot to practice, to be here. But we still suffer. That's why a period of retreat is helpful. You can set external things aside, so that you can really start to pay attention to questions like, "Why do I keep creating suffering? Why do I keep coming back and perpetuate suffering? Why do I keep coming back, like a dog that barfs up something and then comes back and eats it?" It is what we do. We consume our regurgitated garbage, and then we wonder why we suffer. We think, "It must be somebody else. Somebody's doing something

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wrong out there. Somebody's done something wrong, certainly not me.”

The beauty of the Buddha's teaching is that the Buddha brings us back to seeing that this is what we are actually doing. The goal is seeking the end of suffering. Yet we keep replicating and perpetuating it through a lack of understanding and our inability to let go of the impulses towards desire, attachment, becoming. We work to be able to pay attention, to recognize those habits and see clearly. That's why the Buddha gives these different structures of investigation, so we can investigate the nature of our relationship to the senses and their objects—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind; sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mental objects. We come back and pay attention to that because the process is actually quite simple, very basic, and it has been going on for a long time: The eye sees form, eye consciousness arises, there's eye contact, the feeling arising from eye contact, and there's the response to that, which is usually conditioned by ignorance and by desire.

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This is not theory; it is not just Abhidhamma to be studied and then debated and argued over. This is exactly what we do. The eye experiences forms. The ears experience sounds. The nose smells odors. The tongue experiences tastes. The body experiences the tangible. The mind experiences objects, moods, and then the movement starts from there: Consciousness arises; contact arises; feeling arising from contact takes place. That's the structure the Buddha set out in the *Adittapariyaya Sutta*, the Fire Sermon. That's why the Buddha teaches: "The eye is on fire, form is on fire, eye consciousness is on fire, eye contact is on fire, and the feeling arising from eye contact is on fire. With what is it on fire? It is on fire with desire; it is on fire with aversion; and it is on fire with delusion".

This is a very strong image. We are being burned. We need to pay attention to the sense realm, particularly in terms of practice, both as a part of the meditation in investigating what that process is—how we get swept up by it—and in investigating the nature of that reaction.

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Reacting to simple, natural, phenomena—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, mental objects—is completely natural. The pull of becoming is not so much because of the sense contact, because that's natural. It's about being drawn into the feeling and about the feeling-desire link, the feeling that arises. And, of course, we're generally drawn to the pleasant feeling.

The *Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna*, in one of the suttas I read the other day, taught that the pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful feeling is pleasant when it subsides. Our misguided goal is to maximize the extension of pleasant feeling and to minimize, to wipe out, to push away the unpleasant feeling. That's where we get tied into the desire process—into *kama tanha*, *bhava tanha*, *vibhava tanha*. We get tied into the feelings with the desires that the Buddha says are the cause of suffering. It seems completely justified. Why wouldn't we want to experience pleasant feeling longer, and try to minimize, to push away or annihilate the unpleasant feeling?

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But there's a problem between the response to the feeling and the reality of what we set in motion.

We use the pleasant and unpleasant feelings to measure our success or failure. If we experience something pleasant, we think we've succeeded. If we experience an unpleasant feeling, we think we've failed. This measurement comes from a place of becoming, what we have become through *bhava tanha* or *vibhava tanha*. We judge it, we measure it through the desire to maximize the pleasant and minimize the unpleasant. We don't recognize that the pleasant feeling that we seek is like seeking a wage or compensation. So we end up being like the idiom of "working stiffs." We give up the world, and we end up like working stiffs, trudging around trying to get our pleasant feelings. The idiom of "working stiff" is applicable in how it is used for the working class, the day-to-day wage laborer, mindlessly going about his or her life, from paycheck to paycheck. Because of ignorance and desire, that's how we tend to relate to our seeking of pleasant feeling

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and seeking to maintain pleasant feeling. Whether it is pleasant because of extending the amount of pleasant feeling we experience, or because we are trying to get rid of the unpleasant feeling we experience, it is inextricably linked to us being like wage-laborers, and we fail to notice that.

The idiom of “working stiff” is also applicable in the sense of “stiff” as somebody who is dead. There’s a certain quality to the search for pleasant feelings that we stifle ourselves, we die to our true nature by constantly following that pull without recognizing it. We end up trying to gratify ourselves in various ways, trying to make ourselves feel comfortable and secure. We get upset and irritated and end up in conflict with people around us, because we’ve died to the reality of our opportunity to awaken. We blindly follow the eye, form, eye consciousness, eye contact, feeling arising from eye contact, and do the same through all of the six senses. We blindly follow the becoming, and are hopelessly enmeshed, entangled. And

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usually, it is not enough for us to entangle and enmesh ourselves. We then spread it around and entangle others, and draw others into a web of complication and difficulty and suffering.

What the Buddha tells us in the *Fire Sermon*, that the eye is burning, form is burning, eye consciousness is burning, eye contact is burning, the feeling arising from eye contact is burning, is that it's not a picnic, not something that we want to be seeking. It is not something to be delighting in, and it is not something to be averse to. It is something to wake up to, something to really take the opportunity to wake up to. Quit being a working stiff, a wage laborer. Quit seeking for more contact, trying to get the feeling you want. Pay attention to the opportunity that this is what relinquishment is about. This is what practice is about.

The very act of establishing mindfulness in a moment is an opportunity to step back from the impulse of becoming. Recognizing the power

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of mindfulness is wisdom in and of itself. The sustaining, cherishing, willingness to maintain the quality of mindfulness takes relinquishment. It takes letting go. It takes a willingness to not accede to the power of becoming and to recognize the tremendous power in being mindful.

On one level, the teachings of the Buddha and the tools that he gives us are extraordinarily direct and straightforward. When we apply them, we see the results: *Sanditthiko dhamma*, “they are visible here and now; one can experience them for oneself.” The nature of the Dhamma is that “it is well-taught, well-proclaimed. It has tangible benefits. It invites one to see here and now. It is leading inwards, to be experienced by each wise person for themselves.” Each moment of mindfulness is the opportunity to verify the Dhamma of the Buddha. But in order to verify them, to really experience them, you have to be mindful; you have to be willing to pay attention, to not be swept up and swept along by the power of habit and the power of becoming.

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But on a certain level, because of its directness and straight forwardness, the teaching is deceiving. The Buddha explained so many different avenues of approach, of tools, of how to experience it. This evening, I'm using the six sense bases as an example. But there are many, many ways of parsing it out. There is coming back to the five *khandas* and investigating them. The nature of becoming has the sense of an external object, something to become or drawn towards, or the internal sense of "me," of being something or somebody. But if we look and see, we'll find form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

You think, "Well, there's more to me than that. I'm something more than that, more important than that. I'm not just form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. I must be something more than that." But the reality is the way that the Buddha has parsed it out into that structure. If you really look at everything you conceive, perceive, proliferate around, that is all there is. It is not "that's all there is and

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you're nothing; you're a nobody." It is the basis of experience, and we create the desirable, interesting, fascinating, compelling, or the disgusting, irritating, doubtful, uncertain nature of the experience around us. We recognize that we've done this before and wonder how we get caught by it. It is the compulsion of becoming, the compulsion of *kama-tanha*, *bhava-tanha*, *vibhava-tanha*. Usually when our minds cling to the nature of experience in a personalized way, we end up running around trying to prop up a sense of a satisfied happy self, or reinventing ourselves as miserable and hopeless. But all it is is form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness. And we've done it to ourselves.

So you recognize that you can step back to a place of mindfulness and relinquishment. You still rely on the five *khandas* to do that, but you use them in a skillful way. The point is the cultivation of the tools that facilitate awareness, peace and wisdom. You also have to let go of that, but you're not pushing it away or annihilating it because you know it is going to arise and cease on

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its own. It is really seeing clearly; taking what we build experience from and seeing it from a place of Dhamma, as opposed to from a place of *kama-tanha*, *bhava-tanha*, *vibhava-tanha*—of sensual desire, desire for becoming, desire for non-becoming—which puts us into the mode of attachment and becoming.

The practice is looking at things from the lens of our experience and seeing their impermanent, uncertain, changing nature. We see that these are the five *khandas*, these are the six senses; they're arising, they're ceasing, they're arising, they're ceasing. We then allow that seeing to be the catalyst for relinquishment, for letting go, for not being pulled into that vortex of becoming. What does that seeing feel like? What does it feel like when we're not drawn into that vortex of becoming? What's the experience? This is putting the Buddha's teachings into day-to-day life, putting the Buddha's teachings into our meditation practice, putting the Buddha's teachings into moment-to-moment awareness.

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We spend much of practice in so much more becoming. We think, “I’m going to practice the meditation so that I get these peaceful states that will then rise to wisdom into the future.” That is a good intention; it is a good thing to be doing. But it will still be unsatisfying when it is conditioned by the becoming-mind. It is not just worldly things that push us into becoming. It is the whole ball of wax. We need to be able to see whether it is becoming in terms of gross sensuality or gross irritation, or even towards how we view ourselves as practitioners. And to see that becoming will always end up in a place of suffering.

So investigate the nature of becoming, and use it as a tool for gaining confidence in the tools and teachings of the Buddha, in the aspects of cultivation of mindfulness or the cultivation of virtue or the cultivation of concentration and wisdom. As we see the nature of becoming more clearly, we see that is why the Buddha is giving us all these tools to experience cessation of suffering, to experience Nibbana and then

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recognize that Nibbana is the cessation of becoming. The key to that experiencing, to touching on that experience, is an ability and interest in recognizing how becoming works, and how to not be a slave to it, not be hooked by it.

We get so caught up in doing, becoming, activity and engagement that we neglect to attend to stopping. When we say stopping, we're not talking about just sitting around doing nothing, because that can be a form of becoming as well. It refers to a stopping of habits of greed, irritation, confusion and then attending to stopping, stepping back, desisting and ceasing. We pay attention to that experience throughout the day as we are working or in meditation. We recognize how much the mind gets swept up in activity, in doing, and identifying with the activity.

What does it feel like to pay attention to stopping? What is that experience of stopping and ceasing the compulsion to become, the

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engagement of mental activity and mental impulse? This includes stopping unskillful activity as well as recognizing where it all originates so that we can still be engaged and put forth effort and be attentive to duties and responsibilities we have. But we really bring in an attitude of stopping and ceasing, whether it's frantic obsession or worry and fear or competition or aversion.

We tend to keep trying to replace things all the time, to replace our aversion with being good little Buddhists. That's a doing, a becoming. These activities have their complications, as I have already pointed out. Trying to replace desire and greed with trying hard to become perfect practitioners is fraught with suffering. But we can attend to stopping and ceasing to become. We realize that we can trust in the fundamental clarity, fundamental wisdom of the present moment.

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We recognize how much activity tends to sweep us up and pull us into movement, activity, restlessness, agitation. We lose our centers. Through the conscious act of stopping and recollecting, particularly internally—in the mind—we learn how to keep stopping the mind, stopping the flow of thoughts that are proliferating, stopping the flow of moods that get drawn into either attraction or aversion. We return to a clear center, to awareness.

We don't necessarily do this just by conceiving an idea such as, "I'm going to be mindful," or "I'm going to be aware." We do it by learning how to stop. Exercise the ability to stop and develop the sense of bringing things to a point of stillness inside.

Sometimes we need to actually stop what we're doing physically, just step back and recollect, in order to create a break in that flow of activity. But the main thing is to reflect on the fact that what we're doing is internal. How much of

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the time do we just get picked up, carried off and swept away by a thought or a mood? We need to stop, not get drawn into the movement of a thought of aversion, of irritation. But just one little seed gets planted, and the ball of becoming starts rolling. It starts moving, and pretty soon we have worked ourselves into a state of anger or a state of getting into conflict. That's what we become. In the same way, greed or desire begins with a thought of liking, interest, fascination, and then the becoming ball starts rolling.

We know how to become but we don't know how to stop. We're not used to stopping. Stopping is the practice of learning how to take the points of when you feel the mind moving and proliferating and coming back to a place of awareness. That's where you can actually attend to what you're thinking and what you're intending to do. We take that as an exercise, work with it and play with it. Ask yourself, "What happens when I do stop? Does that mean

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I'm dysfunctional and that I can't actually do anything at all?" You will see that if you actually stop and stand in awareness, you'll be able to accomplish things a lot more skillfully.

I offer that for reflection this evening.

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