

Look After Yourself with Ease

May 16, 2014

When we chant the formula for spreading goodwill, the final statement is one of the more important ones: “May I look after myself with ease. May all living beings look after themselves with ease.” When we think about all living beings, our wish for them is basically that they act skillfully, because that’s how you look after yourself. It’s by acting skillfully, thinking skillfully, and speaking skillfully—in other words, creating good karma—that you take good care of yourself.

The phrase we repeat reminds us that we can’t be there for everybody all the time. And there are a lot of people who would actually resent our attempts to be friendly, so you learn to accept that. Like the snakes today: If you went up and tried to pet them, they probably wouldn’t have liked it. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have goodwill for them. The fact that they can bite us is no reason not to treat them with goodwill.

As the Buddha said, we have to protect our goodwill the same way that a mother protects her only child. He’s not saying that we should cherish everybody the same way a mother cherishes her child, as you sometimes hear. We have to look after our goodwill and protect that. Just as a mother protects her child with her life, we have to protect our goodwill with our lives.

But again, this doesn’t mean that we’re going to try to be there for everybody. We wish them well, those who have to find their happiness without us. And there are lots of people out there who will—and would prefer to do it that way. We’re happy for them. We hope they can look after themselves, acting skillfully so that they don’t destroy their own happiness.

At the very least, when you’re dealing with animals like snakes and all, you can think, “May you be well. May you someday get beyond being a snake.” You try to have some compassion for them. Too many times, when we deal with snakes, we’re acting out of fear. Ajaan Fuang once said, “Think about it. They don’t have any legs. Everywhere they go, they have to wiggle on their bellies. Imagine if you had to be like that.” So have some compassion for them. But again, that doesn’t mean you go up and pet them. Just wish that they go their separate ways in well-being. Of course, you have to go your separate way, too.

When you want to look after yourself with ease, what does this mean? It means having right resolve for yourself. As the Buddha points out, it starts out by having goodwill for yourself by looking at your thoughts in terms of what they do to you. Thoughts that are imbued with sensuality, with ill will, or harmfulness:

Those are bad for you. They're like ruts in the mind. Each time you give in to a thought of this sort, it creates a deeper and deeper rut in the mind. You make it hard to get out.

Allowing yourself to think those thoughts is not showing goodwill for yourself. You're not looking after yourself with ease. You're not looking after yourself very well at all. This was why the Buddha said that these are the kinds of thoughts you have to hold in check in the same way that a cowherd would check his cattle during the rice-growing season. The cattle want to go into the rice fields to eat the rice, and you've got to keep them from going in there. Otherwise, there's going to be trouble with the owners of the rice fields. So every time they show any interest at all in the rice, you've got to tap them and poke them.

It's the same with your unskillful thoughts. You've got to tap them and poke them. Recognize them as unskillful thoughts. Going into denial doesn't make them go away. You have to recognize them: These things aren't skillful; you can't let the mind indulge in them at all. As for thoughts that are imbued with renunciation, non-ill will—which can be anything from goodwill to equanimity—or thoughts imbued with harmlessness, they don't really harm anybody. So you can let yourself think them when they're useful.

As long as your thoughts are okay, you can let them think in the same way that a cowherd, after the rice has been gathered, can simply lie under the shade of a tree and have a sense that “The cows are over there someplace.” They're not going to get in any danger; you just want to note where they are. But, the Buddha says, if you think that way for a whole day and a whole night, it may not lead to unskillful actions but it will tire the mind. These are good ruts for the mind, but you don't want to get too rutted in them because they are better things to get the mind into, like getting the mind into good concentration.

Goodwill is both one of the topics of concentration and one of your motivations for getting into concentration to begin with. It's good for the mind to get it to settle down and have a sense of being at ease with the whole body. Think of those images the Buddha gives of the bathman kneading the moisture through the ball of bath powder, or of the spring of water welling up in the lake, cooling all the waters in the lake, or of the lotuses growing in the water, saturated in the roots to the tips of the flowers with water. It's cooling for the mind, refreshing for the mind. Or think of the person sitting, covered by a white cloth: Your mind is filled with a bright awareness.

These are all images of the mind being at ease right here in the body. You're not going after sensual pleasures, i.e., the pleasures of contact at the body. You're going for pleasures of form, the body as it's felt from within. These don't have

nearly the bad effect on the mind that thirst for sensuality has. The Buddha does warn there may come a time when you're tempted to get stuck on this kind of pleasure. But this pleasure is the path. You can't do without it. Even if you're stuck on it to some extent, it's better than being stuck on sensuality, because you can end up killing and stealing and doing all kinds of horrible things over your sensual desires. But nobody's done any kind of crime that gets a person thrown into jail because they were stuck on jhana.

So as long as the mind is going to have its attachments, get attached to this: a sense of the body as it's felt from within, the breath energies flowing through the body. As the Buddha said, this is part of the wind element, the breath energy that flows throughout the entire body. It's a very subtle set of sensations, but it's there. You can take advantage of it to get the mind to settle down in the body and be really refreshed, to have a sense of ease and well-being just inhabiting the body right here.

Having this sense of whole-body awareness is important, because otherwise, when the mind begins to settle down, it could fall into an air pocket or drift off. In other words, if your range of awareness is too small and the breath gets very subtle, you lose your focus—which you don't want. You want the mind to be strongly concentrated with a lot of mindfulness and a lot of alertness. That's how you nourish it. That's how you gain strength. And this is how you show goodwill for yourself.

Then, when the mind is nourished in this way, it's a lot easier to spread more goodwill to others. You're not suffering, so why would you want anybody else to suffer? This is why the Buddha said that the practice of right resolve shades into right concentration. When you're here with the breath—or whatever your object of concentration—there are no thoughts of sensuality, no thoughts of ill will, and no thoughts of harmfulness. So being in right concentration is the embodiment of right resolve.

This is how you look after yourself with ease. This is an important principle. We do depend on others. After all, as the Buddha said, the whole of the path is admirable friendship. If we didn't have admirable friends to point out the way—and the Buddha is our number-one admirable friend—we'd be lost. We'd have no idea that simply sitting here, looking at your breath, focusing on the breath and getting really absorbed into it, could be the path to anything.

If you were a little kid sitting there, focusing on your breath, and your parents came along, they'd say, "What are you doing here, sitting here doing nothing?" That's what they'd say. And if that were all you knew, you'd have to drop it

because they don't see that it's a path to anything. It took the Buddha to find out that this was a genuine path that could lead all the way to a deathless happiness.

So we're indebted to him. We're indebted to all the people who have carried on this tradition, not just serving it up to us in the texts, but also training themselves in this tradition. They can give us instructions, tailor them to our needs, see where we're lacking, see what we need, and give us very particular advice. So we do depend on them for directions, but we have to do the work ourselves.

You can get the best advice. You can read the Pali Canon inside and out. We've seen many cases of this: people thoroughly versed in the Canon and yet they say crazy things. They come away not much better for it. As the Buddha said, there are people who are like the tongue that knows the taste of the soup, and other people who are like the spoon sitting in the soup. The spoon sitting in the soup can be there for years and never know the taste of the soup. You want to be like the tongue. You pick up things, but then you put them into practice. And you learn how to look after yourself with ease.

You learn how to take care of yourself and look after your state of mind. No teacher, no matter how good, can sit there and tell you all the time: "Okay, don't think about this; don't think about that; point your mind over here. Okay, that's right." There's that great Doraemon cartoon where Doraemon gets a little guardian angel for Nobita, which sits on his hand like a puppet. The guardian angel tells him precisely what to do, and he's always right. It drives Nobita crazy. He can't wait to get the thing off his hand.

It's the same with us. You don't want a teacher there, peering into your mind and telling you what you have to do all the time. But that means you have to peer into your mind and tell yourself what to do. Ajaan Fuang's image is of a teacher looking after the students, telling them what to do, giving them their exercises for the day, setting up the lesson plan in the syllabus, and making sure they carry it through. You've got to be that kind of teacher for yourself. If you've got that internal teacher, then you can go anywhere. It means you've got to be strict with yourself, but remember that the best teachers are the strict ones.

As little kids, we don't like the really strict teachers. But afterwards, we realize they were the ones who really wanted us to learn the topic. Well, you've got to be a strict teacher with yourself, and that's how you show goodwill for yourself. It's not by just being nice and saying, "Okay, greed, aversion, and delusion, I want to be nice to you." You've got to realize that these things cause you harm. They make it hard for you to look after yourself with any genuine skill.

So learn to look after yourself with ease, skillfully so that you can taste some of the higher levels of ease and well-being—the ones that are more reliable, the ones that are ultimately beyond change. That's when you're really looking after yourself with ease because those things don't need to be looked after. Once they're attained, they're there.