

Looking after Yourself with Ease

November 13, 2017

That phrase we have in the chants on goodwill—“May I look after myself with ease. May all living beings look after themselves with ease”—is a wish that we can all depend on ourselves—that we have the resources within us, so that when the going gets tough, it doesn’t get tough for us. We have something we can fall back on that we can really depend on. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but they’re primarily examples. They learned how to depend on themselves—the Buddha and the Sangha—by depending on the Dhamma. What kind of Dhamma did they depend on? Look at what resources you have inside. That’s what they depended on in themselves.

In the Buddha’s analysis, we shape our experience in three ways: bodily, through the way we breathe; verbally, through the way we talk to ourselves in what he calls directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a topic and you make comments on it, ask questions (and) come to judgements. This is what a lot of what our internal chatter is.

Then finally there’s mental fabrication, which consists of perceptions and feelings. Feelings here are feeling tones of pleasure and pain; neither pleasure nor pain. And perceptions are the images or words you use to identify things. You see the flame of a candle and you think “candle flame.” You see the Buddha image and something inside you says “Buddha image.” Those are perceptions.

These are the things by which we shape our lives—and the things we can rely on if they’re trained. As the Buddha said, the problem is that we’re usually doing these forms of fabrication in ignorance, which is why we suffer. But if we can bring knowledge to the process, they become part of the path away from suffering. That’s what we’re doing now: We’re bringing knowledge to all three processes as we focus on the breath.

Try to breathe in a way that’s soothing for the body right now if it needs to be soothed, or energizing if it needs energy. Start with a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice how the breathing feels in the body. We’re focusing not so much on the air coming in and out of the nose as on the feeling of movement and energy that goes along with the breath. And that breath energy exists on many levels. There’s even a still breath inside, a level of energy that doesn’t move. You can access it in certain spots in what Ajaan Lee calls the resting spots of the breath.

But in the beginning, it’s best to focus on the in-and-out breath because that gives you something to work with. You ask yourself, “The way I breathe: What is it doing for my body right now? Could it be more refreshing?” And how about the way the in-and-out breath relates to the flow of energy in the

blood and in nerves, can you sense that? If you feel tension or tightness in any part of the body, think of it relaxing.

If you notice that, as you breathe in, you're holding onto tension in some spot in order to breathe in well, drop that tension. You can still breathe in. It's just that different muscles will take up the task. And when you find a rhythm of breathing that feels good—it could be long or short, shallow, deep, fast, slow, heavy, light—maintain that rhythm. And then think of the ease or sense of comfort that comes from that spreading through different parts of the body. All of that is called bodily fabrication.

Now, if you've been the type of person who represses emotions or holds things in, you may find a lot of bands of tension or tightness in different parts of the body. It takes a while to work through those. Sometimes old physical wounds will get in the way of the breath's moving easily through the body. But if you're patient and take an interest in this, you realize: Here it is, free energy to sustain your body. What can you do with it? If you bring awareness and attention to what you're doing, you begin to find that you can rely on yourself—at the very least on the bodily side.

And while you're doing this, you're talking to yourself about the breath. That's what the verbal fabrication is: technically, directed thought and evaluation. Keep directing your thoughts to the breath. If they go wandering someplace else, turn the arrow around and bring it right back to the breath. And then you can talk to yourself about the breath. Evaluate it. "How is it? Is it good? Is it not good?" So you've got the verbal fabrication right there as you're working with bodily fabrication.

And then with the perceptions and feelings: You have the feelings of ease that you're trying to create and trying to maintain. And the perceptions are the images you hold in mind—in this case, your perception of what's happening when the breath comes in, what's happening when the breath goes out. How does it move through the body? What needs to be done so that it can move more efficiently, more smoothly, more evenly, with more co-ordination? What images do you hold in mind as you ask these questions? Those are perceptions.

There are lots of different ways you can perceive the breath. As I was saying just now, you can think of it as the air coming in through the nose or you can perceive it as a flow of energy in the body. And the image you have of the body can be many different things. One is of a sponge, so that when you breathe in, you're not just pulling the air in through the nose, you're bringing breath energy in through all the pores of the skin. Hold that image in mind. See what it does to your breathing.

Or as I said earlier, you can think of those resting spots in the body: that when you breathe in, the energy actually emanates from those spots and from there spreads out through the body. This way, you don't have to think of

pulling the breath in from outside. You just think of opening things up so that the energy can spread smoothly from those spots: from around the navel, or just below the breastbone, in middle of the chest, the base of the throat, or the middle of the head. Think of the breath as originating there and then allow it to spread through the body. If you notice there are any patterns of tension or tightness that get in the way, allow them to relax.

Or you can think of the breath element as being both in and outside the body. It's not confined to the outlines of your physical body, so that the skin doesn't form a barrier at all. There's breath already both outside and inside. Think of them coming together and being co-ordinated. That's a perception you can use as well.

So what you're doing is that you're using these different processes, these different things that the Buddha calls fabrication, or *sankhara*, with knowledge. And you can create a sense of wellbeing right here, both physical and mental, where everything comes together. The body is filled with breath; it's filled with a feeling of ease; it's filled with your awareness.

Or you can think of the sense of ease and wellbeing as the glue that holds your full awareness of your body together with the body and the breath. And there you are. You've been fabricating something with knowledge. And as you get used to these different types of fabrication—the breath on the one hand, your directed thought and evaluation on another, your perceptions and feelings on another—you realize that you're shaping your mind, you're shaping your experience. Not only here while you're sitting with your eyes closed, but as you go through the world.

There's so much coming in through our senses that we tend to forget how much we're going out to shape things: how we interpret what's coming in, how we deal with it, how we suppress some things and augment others. It's all through these three processes. Something gets you angry, and the breath is going to kick in right away and do something strange. If you don't watch out, you'll have this oppressive feeling of something inside you you've got to get out of your system. Well, it's basically because the breath has been irritating you. And part of the mind actually likes the irritation. It wants you to act on the anger. It'll stir things up in the body so that you feel a sense of being oppressed, being stifled.

You have to ask yourself: Do you really want to go along with that? Or do you want to bring some knowledge and awareness to this, and breathe through the building sensations of tension in the body so that you can think more clearly about what's going on?

Then you ask yourself "How am I talking to myself about this? If the Buddha were here listening in to my conversation, what would he think? What would he recommend thinking instead?"

And then finally with the perceptions: These are the real instigators, because when you're operating with perceptions, you're operating way back in the lizard brain, with little flashing images that go through your mind. Ask yourself "This perception I have of what the situation is: How many layers are there in the perception? As I peel them back, what can I find that's aggravating the situation? Can I replace those perceptions with others?"

This is what you do when you practice goodwill. You're dealing with difficult people and all you can think about is your suffering, how you're being mistreated. But if you can stop and think, "Those other people: Why are they acting in this way? Is the issue really me or is it something in them? Can I get out of the way? Do I have to think that what they're doing is aimed at me? Can I step out of the way a bit?"

And in reacting to their mistreatment, "What would really be goodwill for that person?" That takes you out of your sense of being victimized and gives you a different way of perceiving the situation, a different way of talking to yourself about the situation. It might help you think of something that would resolve the conflict. This is just one example, but it gives you an idea.

These processes are things you're doing all the time, these forms of fabrication. If you want to learn how to rely on yourself, you have to look at them because this is what you have to fall back on. And this is one of the reasons why we have the Dhamma to teach us: to give us different ways of thinking about things, different ways of perceiving things. All those images and analogies the Buddha uses in the Canon: Those are to give us new perceptions, new ways of talking to ourselves.

As when you're passing judgement on somebody: Way back in the back of your mind may be the perception that you're high up on the judge's seat and that other person is a little tiny ant down on the floor and you can step on him anytime you want. That perception might be there, aggravating the situation.

So replace that image with one the Buddha provides: You're going through a desert, you're hot, tired, trembling with thirst, and you come across water in a cow's footprint. Just a little tiny puddle of water. And you realize that if you were to scoop it up with your hand, you'd muddy the water and couldn't drink it. So what do you do? You'd get down very carefully on all fours and you slurp up as much as you can of the clean water in there.

Now, you wouldn't want anybody taking a picture of you at that point. But you need that water, so you do what you have to do to drink it. In the same way, you try to look for the goodness in the other person because it's water for your goodness, so that you'll be motivated to act in a skillful way. If you don't see any good at all in anybody else, you get careless in your actions. So try to look and have a sense that you need that goodness to maintain your own goodwill and, through your own goodwill, to be skillful in your actions.

Or if someone has been really mean to you and you think you're in the line of fire, can you perceive yourself as being outside of the line of fire?—that when they say something nasty, it doesn't come right at you, it goes past you? Tell yourself, "They may be aiming those words at me, but I'm not going to let myself be the right target. Those words don't apply to me." Watch the words as they go past and you realize, "Oh. It's that person's karma." And the reason you were suffering from the words is because you were pulling them inside. Our minds are like vacuum cleaners. All too often we go through life sucking up nothing but the dirt. So when a word is fired in your direction, step aside a little bit. Watch it go past. See if you can hold that perception in mind

And also hold in mind the Buddha's comments that the nature of human speech is there's going to be true speech and false speech, well meaning and ill meaning, kind and unkind. This is normal human speech. The fact that unkind, untrue words are being directed at you: There's nothing out of the ordinary there. This perception helps pull you out of the situation so that you don't feel so victimized by it. It doesn't mean that the words are any better than they were. But you don't have to suffer from them.

This is what the nature of the Buddha's skill is all about. There are things in the world that we can change, and others we can't. One of the things we can change is the extent to which we make ourselves suffer over the things that we can and cannot change.

And what are our tools? These three kinds of fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. If you learn how to do them with knowledge, they become part of your path. They become your refuge. If something difficult comes up, you breathe in a different way, you think in a different way, you apply different labels and perceptions. Train yourself beforehand to have a good stock of these things on hand. This is why we listen to Dhamma talks, why we read the Dhamma: so that we can increase our stock of good tools.

Then we work on the concentration to have a sense of wellbeing underlying all of this. Remember the Buddha's image of the practice as being like a fortress. You've got the soldiers of right effort. You've got the gatekeeper, which is mindfulness. You've got the well-plastered wall, which is your discernment. And you've got a storehouse full of food, which is your concentration. If you can give yourself a sense of wellbeing simply by the way you breathe, by the way you settle your mind inside, then you find you've got something you can tap into anytime of the day, in any situation, because the breath is always there. The chatter in your mind is already there. Bring some knowledge to that. And it can become your refuge instead of dragging you down.

So you've got the resources within you. They're things you're doing already all the time. Simply bring some knowledge to them. Be observant. Try to use a

little ingenuity. Pick up on lessons from the Buddha and the great ajaans, and—using their example—figure out new ways of applying their teachings to your specific situations. That way you find that you really do have a refuge of your own resources inside. You can look after yourself with ease.