

Look After Yourself with Ease

February 16, 2015

When we chant the standard formula for goodwill, you may have noticed that one of the main phrases, when you direct goodwill to yourself, is: *May I look after myself with ease* and when you direct goodwill to all beings: *May all beings look after themselves with ease*. In this phrase, goodwill is informed by the teachings on karma, realizing that we create our own suffering and our own happiness. Happiness and suffering come from how well or poorly we look after ourselves. After all, our own craving is what enslaves us and causes suffering. And nobody is going to be able to undo our suffering for us. We have to follow the path through our own efforts. This means, one, that we have to *want* to undo it and, two, that we have to learn the skills to do it.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha taught only when invited to teach and set a standard that you teach the Dharma to people who show respect and basically who want to hear. If people don't want to hear that they have to work on their problem, then it's like a saying in Thai: You're playing a flute for a water buffalo. The buffalo doesn't appreciate the music and you waste your time. The Dhamma is for people who see that they're causing their own suffering and want to learn the skills to stop doing that. As the Buddha said, to act for your own benefit, one, you try to overcome your passion, aversion, and delusion; and, two, you observe the precepts.

It's interesting: We tend to think of the precepts as ways of protecting others from our unskillful habits, and that is true, but the real protection of the precepts comes to us. When we don't do anything unskillful, then we're not going to have to reap the results of having done things that are unskillful. And by the same token, when we want to work for the benefit of others, we try to convince them not to break the precepts and to try to overcome their own passion, aversion, and delusion. In other words, we look at others not in terms of their being passive recipients of our actions. We see them as agents, too, people who are going to reap the rewards or punishments of their actions.

And so to be really kind to them, on the one hand, you want to set a good example. It doesn't carry much weight if you're going around killing and stealing and having illicit sex, and then you try to tell other people not to do those things. You set the example. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, to learn the skills: first, the precepts and then, the skills for dealing with whatever is coming up in our mind in terms of passion, aversion, and delusion—both through

concentration and through discernment.

So as we're meditating, we're learning how to look after ourselves with ease. We sometimes hear that you develop the precepts or the virtues that correspond to the precepts and then you practice concentration and then you develop discernment. But these three parts of the path are all interrelated. After all, the noble eightfold path starts with right view and right resolve, which are factors of discernment, and then moves into virtue and on to concentration. So you need some discernment to develop your own virtue, and you also need some concentration. The ability to make up your mind to do something and stick with it: That's an important skill that you develop through concentration. And there's also that sense of well-being that comes when you learn how to stay with the breath.

I was talking today to a group of people who were taught that meditation is simply maintaining mindfulness in daily life, watching what comes up and goes away in their minds, and they found that their minds run away from them. And when it runs away, it's not only that it runs away from them, it also runs away *with* them. I.e., it's like being on a runaway horse.

Or to use the Buddha's image, it's like having some animals tied to some leashes and you're standing in the middle holding the leashes and they're going to pull you. And whichever animal is strongest is going to pull you in its direction. The animals he mentions include a crocodile, a monkey, a bird, a hyena, and a dog. Of all of those, if the crocodile is the strongest, it's going to drag you down into the river. And if you don't let go, you're going to drown. So the way you make sure you don't get dragged around by things is to have mindfulness immersed here in the body.

Now, an important step in learning mindfulness immersed in the body is learning how to breathe in ways that are really comfortable. Because when you have this sense of ease, this sense of well-being, it helps you resist the temptation to go running off with whatever animal wants to pull you whichever way.

So as we're mediating here, we're learning how to look after ourselves with ease, and we're learning the skills that go with that. It's not simply that you make up your mind, "I'm not going to behave in an unskillful way," and think that that decision on its own is going to end the problem. If you have some unskillful habits, you have some well-worn pathways in the mind, and it's very easy to run down them, especially if you're feeling hungry for pleasure or if you're feeling some sort of lack or - disease inside. You go running out with whatever comes into the mind and then takes you away.

But if you've got a sense of well-being right here—it feels good to breathe in,

feels good to breathe out—you've learned the skill of breathing. Then you have something to resist those other temptations, and you can look after yourself, both because you find it easier to observe the precepts and also because you find it easier to not give into passion, aversion, and delusion. You see these things coming in because the mind is quieter. And you can resist their pull because you have something else to hold on to. If you're out in the middle of the ocean with nothing to hold on to, then whatever comes by and hooks you will carry you off. But if you're standing on a solid place and you've got something good to hang on to, then it's a lot harder for things to pull you away.

So try to get on familiar terms with your breath. Try to learn how to be skillful with your breathing. It's an unusual idea that breathing is a skill. I mean, everybody *can* breathe. But the question is, do you do it skillfully? There's a skillful way to breathe in, a skillful way to breathe out. There's a skillful way to relate to the breath as you breathe in, breathe out. If it's nourishing for the body, if it feels good inside, down to the more sensitive parts of your body, the mind will respond. It'll want to stay there. Because there are parts of your body that are starved of breath energy. And when you give them some good breath energy, it goes deep down into the mind—that sense of pleasure and sense of well-being—and it's a sense of pleasure and well-being that's totally harmless.

The harm that comes from pleasure, sensual pleasure in particular, is that it clouds the mind and also often makes you do unskillful things in order to maintain it. But the pleasure of the breath doesn't require that you do anything unskillful. It actually helps clear the mind. So it's nothing to be afraid of. It's not a sensual pleasure, it's a pleasure of form, how you sense the body from within.

How do you feel your body from within? Your feet? Your hands? Your arms? Your torso? Your head? Just try to be in touch with that. Try to get on familiar terms with it. When you're on familiar terms, then you can feel warm when you want to feel warm, cool when you want to be cool. When the body's feeling heavy, you can focus on the breath energy and things will lighten up. When you feel dizzy, you focus on the earth, a sense of solidity inside. There are ways of balancing things out inside. If your mind is beginning to drift off, try to fill your body with your awareness. This way, you've got your post that you can tie all those leashes of those animals to. So even though they may pull at it some, the stronger the post, then the less likely they are to pull you away. And this is the foundation of the skills that are needed for looking after yourself with ease.

As you do this, you become a good example to others, too. They can see that it really is possible to work on yourself and make some important changes, make some radical changes, inside. There're some teachings where you're stuck with a

particular self and your particular self is defiled and so you can't help yourself, you've got to have someone else come to help you. But the Buddha doesn't teach like that. He says that you've got lots of selves inside, all the different senses of self that you've been using over the years to find pleasure in one way or another, and some haven't gotten much use and others are the ones that you turn to pretty often. As you begin to sit down and sort through them, you begin to realize that there are some in there that are worth keeping and others that you should put outside the wall.

And having the breath as a good place to stay puts you in a position where you can sort through these things. With some of the selves you used to really feel affection for, even though they didn't lead to much genuine pleasure, much genuine well-being, you begin to see that that affection is dangerous. It's a delusion. This way, you can let go of that particular self. At the same time, you strengthen the selves that are skillful, so that you are equipped with selves that *are* able to look after you with ease.

As the training improves, your skills get subtler, until finally, ultimately, you find a happiness that doesn't require anything. It's totally independent.

Again, that's something you can find only through your own efforts; which is why the Buddha taught not that you're going to save everybody. He taught people how to save themselves from their own passion, aversion, and delusion, from their own tendencies to act in unskillful ways. And this is the greatest kindness of all.

There was a strange piece I read recently, saying that the idea that you can save yourself is bad for the environment. The author wanted you to stick around and try to make this into a perfect world, rather than running away. I guess his idea was that people who plan to leave this process of samsara feel that, since they're going to leave it anyhow, they might as well trash it. But that's not how you develop the good qualities that lead you out. That's not how you look after yourself with ease. You treat the world well, and in so doing, you protect yourself. There's no greater compassion than this.

Learn how to show compassion to yourself, learn how to show it to others, by behaving as a good example—and when they're interested, you can encourage them to practice as well. That's how that wish, "May I look after myself with ease," actually becomes a reality. As for others who will look after themselves with ease, that's up to them to decide whether they're going to follow the teaching or not. But because everyone has the freedom to choose, this is the best you can do. Any promises that go beyond that are empty.