

May I Look After Myself with Ease

August 16, 2009

Sukhi attanam pariharami: “May I look after myself with ease.” We chant that every evening, chant it every morning. It’s a reflection that we have to provide for our happiness, we have to provide for our well-being, both on the physical level and on the level of the mind. So as we say that, “May I look after myself with ease,” on one level we’re expressing the wish that we’ll be able to find food, clothing, shelter, medicine, find good people to associate with, so that simply getting along in the world won’t be difficult.

But when you look at the world, what does the world have to offer? It’s not necessarily an easy place to live. There’s no guarantee that the job you have now will stay with you all the time, the health of the body will stay with you at all times. These things are going to change.

Which means that we have to look after ourselves on another level if we want to find real well-being, and that means looking after the mind. We have to take very good care of the mind because it’s going to be our refuge. When the Buddha says, “The self is its own refuge,” he’s referring primarily to the mind. We have to create good qualities of the mind so that the mind doesn’t get frazzled and frayed, doesn’t become its own worst enemy. You want the mind to be its own best friend.

This is one of the reasons why we practice the Dhamma. As we practice the Dhamma, it’s like providing food, clothing, shelter, and medicine for the mind. The practice of the precepts is like clothes for the mind. The function of clothing is to protect us from the vagaries of the climate but also to cover up, as the Buddha said, the parts of the body that cause shame. In the same way, the mind has its parts that cause shame: our unskillful attitudes, our unskillful intentions. So as you practice virtue, you’re learning how to say No to those things, even though they are in the mind. The things you would like to do or say that would harm yourself or harm other people: You learn how to say No. So at the very least you don’t present an unattractive appearance to the people around you. You keep your words and your deeds at what’s called normalcy.

But it’s not just a matter of words and deeds. After all, who’s making the decisions? Who’s giving the orders? The mind. So already you’re training the mind to learn how to say No to some of its unskillful habits. In that way, you’re protecting yourself at the very least from the external bad karma that would come from giving in to those habits.

As for meditation or the practice of concentration, that’s food and shelter for the mind. As the Buddha said, this is your *vihara-dhamma*, the attitude that you take as the place where you want to dwell, so that you’re not dwelling on issues outside: “This person says that; that person says this.” If you dwell on that, it’s an awful dwelling. Look at the world around you, all the horrible things that people do and say. If your mind dwells on those things all the time,

you're going to suffer. So you have to give the mind a good place to stay where it's not dwelling there.

So you dwell on the breath. Allow the breath to come in and out in a way that feels really good. The breath is the factor that shapes your sensation of the body. If it weren't for the breath, you wouldn't even be aware of the body. The way you breathe is going to have a huge effect on how you sense the body. And that, of course, will have a major impact on how the mind feels, the attitude you're in. So you think about the breath, think about staying with the breath, make up your mind that this is really where you want to stay. This is going to be your dwelling, regardless of whatever else comes up.

While you're beginning to focus on the breath, it's obvious that other thoughts will come into the mind, but you don't go with them. You stay right there with the breath. It's like the sounds of the crickets outside right now. If you wanted to have absolute silence before you could concentrate, you'd have to go out and kill all the crickets. You have to realize, okay, the crickets are there, but your breath is right here. The breath is not being destroyed by the crickets. You can breathe in, breathe out, and be aware of the breath at the same time that the sound of the crickets is in the background.

Well, have the same attitude toward the various thoughts that come up in your mind. They're like the sound of the crickets. If you go trying to chase them down, you'll be doing it for the whole hour. It's like that game, Whack-a-Mole. A mole comes out of this hole and you try to whack it with a little mallet. Then another one comes out of another hole and you whack that with the mallet. It never ends. You end up getting all tired. The moles are having all the fun, while you tire yourself out. So remind yourself: Even though there are thoughts in the mind, the breath is still here. It's not destroyed by the thoughts.

Just make this your dwelling. This is where you're going to take your stance. And make it a nice dwelling: Make the breath comfortable. After all, "breath" here doesn't mean just the in-and-out breath but also the many levels of breath energy in the body. There's the breath energy that flows through the nerves, flows through the blood vessels. It's a very subtle form of in-and-out energy that's coordinated with the in-and-out breathing. There's also a very still kind of bright breath that, if you pay very close attention, fills the body. It doesn't move at all. It's just very still.

The important level to focus on is the one that flows through the body. So as you find a comfortable rhythm for the breathing, start noticing: How are you feeling this energy in the other parts of your body? Start making a survey, say, down around the navel. Watch that part of the body for a while and see how it feels as you breathe in, how it feels as you breathe out. If you notice any tension or tightness there, allow it to relax. If there's any sense of blockage, think of the breath dissolving the blockage away.

And again, find whatever rhythm of breathing feels good for that part of the body. If you want, you can think of breath energy coming in and out of the body right there, so that you

don't have to pull it in from anywhere else. There already is breath energy there, it's simply a matter of allowing it to connect. Allow there to be a sense of fullness as the muscles in the blood vessels in that part of the body are allowed to relax, so that you're not squeezing the blood and the breath energy out of that part. Allow it to be fully nourished.

This is where you get to that other aspect of the meditation. It's not just a dwelling but it's also food for the mind. It feels good, and you can feed on that sense of well-being.

When that part of the body feels good, then you move up, say, to the solar plexus and do the same there. From the solar plexus you can go to the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head; then down the spine, out the legs; back to the back of the neck and then go down the shoulders and out the arms.

This way, you gain a sense of how the breathing feels in the different parts of the body and you allow it to be comfortable. Your home with the breath becomes a good place to stay and it has an appeal that it wouldn't have had otherwise. If you try to be mindful of the breath but it's uncomfortable, you'll find it hard to stay there. The mind will resist. It'll keep looking for other places to go, and it'll latch on to thoughts that are whirling around.

But if the breath feels good, you have that sense of fullness. Think of the fullness going out and saturating every little cell in your body: out to the tips of the fingers, out to the tips of the toes. Everything gets full, and the fullness penetrates deeper and deeper into the core of your body. The parts that may not always seem to get enough breath energy: Let them have all the breath energy they need. Into the middle of the brain, into the middle of the heart, deep into the throat: Let the whole body be saturated with that sense of fullness and ease.

There will be a sense that the thoughts running through the head fade further and further into the background, so that they really are like the noise of the crickets. They don't really disturb you at all. They can even grow silent, because you're not feeding them. When you pay attention to them: That's when you feed them, you keep them going. But as you decide, "I don't need to pay attention to these things," they're like stray dogs and cats that you used to feed all the time. Of course, they come and swarm all over your yard. But when there's no more food, after a while they go away. They may cause a little trouble first before they go because they're upset that they're not getting fed the way they used to. But you just have to be persistent and patient, and after a while you find that they go away.

So here you are with a good shelter, a comfortable home with good food. That sense of ease and rapture is very nourishing. But there will be the part of the mind that says, "Wait a minute. I've got other things I've got to think about, other things I've got to worry about." This is where you need medicine for the mind.

This is where the discernment comes in, as you gain a sense of what really is important in life. To what extent can you straighten out the world? You can straighten it out a little bit, but there's never any closure, never any completion out there. The work of the world never gets

done. When people retire, it's not because their work is done, it's simply because they can't work anymore. But the work goes on; other people have to take it up.

And there are a lot of things that should be done that never get done because there's nobody to do them. Yet the world still goes on. In the meantime, people who spend all their time focusing on how much they want to straighten out the world, straighten out other people, end up getting frazzled, all pulled out of shape, and generally miserable.

This is not to say that we shouldn't try to make the world a good place, simply that that task comes secondary in importance. Of first importance is that you've got to look after your mind—because if the mind gets strung out, then it really can't do a good job either inside or out. You've got to develop right view so that you have a sense of what really is important. As we chanted just now, having respect for concentration is an important principle. It may not seem like much, simply having the mind still. It may seem like you're lazy or irresponsible. But you're not. You're looking after the mind. You're taking care of this most important of the various tools that you have.

So this discernment is medicine for all the misunderstandings by which the mind makes itself ill, gives rise to greed, gives rise to anger and aversion, jealousy, feelings of being mistreated and wronged. Because what happens is that you tend to feed on those things. If you don't have good food inside, you tend to feed on garbage that's going to make you sick. So you have to see clearly that your genuine food has to come from within. As for what other people have to say, you don't have to feed on that. If you do feed on it, you're like, as Ajaan Lee says, someone who feeds on things that other people have spit out. They've chewed on it a bit and spit it out on the ground. You bend over and pick it up to you feed on it, then you get sick, and you blame it on them. The real problem is the fact that you're feeding on what other people do, what other people say. Of course, that's going to make you sick.

So, in addition to learning how to concentrate, you need to have respect for concentration. This is part of the path to true happiness. It has to be developed. To understand that is an important part of right view. You've got to protect this, learn how to have this sense of being centered in the breath, in the body, not only while you're sitting here but also as you go through the rest of the day: as you go to work, as you drive, as you talk with people. It's like having a mobile home. You carry this sense of well-being around with you. You're fed inside and you have this sense of shelter inside wherever you are. That puts you in a position where you can see when the mind is leaving that sense of shelter and going out to pick up scraps and other things that people spit out, thinking it has food. In other words, the practice helps sharpen your discernment as to when the mind is actually creating suffering for itself.

We complain that the world is making us suffer, but we're the ones who pick up on the things from the world and bring them into our inner home and weigh ourselves down. Yet if you don't go out there picking up germs, and if, at the same time, you build up resistance inside, then you're not going to get sick. The resistance inside is the right understanding that

realizes the true cause of suffering comes from within. It's our craving and clinging and ignorance: That's what we have to work on. A- The knowledge that sees these things—that understands, that there is suffering, that it's caused by craving, and that by developing the path we put an end to it: That's what builds up your resistance. That's medicine for the mind.

So when you complain about the fact the world is making you suffer, remember: The world isn't making you suffer, it's just doing its own thing. You're the one who's dragging the germs in and feeding on spoiled food, infected food. Of course, you're going to get sick.

So try to understand the basic principles of how to look after the mind with ease. Live a life of virtue in which you cause no harm to anyone else or to yourself: That's clothing for the mind. The meditation provides food, shelter, and medicine: the food and shelter of concentration, the medicine of discernment.

Then you find that you can live in the world without making yourself suffer over the world. The ways of the world—material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain—won't be able to make inroads on the heart or mind. You're not worried about your food, clothing, shelter, and medicine outside, because you've got it in here. In that way, you can simply watch the world as it revolves around, but not get spun out along with it.

One of the principles of the Buddha's teachings is what he calls *adhicitta*, "the heightened mind." It's like lifting your mind up above these things so that you can watch the whirling around of the world and see, "Ah, this is the way the human world is. Anyone who tries to find true happiness there is going to be disappointed."

So you observe your responsibilities with regard to the world as a way of developing good qualities of the mind. But as for your true well-being, that has to come from within. Never lose sight of that point. At the same time, try to develop the skills that allow you to find well-being. When the Buddha was making the statement about finding well-being inside, he just wasn't promoting an empty platitude. There are skills you develop that allow you to find the clothing, food, shelter, and medicine that the mind needs.

That's what it means to look after yourself with ease.