The Self as Its Own Mainstay

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Close your eyes. Watch your breath. Take responsibility for your breath. Be there with it when it comes in. Be there when it comes out, so that you know how it feels. When you know how it feels, then you can make changes to make it better. The important point is that you’re responsible, because the breath is coming in, going out, and going out all the time. What’s going to make the difference here is that the mind engages all the way, takes responsibility all the way. This is a healthy sense of self, the self that feels that it really does want to put an end to suffering and is confident that it can. We’re inspired by the Buddhist teachings. He said that we can depend on ourselves, but we have to develop the right qualities inside. We have to be responsible to create a healthy sense of self together with our practice. Sometimes we’re told that we should have no sense of self as we come to the practice, that if you have a sense of self, you’re going to taint the rest of your practice. But that’s not the case. As the Buddha said, the self has to be its own mainstay. Ultimately, we do get to a point where there’s no more need for a sense of self, but that’s at the end of the path. Walking along the path, we have to have a sense that we are competent, we can do this, and we’re going to benefit from it. Even in the Buddhist teaching to let go of things, he says, when you let go of things that are not yours, it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. You will benefit. So to make ourselves dependable, we have to develop good qualities inside. We can see this, as he says, atahyatanonato. The self is its own mainstay. But it really can depend on itself only when it’s got good qualities. This is where we’re inspired by another principle, which is that we take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge. There are many layers of taking refuge. The first one is being inspired by their example. We see that the Buddha was an admirable being, an amazing being. And he said that the good qualities let us enter into his awakening and put an end to our suffering are qualities that we all have in potential form. He shows us how we can develop those qualities within ourselves. He himself exemplified three main qualities—wisdom, compassion, and purity. He pointed out how to do that. In each case, it’s having a strong sense of really caring about yourself, wanting to find true happiness for yourself, but doing it in a wise, compassionate, and pure way. In this way, your sense of self actually does lead to wisdom. It leads to compassion. It leads to purity. If you develop it correctly, you make it a mature self. Look at what the Buddha had to say about how wisdom begins. It begins with the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” Notice that there’s an “I” and a “me” in there. The wisdom in that is, one, you see that your happiness is going to come from your actions. You can’t wait for it to come floating by. And secondly, there’s such a thing as long-term happiness, and it’s better than short-term happiness. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that the wise person sees that if there’s a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, the wise person would be willing to abandon the lesser one for the sake of the greater one. There was a British translator who translated that passage from the Dhammapada. He put in a footnote that he was confused by the statement because it just seemed so simple and so obvious. Why do we need a Buddha to tell us that? That you should be willing to sacrifice short-term for the long-term. Well, the problem is that even though it’s obvious, people don’t always follow that principle. All too often we go for the short-term because it’s quick. It’s easy. The long-term seems hard and far away, so we take what’s right at hand. So we have to be reminded that, yes, there is a such a thing as long-term happiness, and it’s really worth the effort that goes into abandoning the lesser happiness. This way we get past that tendency we have to say we’re playing chess, to want to win and keep all our pieces at the same time. If you really want to win, you have to be willing to sacrifice some of your pieces. This is the beginning of wisdom. And then, when we ask this question of a wise person, the wise person will point out that happiness is through generosity, virtue, developing thoughts of goodwill. These are ways of finding happiness that harm no one. They don’t harm you, they don’t harm other people, and they create a sense of harmony within the society. If your happiness depends on material gain, status, praise, sensual pleasures, it’s going to create divisions. Because of that kind of happiness, one side gains and the other side loses. But with generosity, both sides gain. With virtue, everybody gains. When you develop thoughts of goodwill, everybody gains. Your mind becomes more expansive, and other people are more beneficiaries of your goodwill. It makes them happier, too. This relates to the second principle, which is compassion. Compassion is not innate in our nature, at least it’s no more innate than lack of compassion. It’s very easy to have compassion for people we like and not to have compassion for people we don’t like. But the Buddha’s trying to train us that we have to have compassion for everybody who’s suffering. There’s a story that goes with this. The king, Visenadhi, and his queen, Mallika, were in their bedroom one day, one-on-one. And in a tender moment, the king turns to the queen and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Now you know what he’s expecting. Typical king. He expects that she’s going to say, “Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” And if this were a Hollywood movie, that’s what she’d say. But this is not the Hollywood movie. It’s the Pali Canon. And in the Pali Canon, people are a little bit wiser. And Mallika is especially wise. And she says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And the king has to admit, “No, there’s nobody he loves more than himself.” So that’s the end of that scene. The king leaves the apartment and goes down to see the Buddha. He reports their conversation. And the Buddha says, “You know she’s right. You could search the whole world over and not find anyone you love more than yourself. At the same time, everybody else in the world loves themselves just as fiercely as you love yourself.” And the conclusion he draws from that is interesting. It’s not that it’s a dog-eat-dog world. He says, “You should never harm anyone or cause anyone to do any harm to anyone else. In other words, if you really want to be happy, you should make sure that your happiness doesn’t harm anybody. Because if it harms other people, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to put an end to that happiness. So that way, your happiness cannot be long-term. So you have to think about their happiness, too. Make sure that in your actions you don’t harm anyone at all. And that way, your happiness is not offensive to other people. So here, too, even though we’d like to think of compassion as total abnegation of the Self, it actually comes from wise self-love. If you really love yourself, you have to have compassion for others. Because that way, whatever happiness you’re looking for in the world, in a righteous way, will last for a long time. So here again, this good quality of the Buddha, like wisdom, compassion comes from having a strong, mature sense of self, learning how to look after yourself in a wise way. That leads to compassion, and a heedful way leads to compassion. And a similar principle applies to purity. The Buddha taught his son, Rahula, one time. At that point, Rahula was seven, just newly ordained. And the story goes that he sees the Buddha coming in the distance one day, and so he sets out a jar of water in the dipper for him to wash his feet. The Buddha washes his feet, and he leaves a little bit of water in the dipper. He got the feeling that Rahula must have told a lie. Because the very first thing the Buddha talks about is,”See how little water there is in the dipper? Yes. That’s how little goodness there is in someone who tells a deliberate lie, who has no shame in telling a deliberate lie.” Then the Buddha takes the water and throws it away. “See how that water is thrown away? Yes. That’s what happens to the goodness of someone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame. It gets thrown away.” Then he shows him the empty dipper. “See the dipper? Yes, yes, yes.” That’s how empty of goodness someone is if they can tell a deliberate lie with no sense of shame. So he’s established the principle that not lying is important to the practice. And particularly, we’re going to see, it’s a matter of not lying to yourself. Because then it goes on to say that if you’re going to practice, you have to commit yourself and then reflect on what you’re doing before, during, and after. Before you do it, you ask yourself, “This action that I intend to do, would it lead to harm for myself or for others?” If you see there’ll be harm for anyone, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, then you go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, you look for the results that are coming out. And if while you’re doing it you see that there’s some harm, then you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you can continue. When the action is done, then you ask yourself, “This action that I did, did it cause any harm? And if you see that it did cause harm, you develop a sense of shame around that action and resolve not to repeat it. And if it was an action in terms of your bodily actions or verbal actions, then you talk it over with someone else who’s more advanced in the path. You take their lessons, and then you continue training. If you don’t see any harm, then, as the Buddha said, take pride in the fact, take joy in the fact, that your practice is developing. And then continue training yourself day by day. In other words, you take joy in when you’ve done something right, but you don’t rest there. You try to make yourself better. This, the Buddha said, is how purity is found. And it’s interesting, in each case, there’s always an”I.” This action that I intend to do, this action that I am doing, this action that I have done. If you’re going to improve your actions, make them pure, you have to be responsible. So it’s in this way, having a strong sense of healthy self, that you realize that you have to be mature in your pursuit of happiness. And a mature pursuit of happiness develops qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity, which are precisely the qualities of the Buddha himself. So we talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, both as an example and then by taking his qualities and developing them inside. And this is how we do it. We do it by really taking our quest for happiness seriously. We want to do this well. We want to do it in such a way that our happiness is long-term. This is how the practice begins. This is how you learn to be your own mainstay. This is how you develop those qualities of the Buddha. The same with the qualities of the Dhamma. The Buddha said you take the Dhamma as your mainstay. You do that in the practice of mindfulness, like we’re doing right now. You stay focused, say, on the breath in and of itself. You’re ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. And although here there may be less of a sense of “I, I, I,” doing it, still the Buddha talks in those terms. If you notice that there’s a hindrance in the mind, you say, “This hindrance is present within me.” When there’s not there, you say, “This hindrance is not present within me.” There’s still a sense of self lurking behind there, helping with the work, helping to make sure that it goes well. Because you are doing this for your long-term welfare and happiness. You’re getting the mind established in such a way that it can see anything unskillful coming up in your life. It can get rid of it. That’s what the ardency is all about. Mindfulness reminds you of the lessons you’ve learned from the Buddha, the lessons you’ve learned from your practice. Alertness is careful to watch what’s going on right now as your breath is coming in and going out, and also to see what the mind is doing to make sure that the mind stays with the breath. If it’s not staying with the breath, then ardency tries to bring it back and tries to keep it there. It does this in a balanced way, in a way that becomes more and more reliable, so that when you tell the mind to do something, it obeys. This is how your mind becomes a refuge. As you point out to it, this is how true happiness is found, by training mindfulness, ardency, alertness. And so here, too, we find that creating a refuge inside comes down basically to being mature in our pursuit of happiness. The same principle applies to the Sangha. They develop the qualities of the Buddha, they follow the Dhamma, they become reliable for themselves. And then we have them as an example to show that this is how it’s done. And it wasn’t just done in the time of the Buddha. Even up to our own time, they’re inspiring examples. We have to rely on them, but we can’t rely on them always. After all, if they don’t die first, we’re going to die first. Then what are we going to do? We have to develop their qualities inside. So in every case, it’s a matter of having a mature sense of self, or maturing your sense of self, that you become reliable, that you become your own mainstay. This is why Ajaan Sawat used to complain about this little drawing that you would see all over Thailand. He said, “Don’t be selfish.” And they make it look like a little Buddha image. The “don’t” is the head. “Be selfish” is the body. He said, “That’s not really a Buddhist thought, because the Buddha would have you look after yourself.” Because the word for “selfish” in Thaila can also mean “look after yourself.” He said, “You should look after yourself.” The Buddha is telling you to place importance on your own happiness, because if you do it wisely, it’s not going to be narrow and grabbing and greedy. It’s going to be wise, compassionate, pure, a healthy self. This is why Lumpur would also say that even though the Buddha talks about many things being not-self, he does point out that our karma is ours, because that’s what we’re responsible for and that’s how we practice. We take responsibility for our happiness. Then we find as we develop skillful qualities and abandon unselfishness, we get to the point where we don’t need that sense of self as the agent anymore. Then you put it aside. In fact, that’s the last thing that would be getting in the way. But you don’t let it go until that point. Up to that point, you use your sense of self to make it healthier, happier, more mature, so that you stay on the path. You keep reminding yourself that you can do this. As the Buddha said, this is something human beings can do. If human beings couldn’t do it, the Buddha wouldn’t teach us. We’re motivated by what the Buddha calls the self as a governing principle. Other people can do this. We hear about the Buddha. We hear about the Noble Disciples. They can do it. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. Why can’t I do it too? Even though that counts as a kind of conceit where you’re comparing yourself with others, still, it’s useful. It’s helpful on the path. So it’s not the case that we’re trying to practice without a sense of self. We’re trying to practice with a healthy sense of self. That’s how the practice is going to succeed. It becomes a practice that we can depend on. We develop a refuge inside, such a way that we can depend on ourselves and the people around us can depend on us as well. In this way, everyone benefits.

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