

Look After Your Mind with Ease

December 14, 2016

“May you look after yourself with ease.”

That’s the message of the chant we recite every night, every morning. It’s an expression of goodwill.

“Looking after yourself” refers both to your physical and to your mental well-being. Physically, may you be healthy. Or if your health is bad, may it be the sort of problem that you know how to take care of, and it doesn’t require too much effort.

But more importantly, you want to learn how to look after your mind with ease, so that the issues in the mind are not a constant struggle, and you don’t need to be depending on other people to solve your problems for you.

You want to be able to see a problem come up in the mind and also to have another part of the mind that can look at it and see what’s wrong, recognize what’s wrong, and come up with an antidote.

That requires training. And a lot of the training, a lot of looking after your mind, basically means knowing how to talk to yourself.

Like right now, we’re sitting here, getting the mind to settle down. This requires that you do a certain amount of talking to yourself. You want to do it in a way that’s skillful, that actually does bring the mind to a quieter state where you can put all that chatter aside.

But in the beginning stages, talking to the mind is necessary. Don’t think of it as an unfortunate obstacle as you’re trying to get the mind concentrated. It’s an essential part of the concentration, that you learn how to rope in the mind’s thoughts and gather them in closer and closer and closer to a sense of stillness.

So, right now, talk to yourself about the breath. How is the breath going? Is it comfortable? Where do you feel the breath right now? When you breathe in, does it feel like you’re fully nourishing your torso all the way down? Is it nourishing the nerves? Is it nourishing your eyes, your ears?

Think of the breath as the flow of energy in the body, and where it would feel good for that flow to go. Then, once it feels good, ask yourself how can you make it spread so that it suffuses the entire body with a sense of well-being.

That’s a skillful way of talking to yourself.

Then you begin to notice at what point the breath is as good as it’s going to be, and it’s good enough to settle down with. That’s when you put the inner chatter aside and just plow into the breath. But to know when that spot is: That requires that you talk to yourself, too.

So these are some skillful ways of talking to yourself to get the mind to settle down.

There are other times when you're not in formal meditation, and you need to know how to talk to the mind, especially when it's getting obsessed with something that's really not good for it. And here your internal chatter can be informed by some reflections on what the Buddha has to say about right speech.

To begin with, right speech grows out of right resolve, as we chanted just now: resolve for renunciation, resolve for non-ill will, and resolve for harmlessness.

In terms of renunciation: If you find that the mind is getting obsessed with sensual pleasures or sensual objects, ideas, desires, how do you talk to it so that it can begin to admit that you don't really need those things? Otherwise, the mind will keep saying, "I need this pleasure, I need that pleasure. I can't stand not having it."

You have to learn how to counter that justification because, after all, you don't really need these things. You can survive perfectly well without them. There are other pleasures that the mind can feed on—like the pleasure of good breathing—that will nourish it in a much more substantial way.

As for non-ill will: We don't usually think that we have ill will for ourselves, but if you find yourself thinking about giving up on the practice, you have to ask yourself: Do you really love yourself? After all, you started this practice because you realized that you were causing yourself unnecessary suffering. And this is the path out of that suffering. Why would you want to give it up? If you really loved yourself, you wouldn't think of abandoning it.

The same with the resolve on harmlessness: We don't like to think that we would harm ourselves, but we keep doing things that are really stupid because we don't really care about the consequences. We say, "Well, let the consequences take care of themselves. I'm going to do what I feel like doing right now." That's a way of harming yourself.

You've got to think down the line. As the Buddha says, "Ask yourself: What would be for my long-term welfare and happiness." When you find yourself tempted to give in to a desire to do or say or think something that you know is going to be bad for you, ask yourself, "How will I feel tomorrow from having done this?" Remember the times you were able to say No to yourself, and how much better it felt the next day.

So these are some of the lessons from right resolve, which are also lessons from right effort: knowing how you motivate yourself to keep on going.

The Buddha has a list of what he calls three "governing principles," which are different ways of motivating yourself to stick with the practice.

First is the Dhamma as a governing principle. You reflect on what a good Dhamma this is, how it's hard to find an honest Dhamma like this, and why it'd be a shame to wander away from it. In this case, you use a sense of inspiration to keep you going.

Then there's the self as a governing principle. This connects with that question I just mentioned: "Do you really love yourself?" You see that you're suffering, and a lot of the suffering comes from you. In fact, *all* the unnecessary suffering comes from your actions. So when are you going to stop? If you put it off to some other lifetime or some time later in this lifetime, it won't get easier with time. If you're going to love yourself, talk to yourself in ways that keep you going. This governing principle is based on goodwill.

The third governing principle is based on a sense of shame. The Buddha calls it "the world as a governing principle." You remind yourself that there are people in the world who can read other people's minds. Suppose they were to read your mind right now: What would they think? Wouldn't you be ashamed if they saw the unskillful thoughts that you're feeding on right now?

These are some lessons from right resolve and right effort to keep in mind as you're chatting to yourself about the practice, about where you're going in the practice, and how you want to stick with it.

Then, of course, there are the lessons from right speech itself.

As the Buddha said, the things he would talk about would have to be:

- 1) true,
- 2) beneficial, and
- 3) timely.

You can apply the same standards to your thoughts. If something comes up in the mind, ask yourself: "Is this really true?" Some parts of the mind might say, "Yes it's really true," but you have to question them: To what extent is the opposite true? What happens if you think in that opposite way? Which is better?

This is a good brake on the type of obsessive thinking that grabs on to one little detail, one little idea, and just runs with it, without any concern about where it's going to go. You have to be able to check yourself: To what extent is this thought out of balance, even if it is true? And is it really true? The mind can convince itself of the truth of all kinds of stupid things. You've got to learn how to step back and question them.

I saw a case in my own family years back when my father was going through a severe depression. I came back from Thailand to talk to him, and I found that the best approach was, one, was not to mention the B word as we were talking, and two, to let him talk.

After a couple days of talking, he sat bolt upright in bed, and said something that indicated what the real problem was—something he had been keeping to himself all along. He had been feeling guilty about his first marriage to my mother, and now he was involved in a really bad second marriage. But now he sat up in bed and said, "Well maybe if this marriage fails, too, it's not my fault."

That was what had been weighing on him for months before I was able to get back. Just learning how to question that—that the failure of another marriage would be his fault—he got well within the next three days.

So you may find that you're obsessed with something that you think is really true, some issue that weighs the mind down, but you don't see any way out of it: You've got to learn how to question it. Sometimes talking to yourself in the right way can bring these things out into the open and clear up all kinds of problems.

And of course even if things really are true, then the next question is: Are they beneficial? Is it good for you to be thinking this thought, talking to yourself in this way? Where is this going to lead? Think about the consequences of your thinking.

Finally, have a sense of time and place. When is the right time to think, when is the time not to think, when is the time to come down harsh on yourself and your internal chatter, and when is it time to be comforting?

One of the main defilements that keeps people from staying on the path is a tendency to be overcritical with themselves: "This is no good, that's no good, I might as well give up." That's what the mind is saying—that's what its defilements are saying. But those thoughts are never beneficial. Those are the times when you have to talk to yourself in a comforting way. Part of the mind will object, saying that comforting thoughts are just Pollyanna-ish ideas. But remember, Pollyanna did well. She wasn't that stupid.

You look at all the great ajaans. They were really good at encouraging themselves. They recognized their faults, that's for sure, but they also recognized that they had good potentials within them, and they found those potentials where other people might not have seen them.

After all, most of the ajaans came from really poor families in a very backward area of Thailand. They didn't have much education. People from outside looking at them would have said, "There's no chance, there's no way these people are going to gain awakening."

Yet they found that they could. They proved the rest of the world wrong.

So you, too, can prove your defilements wrong by defying them. Tell yourself, "There's got to be something good here, otherwise I wouldn't have even thought of practicing." Kearn to ferret out your good qualities.

This ability to know how to talk to yourself is how you look after your mind. And it can make all the difference in the world as to whether you'll stick with the practice or not. So be very careful about what you say to yourself. If anything that the mind is talking about begins to seem harmful, question it.

Because another thing that keeps people from making progress on the path is getting obsessed with some idea that proves to be harmful. So you have to learn how to step back from your obsessions.

This is especially important as you're developing powers of concentration because the stronger your concentration, the more you do tend to get obsessed. After all, you're supposed to be obsessed with the breath right now. But if you're alert, the basic method gives you the tools for turning that obsession into a kind of balance.

You're noticing, as the Buddha says, what you're doing to fabricate your sense of the body by the breath, what you're doing to fabricate your sense of the mind by the way you perceive things—i.e., by the images you hold in mind, the words you hold in mind as you meditate. Then you notice what you can do to calm that fabrication—in other words, to bring things into balance, so that a centered state of mind is something you can maintain with ease, something you can stick with for long periods of time and not feel out of balance.

The more you gain a sense of balance with this exercise, the more you'll be able to recognize when your own mind is getting out of balance in other areas.

So learn how to talk to yourself with ease, because that's how you look after the mind.