

On Your Own Two Feet

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One of the basic principles in the practice is that you have to be your own mainstay. *Attāhi attano nātho*, the self is its own mainstay, your own refuge. But as you quickly find out, you have to make yourself into something that's reliable, that you can take as a mainstay and a refuge. It's not automatic.

This is why we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to begin with. They give us examples of how to train ourselves, so that we can eventually stand on our own two feet.

And particularly so that we can gain a sense of what's right and wrong, what should be believed and what shouldn't be believed. And here, as the Buddha said in his discourse to the Kalamas, on the one hand you can't take outside texts as your authority or religious traditions, but on the other hand, you also can't take your intuitions, your own sense of right and wrong, your own preferences as your authority. You have to test things to see what actually works and what doesn't work. This means that you have to put the mind in a position where it really can test things and pass reliable judgment on the results.

This is why the Buddha started his instructions to Rahula, when he was going to teach Rahula how to meditate, by saying, "You have to make your mind like the earth... like water... like the wind... like fire." But of these four elements, the earth is probably the most graphic in the sense that the earth doesn't react, doesn't move at all. Disgusting things are thrown on the earth and the earth doesn't shrink away. You can pour perfume on the earth and the earth doesn't get refreshed or excited by it. The earth is just earth. You've got to learn how to develop that quality in your own mind.

And notice that the Buddha's meditation instructions don't stop there. He doesn't say to just be equanimous and non-reactive and accepting of everything. You develop the quality of non-reactivity so that you can observe reliably, and then you start your experiments. As when we're working with the breath: The calmer you can make the mind, the more easily you'll be able to observe what actually is healthy breathing and what's unhealthy breathing; what's energizing and what kind of breathing drains your energy; what's relaxing, what gives rise to tension.

So this ability to make the mind still and observant, and also to experiment: They have to go hand-in-hand. Because as you get better with dealing with the breath, the mind will be able to settle down and be even more solid. And the more solid you are, the more you'll be able to observe the subtleties of the breath. So it's not a Catch-22, it's simply that these two faculties of the mind—the ability to watch things and observe and come to reliable conclusions; and your

inventiveness in trying out different ways to experiment with the breath and the way you focus on the breath—go hand-in-hand. They develop together.

After all, a lot of things are going to come up in the meditation. You may find yourself remembering things that people told you about what you should do when you meditate or what's a good meditation or what's not a good meditation—or whether there even is such a thing as a good or bad meditation. You have to put a little question mark against what you've remembered. The same thing with intuitions that come up within the mind, that you have to do this or you should do that. Sometimes they're right and sometimes they're wrong. One of the most dangerous things you can do in meditation is to simply believe every impulse that comes into the mind.

I saw many examples in Thailand of people who actually developed some kinds of psychic powers as they were meditating: the ability to read other people's minds, to foresee future events, to remember their own past lives. But as it turned out, the information they were getting was not one hundred percent reliable. And the reliable things actually made it worse, "Because this worked out, and that came true, then gee, everything that must come up in the mind in meditation must be true." That's what they thought. And they ended up getting further and further away from reality.

This is why the Buddha said that heedfulness is the most important quality, one, to develop skillfulness in the mind, and two, to bring the practice to its consummation. To begin with, heedfulness keeps reminding us that this is why we're here. If we don't train the mind, we're creating dangers for ourselves. That's our basic motivation to practice and to actually work on the mind to begin with—realizing that if we don't do this practice, nobody else is going to do it for us. And if we don't do it *now*, it's not going to get easier as time goes on. But heedfulness is also what keeps us on the path. It's a little question mark that you put next to things. Whatever comes up in the mind, whatever you hear from other people: You have to test it.

We read stories of Ajaan Mun with devas coming to visit him and, in the early years of his practice, giving him instructions on how to do walking meditation, how to do sitting meditation. It wasn't the case that he believed everything they said or even necessarily believed that these really were devas coming into his mind. But he'd take the information from the visions and treat it as that: simply as information, recommendations for the practice. And then he'd test them. He found out that some things worked and some things didn't.

So the testing is what made all the difference and kept him on the path.

This is probably one of the most important qualities you can build into the mind: the ability to be a reliable investigator, a reliable reader of your experiments. Which is why this quality of the imperturbable mind is really important—the attitude of mind that can step back a little bit and just watch things, to observe: "What am I doing? What are the results?"

This is also why mindfulness and alertness are the two main qualities you need in order to develop this sense of the observer. With mindfulness, you keep things in mind. If you're going

to watch how A gives rise to B, you have to be really sure that A actually is giving rise to B. That means you have to be there all the time, from the time you did A, the action, to the time that you received B, the result. You can't just skip in and then run away for a while and then come back. Because who knows? Maybe C, D, E and F came in the middle and had their influence. So you've got to be here all the time to watch and to be alert. What are you doing? And when the results come, what do you do with them?

Sometimes really good results come and then we get carried away, in which case our defilements have hijacked our insights. Kee Nanayon keeps stressing this point again and again, that whatever insight comes up, you have to watch what happens next in the mind, and then what happens next and next. In other words, the observer has to stay functioning all the time, so that you can see the full ramifications of what you've done and what's happened as a result.

So when you make your mind like earth, it's not just making it like a clod of dirt. You're making it solid, you're making it steady, so that you can rely on it more and more—so that whatever comes up, either inside or outside, you can check, and then check again and check again, until you start getting results that really are reliable, you see they really do make a difference in the mind, and the difference is good. It really is an improvement.

I noticed when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang that he had a certain skeptical cast to his mind. He didn't quickly or easily believe things that people said. And I found out later that he'd applied the same quality to his own mind. He had to learn to be a little bit skeptical about whatever came up: whatever visions, whatever information arose in his mind in the course of his meditation. He had to keep looking at it with a skeptical eye, because otherwise it's very easy to get taken in.

And so that quality of skepticism is not an unfriendly skepticism, it's just a desire to keep watching to make sure. That's one of your main protections on the path. That gets you started on the path and it keeps you on the path, on your own two feet, all the way to the end.