

Looking after Ourselves

January 16, 2017

Close your eyes and watch your breath as it comes in, as it goes out. Try to stay with it as consistently as you can. See if you can trust the mind to stay.

At first you have to watch it very, very carefully, because it has a tendency to slip off very easily. In fact, that's how we live our lives: Our minds slip away all over the place. To get any work done, we do have to concentrate. And especially if you're going to get work done on the mind, you have to concentrate for long periods of time.

As the Buddha said, *attahi attano natho*, the self is its own mainstay. The only way it's going to be able to depend on itself and be its own mainstay is if you train it. Otherwise, it's like trying to depend on an untrained child. The child has all kinds of moods and emotions and a really short attention span. You can't depend on the child to be helpful when it's really needed. So you have to train it.

So we train it by developing these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindful means keeping something in mind. Alertness is watching what's actually going on and specifically watching what you're doing and what results you're getting from your doing. Then ardency means putting your whole heart into this, realizing that the state of your mind is the most important thing you have. So you want to make sure it's good; you want to make sure it's well-trained.

As for your other interests, you can put them aside for the time being. This is the time when the mind has to come first. It spends the day looking after the body, looking after all kinds of other things, with very little time for looking after itself. Well, here's a chance to look after itself.

It's like having a tool like a knife. If you want the knife to work well, you have to look after it. You can't spend all the time just using, using, using the knife, and then tossing it away in the drawer when you don't use it. You've got to sharpen it; you've got to oil it to make sure it doesn't get rusty. Then you put it away. In the same way, the mind has to be trained so that when you really need it, you have a sharp knife that cuts right through things. Otherwise, the mind just keeps cutting, cutting, cutting, and after a while it can't cut anymore. It just slams against things because its blade is dull.

Train the mind so it'll be there ready when you need it. That way, you can learn to trust it. And when you can trust your mind, then you really can be your own mainstay.

We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as examples. It's not as if the Buddha is going to come and catch us when we fall. It's that he teaches us how not to fall and, if we do fall, he tells us how to hit the ground so that we don't hurt ourselves.

So we can look after ourselves. We have that chant every day, "May all living beings look after themselves with ease. May I look after myself with ease." The skills with which we can look after ourselves: Those are the Buddha's greatest gift to us. He shows us that it can be done and he tells us how he did it. Now it's simply up to us to follow in his footsteps, to get the work done on our mind, so that ultimately we don't need outside examples to be our refuge. The mind at that point can look after itself.