

## *To Depend on Yourself*

*February 5, 2017*

The Buddha looked for two qualities in a student. One is that the student be truthful, particularly around his or her actions, and the second was that the student be observant, again around actions. When you're practicing on your own, these are the qualities you want to look for in yourself or try to develop in yourself, because your honesty with yourself is the only thing that saves you. It's very easy to get deluded and not see what's going on in your life, not really see what you're doing or how your actions are related to the results, so you have to be especially watchful.

The Buddha's instructions to Rahula are really helpful here. Pay careful attention to your intentions before you act, before you speak, before you think. I know a lot of people who think that's a big trouble. I've heard people say, "Why so much attention on little things like this? Why don't we just open up to the large oneness around us and let it do its work, do its magic through us?" But that's being irresponsible, and what it does is that it covers up a lot of what you're doing and a lot of the connections between cause and effect. If you want to see true freedom, you have to realize that you have the freedom of choice right now to do something skillful or something unskillful, and if you take advantage of that freedom of choice, you get closer and closer to genuine freedom.

So that's the incentive, but it does mean that it might slow you down somewhat to think about what you're going to say, think about what you're going to do, and even think about what you're going to think about. In other words, when you see that the mind is going in a particular direction, ask yourself: Is this really worth following? Because you do have that choice.

Like right now, as you're meditating: You can stay with the breath. If something comes up and you decide to take a little break from the breath and follow this other thing, or just cut it off, that's your choice right now. But if you want to develop powers of concentration, you have to learn how to cut things off. The important thing is that you realize you do have choices. Even though we're all supposed to be sitting here meditating, no one's enforcing it. We don't have a meditation policeman going around, checking everybody's minds. So it's up to you to make the choice. The more you exercise that freedom of choice well, the more you're going to learn.

Then you look at your actions as you're doing them, seeing what results you're getting from them. If you didn't anticipate any harm but you discover you actually

are causing harm, then stop. When the action is done, look at the long-term results, and if you're there continually with what's going on in the mind, you have a better chance of seeing the connection between cause and effect.

The purpose of all this is for your well-being, because your actions are going to be determining the level of happiness or misery in your life, so you want to be on top of them. Don't do things or say things just for the sake of doing or saying. Try to be a little bit more careful.

There's that Peanuts comic strip where Lucy complains: If you go around watching everything you say, you never get much said. But if they're going to be harmful things, why say them to begin with? If you take more care with your words, people will listen to them with more care. If you're more careful about your actions, people will begin to notice after a while. But regardless of whether they notice or not, the fact is that you're taking more care with an area that you really are responsible for. This is the news you should be watching: What are you planning to do? What are you doing? What are the results of what you've done?

With the news outside, you never know. You always have to ask yourself, "Who wants me to believe this and why?" With the Buddha, though, you've already got the answer. He wants you to learn how to put an end to your own suffering, and if you realize that that's probably the best thing you could ask from anybody, then you take on the duties that he talks about in terms of the four noble truths. Try to understand or comprehend what exactly you're suffering from. Try to find the cause so that you can abandon it. Do this by developing the factors of the path, which start out with the desire to be skillful.

Right view and right resolve actually help each other along. Once you have right view about actions and right view about suffering, then the natural resolve is going to be, "Let's put an end to that suffering. Let's learn how to be more skillful." But right resolve itself is what basically shapes right view. After all, the Buddha was speaking about ways of putting an end to suffering, and two of the forms of right resolve are goodwill and compassion. That goodwill and compassion will focus you on the problem of how to put an end to suffering, which points you to right view. So those two discernment factors help each other along. As you exercise them together, they get stronger and stronger.

So as Ajaan Suwat used to say, if you don't believe anybody, at least believe the Buddha, because his intentions are totally compassionate. There are lots of people in the world who want to tell us how to live our lives. The question again has to be, why? The Buddha only asks that people practice what he did. That, he said, was the best way of showing their respect for him, even though he wasn't necessarily

going to be getting any benefit out of your practice. It shows how totally selfless his intention was in teaching the Dhamma.

So here's a good Dhamma, and it keeps focusing you on what you can do. It's putting the power in your hands. A lot of us, when we find we have that kind of power in our hands, realizing that it really will make a difference what we do and say and think, want to abdicate that power to somebody else. But how can you get anybody to be more skillful for you? They can be skillful in their own actions, but they can't make you more skillful. People who have genuine goodwill for you tell you, "Okay, you've got to be responsible for your choices."

This is why we meditate, so that we can see what our choices are doing as they're being formed. If the mind's not quiet, a lot of these impulses come in and we hardly know what's going on and we're basically being taken for a ride. But if you're on top of things—right there at the breath, because that's where you're going to be seeing things very clearly—you realize that you really do have choices, they really do matter, and you can learn from your past mistakes, because that's the only way we're going to get through delusion. A lot of us would like to have a foolproof path that we can totally trust without having to make any mistakes, but there is no such thing. Recognizing our mistakes is how we learn. It's painful to make a mistake, but you use that pain as incentive not to make that mistake again.

So the path asks a lot of you, but it also gives you a lot in return. It gives you the power of freedom of choice, and as I said, if you explore that freedom, you begin to realize it opens up to a bigger freedom inside. That's because the freedom we have to choose our actions is right next to a much larger freedom that's totally unconditioned. It has nothing to do with time or place or culture or who you are or where you're from, which is why it's a really reliable Dhamma. It's why it's been passed along through many different cultures, many different generations. In some cases, it gets changed, and the changes go off someplace else, but there are also people who really want to stick with what the Buddha taught and really give it a fair try.

So do your best to learn what he taught as it applies to the problems in your life and take whatever guidance it can give you to how you can understand them. The more you bring those two qualities of truthfulness and being observant to the practice, the more you become your own refuge. Even with a really good teacher, you're constantly being thrown back on yourself. A teacher can help you with only so much. The real work is yours, but it's good work and it gives good results. So look at your actions again and again and again, and do your best to learn from them.

When the Buddha talks about being mindful, he says mindfulness means remembering what was done and said long ago. That can mean what other people did and said, and also what you've done and said. What other people have done and said: You want to remember the Dhamma. You want to remember the example they gave when they acted in line with the Dhamma. But also what you've done and said. What did you do? What did you say? What were the results? Remember that, because that kind of knowledge can be applied again and again and again as you refine it, as you observe it more and more.

So get used to being right here, and exercising those qualities of honesty, truthfulness, and trying to be quick to observe, because they're the foundations of everything else. They're your way of guaranteeing that you don't go off the path.