On Your Own Two Feet

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We start out our lives very dependent on others—our parents, then our teachers, friends. We need other people to show us the way, how to speak, how to walk, how to do all kinds of basic functions. Without someone to teach us, without someone to support us, we wouldn’t have survived. But as we grow up, we begin to see those supports beginning to fall away. The people we relied on get old, sick, they pass away. We’re more and more exposed to a world where we’re full of people we can’t rely on. So we have to learn how to rely on ourselves. This is a lot of what the practice is for, to develop the strength we need. All the basic skills that we’re going to need in order to be strong enough and wise enough so we can really stand on our own two feet. Meditation is one of those skills that’s very important, because you’re looking directly at your mind. But it’s based on a lot of other models. More basic skills. Think of those instructions that the Buddha gave to Rahula. Look at your actions. Be truthful and be very observant. There’s another passage where he basically said that this is what he was looking for in a student, someone who was truthful and observant. He would teach that person the Dhamma because that person would be able to use it and apply it. So to be truthful, what does it mean? You’re clear about what you’re doing. You’re clear about the results. And if the results don’t measure up to your standards, you try to bring them up to your standards. If they do measure up to your standards, you try to raise your standards so that you can get stronger and stronger. And that requires a certain amount of effort. Self-esteem. When the Buddha’s talking to Rahula, he says, “Be ashamed of your unskillful actions.” But this is not the kind of shame that’s debilitating. It’s more the shame that comes from having a sense of your own worth and realizing that actions of that sort are beneath you. You want to be better than that. That’s something to be encouraged. So to be observant, you have to be not only truthful but also get the mind really still and impartial. This is where the concentration practice comes in. Try to be with the breath and have a sense of the nourishment that comes from allowing the mind to be still. There’s no happiness or there’s no pleasure other than peace. Sometimes it’s translated as, “There’s no happiness higher than peace.” But he actually said, “No happiness other than peace.” In other words, the pleasures that we get in the course of the day, the short ones that are more like roller coaster rides, the pleasure we gain from that is simply the fact that the mind is able to stay with that particular mood or stay with that particular object for a while. If you look carefully, though, at what we’re staying with, it’s not all that reliable. And it’s not all that really happy deep down inside. You want happiness that comes from being able to be still with something that’s really lasting and harmless. So as long as you’re alive, you’ve got the breath. Learn to be friends with the breath. Because after all, when you look at your friends outside, they’re all kinds. So you need someone inside that you can really rely on. So try to get to know the breath. How would you make friends with the breath? It’s like making friends with a person. Try to be sensitive to what that person likes. In other words, listen to your breath. What the body needs right now. Try to be very sensitive to that. This is an area of our awareness that we tend to block out so we can pay attention to other things. It requires some moving back in and getting used to it. It’s like moving back to a home you lived in before. Other people came, it seems, in the meantime. So you’ve got to readjust and get back into the old rhythm. But after a while, you begin to notice there are times when you’re with the breath and there’s a sense of fullness. It starts in different parts of the body. Sometimes it can be very unexpected. I remember one time encountering a sense around my mouth that I said, “Gosh, I haven’t felt that for years.” And then you could allow that sense to spread and see where it goes in the body. It may take a while, because there are lots of energy channels in the body that have been closed off. But you can just gradually open, open, open. Just think about everything inside being open and see what responds. And think of the breath going into unexpected places to nourish the parts of the body that have been cut off for a long time. This way, you can get your foundation. Because dealing with a lot of the ups and downs in the world, a lot of the disappointments and betrayals, requires that you have a solid foundation inside. So you’re not knocked out of kilter. As the Buddha said, “There’s nothing good and bad that’s going to happen in life. There’s gain and there’s loss. There’s status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain.” We simply have to accept the fact that that’s the way the world is. There are certain things that we can change in the direction we’d like for a while. But the longer you live, the more you realize that things outside are pretty undependable. You’ve got to learn how to be dependable yourself. So try to develop this foundation. This can be your refuge inside. This can be your strength inside. It’s strengthened by those qualities that the Buddha traditionally talks about as being strengths for the mind. There’s conviction. It starts with conviction in the Buddha’s awakening that it is possible for a human being to gain true happiness through his or her own actions. The Buddha set the example. That’s what his awakening means. From that conviction arises a sense of energy and persistence that it really is worthwhile to put in energy in this practice. The more you notice from what you’re doing as you try to get the mind more skillful, the more things you have to remember. That’s where mindfulness gets developed. Remember what works. Remember what doesn’t work. You’ll find often that there are certain ways of dealing with the breath that work for a while. They seem to be your magic bullet or the golden key that unlocks things, and then after a while it doesn’t seem to work anymore. Well, don’t throw away the key. Don’t throw away the bullet. It may have its uses again. It’s a matter of time. Sometimes you’ve dealt with that problem and you thought, “Well, this was the key to all my problems in life.” Well, no, it was the key to that particular problem, and now you’ve got other problems to come up. So be observant again. Try to see what works with this problem. After a while, you’ll have a whole collection of keys and a collection of magic bullets. And with time, you’ll learn to figure out which one is appropriate for which door, which key, which bullet is good for which problem. When you have that set of keys, then the mind can settle down and be still in different situations. When things are going well, it’ll settle down one way. When things are going not so well, you can still get the mind to settle down. It’s simply that that’s a different route into that sense of stillness. It’s a different set of chambers that you have to unlock. But this is a lot of what the skill and concentration is, that you can sit down and be still in any situation. Sometimes you’ll find that as you sit down, the stories that you’re bringing up from the meditation are pretty upsetting. Learn to tell yourself that story in a different way so that it doesn’t keep you upset throughout the meditation. You come in saying, “Well, this person did that, and that person did this, and here I am suffering.” Well, change the story. That person did that. There’s no denying it. But your reaction is a new story. Say, “I was able to rise above the situation and find my inner peace. Maybe I couldn’t find it right away. I was willing to keep working at it.” Remember that what we admire about the Buddha is not so much that he was able to gain awakening. In fact, he didn’t gain it immediately. He had to work at it. He was able to put in the energy and put in the effort. He met with lots of false starts, lots of dead ends, but he didn’t give up. That’s one of the reasons why we admire him, because he shows how you can work your way around difficulties. In doing all of this, of course, discernment is going to develop. There’s the discernment that goes into getting the mind to settle down, and then the sharper discernment that comes once the mind has been settled down, so you can see things clearly that you couldn’t see before. In particular, you can see more clearly what you’re doing, what the results are. That question you started out with, “How can you learn how to rely on yourself when this is how you do it? How can you learn to be truthful and observant?” You develop these qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. That’s what allows your discernment to see sharply and to see right through things that you’re doing that sometimes you barely realize you’re doing. But they are causing you unnecessary suffering. You’ve been burdening yourself. So it’s not simply that we strengthen ourselves, but we look around to see what we’re carrying around that we don’t need to carry around anymore. That, too, is a way of increasing your strength. You can stand on your own two feet, and you can stand up straight. You’re not bending over with large burdens on your back. We depend on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. “Sangha” here doesn’t mean just everybody who’s meditating. It means, on the one hand, the monastic sangha and, more importantly, the noble sangha. These are all good examples. But the real refuge comes when we can take their qualities and develop them inside, so that we, too, someday can be a member of the noble sangha. It can be a refuge not only for ourselves, but also for people around us. In other words, you want to get as reliable as you can within yourself. And that becomes a gift to the world.

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