On Your Own Two Feet

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They say that one of the biggest enemies of getting the mind into the first jhana is noise. And some noises have a lot more sting than others, particularly the noise of people speaking. That’s one of the reasons why, as we’re living here together, you really have to be careful about when you speak, why you speak, what the impact of your words is going to be. Because you may be destroying someone else’s concentration. And it’s good to look at how much support you want to get out of the conversation, and ask yourself how much of it is really necessary so that you’re not leaning on other people too much. And you’re learning to look inside so that you too can develop concentration. One of the whole points about observing the eight precepts is that, in order to achieve happiness, in addition to avoiding harmful behavior, you’re also placing some restraints on your search for happiness through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. The purpose of that is so you start looking more for happiness inside, working on the qualities within you that are going to provide a good foundation for happiness. So you’re trying to develop the attitudes that allow you to let go of that search outside. And this is one of the reasons why part of right mindfulness is called putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Greed here is not just greed for material things, but also greed for certain kinds of relationships, certain kinds of support from other people. You’re realizing how much you impose on others, largely because you’re not looking inside for a source of strength there. So you want to have goodwill for others. You see someone else is happy, you’re happy for them if someone else is suffering. You have compassion. In other words, you’re thinking about where they are, what they need, instead of constantly thinking about your own needs, which keeps turning you back, turning you back, looking inside. What do you have inside that you can use to support yourself? You’ve got your karma. Notice that reflection we have in the sublime attitudes. “May all beings be happy. May those who are suffering be free from their suffering. May those who are happy not lose their happiness.” The first three sublime attitudes are all “may, may, may.” It’s a wish. Whereas with equanimity, all beings are the owners of their actions. It’s a simple statement of fact. It’s the reality principle. And it works several ways. One is realizing there are people you want to help, but sometimes you can’t help them. And there are people you would like to have help you, but their help for you has to be filtered through your karma. So that keeps turning us back, turning us back. What karma are we creating right now? And we can’t just let go, let go. We’ve got to learn how to develop, develop, develop the good qualities that we need. The qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. These are the inner strengths we need to develop so that we can rely on ourselves and we don’t have to go leaning on other people all the time. Conviction that our actions really do matter. Then if we want to find happiness, it has to start with our own actions. And persistence is what carries through. Trying to find ways of generating desire inside so that you really want to develop good qualities. And let go of whatever’s unskillful. This requires that you know yourself. You know how to motivate yourself to get yourself going. And you have to keep in mind the fact that this is really what you want. It’s so easy when a strong emotion comes up that you forget and you go with the emotion. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha’s instructions are sometimes very short. Stay with the body in and of itself, period, period, period. So when the emotion comes along, you’ve got something clear and simple to keep in mind. Stay with your sense of the observer. Whatever comes up, watch it. Don’t go running with it. This is probably one of the most important skills you need to develop as you practice, is learning how not to identify with everything that comes up in the mind. It’s the beginning of the not-self teaching. Learn how to see the various thoughts in the mind as members of a committee. And it’s not a gathering of saints. It’s a very corrupt municipal council. All kinds of devious ways of dealing. And you have to admit, yes, there are some devious ways within your own mind. You don’t like to think about it, but if you don’t think about it, they’re just going to be able to keep on being devious. So you learn to recognize them. “Oh, this is an unskillful thought, and it’s having an impact not only on me but also on the people around me.” And learn not to get entangled. And so when you can step back like this, what do you step back to? Well, you step back to that reflection on karma again, the basic principle of equanimity. It’s interesting that that phrase, “All living beings are the owners of their actions,” is not only meant to give rise to equanimity, but it’s also meant to remind you that wherever you go, anywhere in the universe, you’ve still got your karma. In a way, it’s a good reflection to get you on the path, to remind yourself that you really do want to get out of this. So these are the things you keep in mind. That focuses you more and more on the practice of concentration, because the mindfulness is meant to lead to concentration. I was reading recently someone saying, “Well, the Buddha lists mindfulness and concentration as two separate factors of the path, so they’ve got to be different.” That neglects the fact that the factors of the path feed on one another, and they blend into one another. Right mindfulness builds on right effort. It’s not just watching things coming and going. But when you see something coming and going, you can figure out why it’s coming and going. You can stop the unskillful things and encourage the skillful ones. Well, that’s what you do. The purpose of that is to bring the mind into concentration, to get it to settle down. Now, to get your mind to settle down is going to require lots of different skills. It’s not just a matter of nailing your mind down on one spot because you can’t nail it. It’s like trying to nail down mercury. You put your finger on mercury and it spurts off in another direction. You’ve got to make the mind want to stay here. So you look for a topic it likes, and you work with something. You see that it’s having a good impact on your body, it’s having a good impact on your mind. That helps you stay with it. If any unskillful thoughts come up, sometimes just watching and the fact that, “Hey, this is an unskillful thought. This is not why I’m here,” reminding yourself that that is enough to drop it. Other times it’s not. That means you’ve got to develop other skills as well, to think in ways that counteract the thought. If it’s a thought heading out for greed, well, you have to remind yourself, “What gain do I gain if I go out after that object or that person or that relationship or whatever?” Look for the drawbacks. Or if there’s something you’re really upset about, well, look for the advantages, the good side of whatever it is. It’s often hard. And if you can’t find any good about it at all, remind yourself it’s good not to get entangled. If you’re feeling lazy, the Buddha recommends recollecting death, that it could come at any time. We even have earthquakes on the East Coast now. Storms, heat waves, cold waves. John Lee has a nice passage where he says sometimes you can die from being too sad, you can die from being too happy. You can die from eating too much, die from eating not enough. There’s death waiting on you on all sides. Look at your state of mind. Are you ready to go with this state of mind? If not, well, there’s work to be done. So in this way, you use your thinking to bring the mind to stillness. In other words, you counteract your unskillful thoughts with more skillful thinking. Because you can’t just walk in off the street with whatever attitudes you have in your mind and settle the mind down. You’ve got to look at your attitudes, ferret out the ones that are going to make it hard for the mind to settle down, and decide that you really don’t agree with them. Sometimes this is going to take a while. In the meantime, you try to make the breath as interesting as possible. If you have certain pains in different parts of the body, or a sense of blockage in different parts of the body, see if you can work through it. It gives you something to do, something useful to do with the breath. And it teaches you the influence of your perception on the actual sensation of breathing. There’s a famous Zen teacher, Jigme Khyentse. He talks about how meditation is basically de-thinking your thinking, which means you’ve got to learn how to perceive the world in new ways before the mind is going to settle down. In this way, you’re beginning to use discernment, which actually you’ve been using all along in trying to develop these strengths. There’s a certain amount of discernment in the conviction that action is important. There’s a certain amount of discernment that points out how you can motivate yourself to develop right effort. There’s discernment involved in trying to get the mind to keep the right things in mind. Then there’s the discernment you need in order to get the mind to settle down. You have to develop the right attitudes, both to your object of meditation and to the things that would pull you away. And when you’ve got these qualities developed inside, that’s when you can be your own person, you can stand on your own two feet, and you don’t have to go around leaning on other people all the time. And if everyone in the world could stand on their own two feet, we’d be a lot better off. So you can’t wait for other people. So you learn how to stand on your own first. You’ve got that dharma here to help you. And when you look to others for support, you’ll look to them for the example they give and how to practice, and realize that you can do that too. In this way you deal with probably the most distracting noise, which is the noise in your own head. The different noises that make it impossible for you to settle down. You sort of sort through them. And then you come to the fact that the mind really can settle down. It really can drop all its worries, all its concerns, all the unskillful narratives that make it hard for you to settle down. That doesn’t mean you just stop the narratives. You learn how to tell new narratives. Because the way you live the present is actually rewriting the past. Think about it this way. You have a lot of difficulties in the past, and you allow those difficulties to keep you back. Then that’s the narrative that you keep writing, that those difficulties were the most important things in your background. But if you find that you can overcome them, it becomes a different narrative. You had these difficulties, but they weren’t that important. You found strengths inside that enabled you to overcome them. That becomes the new narrative. So keep on writing a good narrative for yourself, to the point where you can just stop the narrative because the mind is ready to settle down. There may be a certain pleasure in the old narrative, but that doesn’t mean it’s the new narrative. There’s a lot of drawbacks. So look for a new narrative that can set you free.

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