

Self-reliance

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It's a common belief that different religions, different philosophies, are giving different answers to the same question. But actually they come from different questions. The Buddha's big question is, "What is suffering? And how can you put an end to it?" That's a question that other religions tend to leave in mystery. They point your attention to something else. But the Buddha's focus is right here, and his analysis comes down to the fact that you *can* do something about suffering because you're causing it. So you have to look inside.

And the reason you're causing it is not because you want to. It's because you're ignorant. The word for ignorance, *avijja*, can also mean lack of skill. We suffer because we lack skill. But skill is something that can be developed. In fact, you have to develop it yourself. No one else can make you skillful. They can give pointers, they can give advice, but to become skillful you have to be observant of what you're doing and what you might do differently. You have to depend on yourself.

Now you do rely on other people to learn about the Dhamma. When the Buddha's talking about the different qualities that make you reliable and make you a mainstay for yourself or provide a protector for yourself, quite a few of them have to do with your relationship to other people. You find good people to associate with: people who have conviction in the Buddha's awakening; people who are generous, virtuous, discerning. And you try to emulate their qualities. You listen to the Dhamma, you try to remember it, think about it so that it makes sense, and then measure your own actions against the Dhamma. And you're not simply involved in listening, you're really actively trying to search it out.

As the Buddha says, you try to be easy to teach. Now, this doesn't mean simply doing everything unquestioningly. But you show some respect. You take on a teaching and you give it a good try. If it doesn't work, you try to figure out why. You can't just come to the teacher and complain, "This isn't working for me." I mean, there are meditation methods where they simply tell you, "Just do this and do what you're told and don't think about it," promising that when you put your mind through the meat grinder it's going to come out awakened. But that's not how they teach in the forest tradition, and that's not how the Buddha taught, either. When something goes wrong, you have to try to figure out what the problem might be. Try to figure it out on your own first and *then* you go consult with a teacher. That's what it means to be easy to teach.

Then, given those external conditions, there's still a lot that you've got to do on your own. It's interesting that when the Buddha talks about being self-reliant in many different contexts, *the* big point they have in common is that you have to be mindful. In other words, you learn a lesson and you keep it in mind. You don't forget it. Otherwise, you can learn things but they

don't mean anything because you forget them. You learn them again; you forget them again. It's when you're mindful—in other words, when you learn how to keep things in mind, you learn how to remember things: That's how you keep your storage of knowledge. All the things that you've picked up will be available to you. It's like your inner set of tools. You get to the point where you don't have to rely on people outside to provide you with the Dhamma, because you've learned so much both from what you've heard and read, and also from what you've done. And it's there. It's available. That's what you can fall back on.

This, the Buddha said, is how you make yourself an island. You're mindful, ardent, alert, and you keep looking into: Why is it that the mind is creating suffering for itself? You get the mind quiet, you get it still, so that you can watch the mind. Fortunately, the mind is something you *can* watch. This is where the fact of the committee of the mind comes in really helpful. One part of the mind can watch another part of the mind. In fact, as you develop this observer—that's the alertness part—it becomes the part that's also going to allow you to gain some discernment by stepping back from your actions to evaluate them.

If you're totally *in* the action, if you're committed to it, you identify with it and you don't want it to be judged. There's a part of the mind that says, "If I did it, it must be right. And I don't want any criticisms, I don't want any commentary on this." You see this attitude more and more around us all the time. Well, that's a recipe for disaster. Because if you're not willing to step back from your actions, *how* can you learn? You make a mistake and you don't even admit that it's a mistake. That closes off all the avenues for learning from your mistakes. And if you don't learn from your mistakes, what are you going to learn from? You learn words and, as they say in Thailand, they "decorate your mind." That's all. They stay on the surface. But it's in learning from your mistakes that the knowledge goes deeper.

Ajaan Chah has a nice observation. He says that as you watch your mind, the first lesson you learn is how much the mind lies to itself. Now, you're not going to see that unless you can step back and say, "Oh yes, one part of the mind is trying to hide something from another part of the mind." When you can step back like this, this is how you can really rely on yourself. You have the voice inside that evaluates, and evaluates more and more wisely, more and more perceptively, with more and more maturity gained through the practice.

There's so much commentary on how bad it is to engage in the judging mind. Well, it's usually the judgmental mind that's the problem—the one that jumps to judgments without much evidence and comes down harshly with no concern for whether it's helpful or not. What you want is the kind of judgment that's helpful, that points out where the problem is and also points out where a solution might be, a possible way of doing things better. That's the kind of internal judge that you want to develop, the judging of a craftsman working on a project, not the judge who's passing down a final verdict. You have to realize: Your life, your practice, the path is a work in progress. And so you want the kind of judgment that points out, "Yeah, you're getting off the path but here's a way to get back on"—the judgment that gives encouragement

when you need encouragement, and can be harsh when you need a little kick in the rear. But with the idea that this is going to be good for you, that you can get better *because* of the criticism.

So try to train this observer: picking up lessons from outside, good examples set by other people. And then develop your internal judge, because that's what you're going to be relying on, the one who like every good judge has a good knowledge of the law—in this case, good knowledge of the Dhamma—and can remember it, has it at his or her fingertips, and is more and more alert in applying it. That's how you become your own refuge.

And that's how you answer this question, "Why is it that you're causing suffering?" You see your actions more and more clearly. The internal judge helps you develop your skill, so that what you do and say and think, instead of being a cause for suffering, becomes part of the path to its cessation.