

Reliable Action

October 29, 2005

Those five reflections that we chanted just now are good things to reflect on every time before you meditate. As chant says, they're something good to reflect on every day. This first four, if you just took them on their own, would be pretty depressing: We're subject to aging. We're subject to illness. We're subject to death, and separation from all the things we love. If you stopped right there, it'd be depressing. But it doesn't stop there. It goes on to something else: "We are the owners of our actions, heir to our actions. Whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir." That's where there's hope: that through our actions we can find peace, through our actions we can find happiness. The problem is that if we're not careful, we can also, through our actions, find a lot of misery.

This pins everything on our own actions. And where do the actions come from? They come from the mind. This is why we meditate, so that we can gain some control over the mind, so that we can begin to trust it, rely on it.

They say that one of the essential qualities in the practice is having conviction in the Buddha's awakening, in the principle that human beings can find true happiness through their own efforts. Here's the Buddha's example, and when he talked about his own experience of awakening, he didn't say it was because he had some special in with a special god. It was through developing qualities in his mind that any human being can develop in his or hers.

In the beginning, you have to take that on faith. People who are suffering have to take any news about total happiness on faith. But it's not an unsupported faith. As the Buddha said, you can find out for yourself, and in the course of finding out for yourself whether you can rely on the Buddha, you have to turn yourself into a reliable person. Only when you can rely yourself can you know if anybody else is reliable.

That's why we're working on the mind, because as the Buddha said in one of his very short discourses—it's only two sentences long—the mind when it's not developed is very quick to reverse itself: so quick, in fact, that he couldn't even think of anything to compare it to. Here's the Buddha, who was very adept at finding apt comparisons, analogies, and similes, and when he's confronted with the quickness the mind to totally turn itself around, even he is at a loss. There's nothing so quick in human experience that you can compare it to. You seem to be sailing along really fine, no problems at all, and all of a sudden something comes out of nowhere and you're in another world. It may be remorse; it maybe anguish,

fear, whatever. It's so quick that even a lightning bolt isn't quick enough to serve as an analogy. That's why the mind is so hard to trust, and it's why we have to work on it.

This is why we develop mindfulness. Give the mind something to keep in mind, like the breath, and give it something to watch, like the breath, so that you can use your mindfulness and your alertness together right here, right where the mind and the body meet at the breath coming in, the breath going out. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. When you're in the present moment, you have an opportunity to see how the mind could change if it weren't watched. But here you're watching it. The problem, when you begin, is that it changes even while you're watching it, right in front of your eyes, and yet you miss it. You're with the breath and all of a sudden you're way off someplace else.

So as soon as you catch yourself, bring yourself back. Try to make the breath as comfortable and as inviting as possible, so that the mind would like to stay there. And sure enough, it's going to slip off again. Well, bring it back again. Try to get quicker and quicker in catching it. That way, you become you become more and more reliable as a witness of your own mind. You see precisely how the mind prepares itself to go. It's not that it changes without warning. There are advance warning signals, if you learn to look for them. But in beginning it's simply enough to make up your mind that as soon as you catch the mind wandering off, you bring it back. Don't just give in. And don't get discouraged, because this is the way it is with everybody.

Over time, you'll find that you have a sense of when the mind is ready to go and you can prevent it from wandering off, by getting it more and more firmly embedded in the breath. Try to bring all of your powers of observation to bear. Think of the breath as a whole body process. It's surrounding you as it comes in, surrounding you as it goes out, permeating everything in the body. Then try to notice which parts of the body are not getting any energy flow, where there's a sense of blockage or tension or tightness. In other words, you don't just force the mind to stay here. You also try to make it interesting to stay here. Once you get interested, you get more and more engrossed, more and more absorbed, and there is less of a need to force things.

Because you'll find that the present moment does have a lot to offer.

As you explore and experiment with this energy flow in the body, think of it coming in at the neck and going down the spine, or coming up from the soles of your feet up the spine, whichever feels better; coming in and out from the front, coming in and out from the back, through every pore of the skin. That makes the

present moment more interesting. It also gets you more and more firmly embedded here. The larger your range of awareness in the present moment, the more difficult it is to go slipping off someplace else. If you fully occupy the present, you're more likely to stay here. And as you stay here more and more continually, you begin to see the intentions in the mind—and that way you can do something about them, because these are the intentions that form the basis of your actions. In fact, the Buddha at one point says, the intention *is* the action. In other words, the quality of intention determines the result of the action

As you observe your intentions, you can get a better and better sense of which ones are skillful and which ones are not. This puts you more in control. Of course, then you deal with the issue of things that you know would be good to do but something inside you doesn't want to do them. Or things that you would like to do but you know they're going to give bad results. This is where the Buddha says you have to develop wisdom.

When we think about Buddha's wisdom, we tend to think in more abstract terms: the teachings on not-self, emptiness, or dependent co-arising. They seem very abstract but they grow out of this very issue: how you deal with the mind when you know an action is going to give bad results, and yet you want to go ahead with it anyhow. The teaching on not-self helps you to dis-identify with that desire to go ahead with it. Or on the other side, in the case of something you know you should do but you don't want to do it, you can learn how to dis-identify with that not wanting to do it. This, too, is where the teaching on not-self begins to show its worth.

The same with emptiness: As the Buddha says, you watch your states of mind and learn to compare them as to which ones are less weighed down by disturbance or suffering than others. You begin to notice a lot of the disturbance has to do with your perceptions. You could sit here thinking about how you're in the midst of this room with all these people and about the narratives of who said what today, and that perception could fill the mind with disturbances. Or you could perceive what you have here simply as physical and mental elements. That cuts through the narratives. There's a lot less disturbance.

You look at your own states of mind and you realize, "If I act in a particular way, it's going to cause disturbance. Why would I want to do that? After all, it's me who's going to be disturbed by a lot of unnecessary suffering." As you learn to appreciate states of mind that are more empty of disturbance, it gets easier and easier to act on the causes that would maintain those undisturbed states.

As for dependent co-arising, it's a way of de-personalizing the whole issue of what you want or what you don't want to do. That way, you find it easier not to be

pushed around by the desire to do things that you know are going to be harmful. You look at it and ask, “Where does this desire come from? It comes from contact, it comes from feeling, and it comes from all kinds of impersonal events. So why do you have to identify with it? Why would you want to cling to it? And who is this ‘you’ who’s doing the clinging?”

It’s right here that the Buddha’s wisdom or discernment teachings really show their worth. They help you to act in more and more skillful ways. You become more reliable. You can trust yourself more because you’ve acted in more trustworthy ways. You become a better and better judge of whether the Buddha was right, that this path does lead to the end of suffering. You won’t really know for sure until you get to the end of the first path, but you begin to see signs along the way.

There’s a really fine discourse where the Buddha says that it’s like hunting an elephant. You want to a big bull elephant to do some work for you, so you go into the forest. You come across some big elephant footprints, but that’s no guarantee that you’re on the trail of a big bull elephant because, as he said, sometimes there are dwarf females with big feet. But the footprints look likely, so you follow along. Then you begin to see scratch marks and tusk marks way high up in the trees. But again, that’s not a definite guarantee that you’re on the trail of a big bull elephant, because some females are very tall and have tusks, too. It’s only when you get to a clearing where a big bull elephant is standing—you actually see him with your eyes—that you know you’ve got the elephant you want.

It’s the same with the practice. All the work we do—not only developing the jhanas, but also seeing past lives, and seeing how karma effects the way people are born and pass away and then born again: Those are just footprints, scratch marks, tusk marks. The actual elephant is when you discover that this practice really does lead to the deathless. Then you know for sure that the Buddha was awakened. You’ve followed the path that he taught and it leads you to place where you’re totally relieved from suffering.

This is how the principle of karma contains the seeds of hope, because it can lead you to a realization of a dimension in the mind that’s not touched by aging, illness, death, or separation. That’s the proof.

Fortunately, though, you don’t have to wait to the end of the path to gain its benefits. You begin to see in yourself a sense of ease that comes from meditation, a sense of ease that comes from practicing the precepts, and having that really important sense of ease when you learn how to rely on yourself. You can trust yourself. You set your mind on something and you stick with it.

One of the scariest things in life is if you see that you can't trust yourself to act in your own best interests, to say nothing of the interests of other people. That's scary. That's a real source of insecurity. But this practice is one that makes you a more reliable person, a more trustworthy person. And in following it, you find what's really reliable and really trustworthy in life.

That right there is something to really to live for, to work for, something that—unlike so many other things you live for and work for in life—is not going to disappoint.