

Inner Refuge

June 9, 2009

As we're born into this world, we develop a habit of seeing that pleasure and pain come from outside. So when pain comes, we look outside for help. If our parents are there, we learn to depend on them. But the sad truth is that we can depend on them only up to a certain extent. As we get older, we begin to realize that we have to depend on ourselves to at least some extent—although we still have that habit of looking outside.

It's only when we realize that the world is as the chant just now said—it's full of aging, illness, death, and separation, it's a world in which these things are normal—that we take that fifth contemplation or fifth reflection really seriously: that we live in dependence on our actions. We have to learn how to depend on ourselves to take refuge inside. That's why we meditate: to develop these qualities inside, qualities that we can depend on.

In the beginning, it's discouraging. We make up our minds we're going to stay with the , and it seems like we have many minds all of a sudden and they're all running off in different directions. Well, it's not all of a sudden. It's the way the mind has been all along. We've got lots of different voices, lots of different ideas, lots of different conflicting opinions jostling around inside here all the time.

So no wonder we don't think we can depend on ourselves, that we want to look outside. But the solution is not looking outside. It's learning how to develop the skillful qualities we have inside. We all have skillful qualities to some extent: We have a certain amount of virtue, a certain amount of concentration and discernment. Our refuge lies in developing these things to the point where we really can depend on them, when they're all-around.

As Ajaan Mun once said, you have to make your practice in the shape of a circle. Keep going around and around and around in a circle and it never ends. In other words, you want your virtue to be like a circle all-around, you want your concentration to be like a circle that goes all around you, and your discernment all around you on all sides. This means you have to make your practice timeless, something you do all the time. It also means looking inward all the time. Always stay in touch with what the mind is doing, what it's up to.

As you're sitting here focused on the breath, this means trying to catch it before it leaves. Accept the fact that it's going to have a tendency to leave the breath. That's normal. Be prepared for it. Don't be surprised. But being prepared means that you learn how to look for the warning signs that the mind is about to slip off. It's getting loose and shaky. It might be getting bored with the breath and it starts gazing around to see if there's something else that might be more interesting.

Like an inchworm that's come to the edge of a leaf: Its back feet are on the leaf and its front feet are feeling out off the edge of the leaf to see, "Maybe there's something else out

there.” As soon as another leaf comes by, blown by the wind or whatever, it latches on and jumps up to the other leaf. So be prepared for that to happen and see what you can do to stop it before it’s gone on to that other leaf.

One way of preventing this is to try to see how interesting the breath can be. There’s a lot going on in the breath. It’s the energy flow throughout the body. It’s not just air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s an energy flow that accompanies the breathing process—which actually *is* the breathing process. It can involve the entire nervous system. Parts of the body will be blocked off, but you can make a survey to see: Which parts are blocked off? And which ones are in on the breathing?

If you have trouble telling, you just go through the body and relax the muscles: Start with the fingers and go up the hands, the wrists, the arms, up to the shoulders. Start then with the feet, go up the legs, the pelvis, the back, the neck, the head, very systematically relaxing the different muscles that you sense there. Wherever there’s a sense of tension anywhere as you go through the body, just let it relax, relax, relax.

You’ll find that the breath can then flow a lot more easily throughout the whole body. This is one way of getting absorbed in the present moment, to see that this simple process of breathing can be made soothing, energizing. It can be really healing for the body and for the mind as well. You begin to realize that you have friends in here, that the qualities of the body can be used in a way, can be manipulated inside in a way that’s comforting for the mind, absorbing for the mind. It becomes easier and easier to stay here consistently.

Ultimately, you find yourself breathing with a sense of fullness in the body. You’re not forcing things too much. The breath comes in, goes out, it tends to get more shallow and quicker as the breath energy needs in the body are met. You even get to the point where it seems to stop and you can just stay there with that sense of fullness. This is the help that concentration can give you.

But the concentration on its own is not enough. You have to have the discernment to realize that once the concentration has given you a sense of ease and well-being, you’re in a good position to look around at the mind’s normal preoccupations, its normal understandings of things, and start calling them into question. There’s a process the Buddha calls cross-questioning. It’s like examining and cross-examining yourself. You’re like a witness on the stand. You ask yourself as you notice the mind slipping off, “Where are you going? What do you want? What do you expect to get from this?”

Ordinarily, the mind is used to slipping out without anybody in charge at all. It slips out the back door, like a child slipping out of the house without asking permission from its parents or telling its parents where it’s going. It just goes. But as your mindfulness gets stronger, and you feel more settled and stable here in the present moment, you’re in a better position to ask, “Where are you going? What do you want?”

As you become more and more honest with yourself about this, you begin to see that a lot of the mind's wanderings are pretty aimless or based on all kinds of misunderstandings. It's in putting up a little blockade like this that you begin to see its real behavior and the real motivation for its behavior. Basically, the mind wants happiness—that's why it does anything at all. But you can look at its movements and say, "Well, is it really going to gain any happiness from wandering out like that?"

This question is easier to ask when you've had a taste of well-being, the sense of rapture and fullness that can come when the mind settles down, so that you're not so hungry. If the gatekeeper is hungry, too, then when the mind wants to slip out, the gatekeeper will say, "Well, go out, but bring some bread back for me." But if the gatekeeper is well-fed, he's not going to believe this wandering part of the mind so easily, he's not going to be in cahoots with that wandering mind. So it's this combination of concentration and discernment that helps to counteract the tendency of the mind to go out and look for its gratification, to look for its true happiness outside.

This is one of the reasons why we suffer so much in life: We think that true happiness can be found outside—in other people, certain situations, certain relationships. But the relationships can never provide that genuine refuge that we can give one hundred percent trust to. Separation is a normal part of life. Disappointments outside are a normal part of life.

This is why that reflection that we had just now is only part of the story. In the original passage the Buddha has us reflect not only on the fact that "I am subject to aging, I am subject to illness, death, separation." From there he says to go on to all living beings—men, women, lay, ordained, wherever they are: They're all subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation.

On the one hand, this reflection is strangely comforting. Because a lot of the pain that comes when we've suffered a loss is, "Why is this happening to *me*?" It helps take some of the sting away when you realize, "Well, this happens to everybody." It's not as if the universe is focused on making you suffer. It's simply the way things are. And we've been living in denial of that fact.

But at the same time, that reflection on the universality of these things should give rise to a sense of *samvega*, a sense of terror or dismay that this is the way human life is. There must be something *better*. That gives us the impetus to practice, to see if we can find that something better inside.

We have the seeds for that something better, but they need to be nourished, they need to be cultivated to the point where we really can depend on them. We depend on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to some extent as examples: This is how happiness is found, this is how people have found it in the past and other people are finding it in the present moment.

But for genuine refuge, we have to take the qualities that they develop—mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—and build them up inside. That's when the refuge

becomes an inner refuge, something we can really depend on. And when we have this inner refuge, we find that we can depend on ourselves.

Because it's often the case that when we're disappointed outside, it's not just the case that we simply suffer. We can also lash out at what we don't like—out of disappointment, out of a sense of being treated unjustly. That often creates more problems, just more bad karma.

So this practice we do is not only for our own good in the sense of finding a reliable sense of comfort inside, but also it means that we can become more reliable in our actions—the things we do and say and think. In that way, regardless of what's happening outside, we can behave in a responsible manner, a harmless manner.

So meditation is a gift. It's an expression of goodwill. Whether we consciously spread thoughts of goodwill to other beings or not, the fact that we're training our mind is a sign of goodwill for ourselves and that we wish well to other people: that we're going to take responsibility for our minds, we're going to learn how to develop reliable qualities inside. The benefits that come from that are not only felt inside but they spread around outside as well.