

From Dependence to Independence

September 4, 2015

The last book that Ajaan Lee dictated was on the topic of refuge. He didn't write his books, you know; he would dictate them. The last one he dictated was when he was in the hospital, shortly before he died. And it's essentially a book on the extent to which we're dependent on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and the extent to which we want to take that dependence and turn it into *in*dependence. After all, as the Buddha himself said, he only points out the way; we have to follow it for ourselves. But you have to trust that he knows what he's doing, where he is pointing us.

You look at the way action happens in the world, and you can see why some people would say that things are pretty chaotic, that there is no clear pattern of causality at all. That's because the pattern is so complex. You've got results of past karma coming in, you've got your present karma, and together they create a complex system. As the Buddha said, if you try to trace back all patterns of cause and effect even in just your own actions, you'd go crazy, to say nothing of all the actions that are happening in the world.

So it's good that we have someone like the Buddha who had a very large perspective on action. He could see the larger patterns. The nature of a complex system is that the complexity comes from simple patterns interacting. If you can ferret out the simple patterns, then you know what to do.

The fact that we take refuge in the Buddha and the Dhamma is directly related to that, because the Dhamma points out the pattern. If we trust that the Buddha knew what he was talking about, we can trust that we can focus all our attention on the simple elements in the pattern that he pointed out: that is, if you do skillful things, if you act on skillful intentions, the results will be good; if you act on unskillful intentions, the results are going to be bad. That sounds simple. But again, because your actions have results that happen in the present moment, and then they have results that happen over a little bit of time, and results that happen over a *long* period of time, these results can interact in complex ways.

The other drawback of the fact that things are so complex is that once you decide to start following the path, it's very easy to get discouraged. After all, in a complex system you can put lots of new energy into the system, and it just seems to disappear. You're sitting here meditating and focusing on the breath, and the mind doesn't seem to get anywhere at all. Sometimes it seems to be getting worse. Or things can be going really well, and you start getting complacent, not realizing that you've still got things coming in from the past that you don't know about.

This is where it's good to have a Sangha: people who have practiced the path before, who have some experience. They can give you warnings when you're getting complacent, and encouragement when you're getting down.

Of course, all this comes down to your willingness to take this kind of refuge and to trust that it really will direct you in the right way. But then again, what are you being asked to do? You're asked to do something honorable: Take responsibility for your own actions. An emotion comes up, and you can't just say, "Well, this is the force of the universe acting through me; I've got to give in." You are free to ask: "Is this something that I really want to follow or not?" This is, as the Buddha said, a noble path. The word *ariya*, here, can also mean honorable. It's an honorable path, where there's no room for throwing the responsibility off on other people.

As Ajaan Lee pointed out, when taking refuge, we're taking the example of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—the lessons we can learn from them—and then we try to develop their qualities within ourselves. As I've often said, they never claimed exclusive rights to those qualities. These are qualities that we all have, at least in potential form: the ability to be mindful, to be alert, to be resolute in what we do.

Now, there's a large part of the mind that would rather not make the effort, would like to dismiss the whole thing. But you can ask yourself: "What kind of part of the mind is that? Where will it lead you?" As long as we're human beings, we might as well act on the possibility that we can be honorable beings, we can be responsible beings. And it's within our power, with the help and guidance of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, to see what's skillful and what's not skillful within ourselves.

So it's a combination of being dependent and interdependent. But the general thrust is toward more and more *in*dependence in your practice. As for people who would rather not be responsible, the Buddha wasn't interested in teaching them. So ask yourself if you want to be the kind of person that the Buddha would just put aside, or the kind of person whom he would be willing to teach, who could benefit from the fact that there is this path available, that there are people who've made it available and continue to make it available. And it gives direction to your life.

Because otherwise, what is life? Things develop for a while, and then this falls apart and that falls apart. As you get older, the body starts doing things that you never thought it would do. And it doesn't ask for your permission. We like to think of life as having a meaning and a purpose, like a good plot in a story, with things coming to closure at the end. Well, things in life stop but they don't come to closure; there are lots of loose ends in life. The life of the body doesn't go anywhere much at all. It develops for a while and then it begins to deteriorate, and it

falls apart in ways that, to some extent, you can prevent but ultimately you can't. So that's the life of the body.

But the life of the mind doesn't have to go that way. You see that for a lot of people, their minds deteriorate as they get older. But there is a possibility that something in the mind doesn't deteriorate—something that actually can be developed, good qualities that can be developed, good choices that can be made all the way to the end. And with that possibility present, would you want to throw it away? Would you want to turn your back on it?

The Buddha talks about his teachings being a safe bet, in the sense that if you believe in the power of action, believe in the power of your choice, believe that there is some potential in your experience that's not just an aspect of the body, then you're inclined to act in ways that are more skillful. And there is a possibility that those skillful actions might lead to something really good. If you don't believe in that, then you throw away the possibility.

Now if it turns out that things don't go in the direction that the Buddha taught, at the very least you've given it a try. You've tried to push in the direction of what is honorable, what is noble in life. If you don't take his teachings and you just turn your back on what's honorable and noble, what good is that? We've got a noble path, and the Buddha encourages us that we all have the potential to follow it. As he said, if it weren't possible to develop skillful qualities, he wouldn't bother teaching people to develop skillful qualities. If it weren't possible to abandon unskillful qualities, he wouldn't teach us.

In other words, if something comes up in the mind, you don't have to follow its current, as they say—the current of greed, or the current of anger, or the current of delusion. There are also good currents in the mind. There is a current of goodwill, compassion; these are things you can follow. So you want to be particular about which currents you follow. You can make the choice. We develop mindfulness and alertness and concentration as we meditate here on the breath, to put us in a better and better position to make that choice. And to make it well. It's in this way that the Buddha's teachings are empowering.

But with power comes responsibility. So realize, each time you breathe in breathe out, that you have the choice. Are you going to stay with the breath? Develop your concentration? Develop your mindfulness? Or are you going to flow off someplace else? If you keep coming back to the breath, given the complexity of the mind, it might be a while before it can see the benefits that the Buddha talks about. But when they do come, they're really rewarding. And there's a greater sense of independence that comes inside.

Otherwise, if you're just subject to the ups and downs of life, your mind's happiness depends on things being good outside and gets destroyed when things are not good outside. You're slave to every little thing that comes in your ears and eyes and all your other senses. But as we've seen all around us, people can be miserable in spite of good situations and happy in

spite of bad situations. The mind does have this potential for independence, so you want to use this potential in a good way. Straighten yourself out from within.

This is the hard part of the teaching. If the Buddha could have come in and straightened you out from inside, things would be very easy. But we suffer because of our own lack of skill within, and it's from within that we have to solve the problem, to develop skill for ourselves. But the Buddha gives you the tools, points out aspects of what it's like to be inside a mind, inside a body, that you can use to your advantage. You can use the breath to your advantage; you can use your ability to choose where you focus to your advantage. He gives you the tools; he gives you the encouragement; he gives you the warnings, too. Because just as we have the power to do good, we also have the power to make a big mess of things. Delusion is a big problem in the practice, so we have to check ourselves again and again and again. If we make mistakes, be willing to admit the mistakes. That's only that way you can learn.

So from dependence to independence: That's the general direction of the path. After all, it is a path that leads to release. As the Buddha said, all of his teachings have one taste, just as the ocean has a single taste. The ocean has the taste of salt; his teachings have the taste of release. They all head to freedom. They lead us from a place of confusion, so it's good to have the help, and to be willing to accept the help that the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha offer. They offer it not to tie you down, but to end your confusion, to put you on your own two feet, so that you can walk the path to total freedom.