

Look After Yourself with Ease

June 21, 2013

There's that phrase in the chant when you're spreading thoughts of goodwill to yourself: "May I look after myself with ease." As with all the thoughts of metta for yourself, it's not selfish. Think of times in the past, or sometimes in the present, when you're with someone you love, and they're suffering. And there's nothing you can do about it. They're making themselves suffer, yet they're beyond your reach. It might be a small child, or someone who's old and very sick, or someone who's really set in his or her ways of thinking and is not about to change them. When you see that, it really hurts.

That's where you have to exercise equanimity. But it's also a useful lesson to turn around and reflect on yourself: You don't want to ever be in a situation where you're suffering, you can't handle it, and you're beyond someone else's reach. In other words, you don't want to put them in that difficult situation. So you can avoid that by learning how to take care of yourself properly.

This is what we're doing as we meditate. We're learning how to look after the mind to see where it's causing itself unnecessary suffering, unnecessary pain or stress, and look more deeply into it. What are we doing? Why do we go for that stress?

It's interesting. The Buddha tells you to try to exercise dispassion for the craving that causes the suffering, and you're also supposed to comprehend the suffering itself. In another point, he says, "What is comprehension? Comprehension is seeing things to the point of dispassion and disenchantment." So you have to learn to be dispassionate both for suffering and for its cause. As he says, the problem is that we're usually passionate for both. We're enchanted with our suffering. The things that we really like can at the same time make us suffer. So as you meditate, you want to pull yourself away from a lot of the things that you normally look to for happiness, that you normally look to for pleasure, so that you can learn how to see them with new eyes. As you stay with the breath, you can put down a lot of narratives. It's good to put down as much as you can.

One of the common questions you hear in the forest tradition is that, when the mind gets really still, you should ask it, "Who are you?" When you look at it in those terms, what do you see? There's nothing male or female about it, nothing white, nothing black, nothing Asian. It's just the mind; it's just awareness. You want to get to that state of stillness where you're at least somewhat outside of

yourself, outside of your ordinary narratives, outside of your ordinary ways of defining yourself. Take some time to rest there. Get a sense of strength from it.

Then you can turn around and look at your life. If you can manage to see it from a new direction with a new perspective, there are times you can actually see right through some of your old habits, your old likes and dislikes, see the stress, disturbance and suffering they entail, and decide that it's not worth it. That's when you let go: when you see it's not worth it and that there is an alternative.

Ajaan Suwat often commented that the causes of our suffering are our likes. If you want to look where suffering is, don't look any farther than the things you like. Look *into* them. When you see the suffering there, when you see the stress, then you need to ask yourself: "Is it worth it?" There will be voices in the mind that say, "Of course, it's worth it! What else is there in life?" So again, this is why we have the concentration: to give you an alternative, to give you something else in life. Because for most people, as the Buddha pointed out, the only alternative to pain is sensual pleasure. So the whole purpose of practicing concentration is to give you another escape from pain, another alternative so that you can put things into perspective. Then you can question those voices that say, "Well, what else is there?" and you can say, "Here's something else: a sense of well-being that doesn't have to depend on sensual pleasure at all."

This is how you learn how to look after yourself. You don't let yourself stay in your old dichotomies telling you that if there's pain, you have to go for sensual pleasure. It's the same as with the old dichotomy: "If I bottle up my anger, I'm going to get cancer, so the only choice is to let it all hang out." That's a false dichotomy. There's a third alternative, which is to notice how the pent-up energy in your body can be released by the way you breathe, by the way you manage the breath energy in the body. You can disperse it so that you don't have to bottle it up, and at the same time, you don't have to let it out. It's a much more skillful alternative.

This is a lot of what the Buddha's teachings offer: alternatives, ways of stepping out of your old habits of thinking that things have to be either like this or like that, neither of which is especially skillful. He said there always is a skillful alternative. The whole reason we listen to his teachings and the teachings of the ajaans is they give us alternatives that we, on our own, probably wouldn't have thought of.

That way, we learn how to really look after ourselves with ease and at the same time, make that a gift of ease to others, because our way of looking after ourselves doesn't place any burden on others at all. Then as we get older, as we get sick and we get more and more beyond the reach of other people, we won't give them any

cause to worry. We'll be able to take care of ourselves. As always with the happiness the Buddha teaches, it's a gift to yourself and a gift to others.