

Stand Your Ground

October 7, 2015

Every day we chant in which we take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge. What does that mean? It doesn't mean that we're hoping for the Buddha to come and help us. The Buddha entered nibbana a long time ago. As for the Sangha, they may not be around when we need them. What we need is a refuge inside that goes with us everywhere we go, and that's what the Buddha meant when he talked about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. In other words, we take the Buddha, his Dhamma, and the Noble Sangha as examples of how to live, how to look after our minds. Then we internalize those lessons. We put them into practice. We take the skills that they've mastered and we try to master them ourselves.

We start with the skills dealing with the breath, the skills in developing mindfulness and concentration, trying to develop a spot in the breath energy in the body where the breath feels good going in, feels good going out. The quality of the breath energy in the body feels good—everything is flowing smoothly. As you get to know the energy in the body, you'll begin to realize that certain spots are like crossroads in the energy, where the channels of the energy come together and then spread out again, such as the spots that Ajaan Lee mentions in his book, such as the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, the tip of the sternum, or just above the navel. Focus on one of those and try to keep that spot going well.

If anything happens to the breath energy in that spot, you know something has happened either in the body or in the mind. You can use that as your barometer to tell you that there's danger. Things have gotten tight suddenly in that spot. Either something is out of balance in the body, or greed, aversion, and delusion have arisen in the mind. The first reaction should be to open it up again—breathe in a way that opens the spot.

Then look at your mind. What happened in the mind? What did you just do? Or what did somebody else do that you reacted to? What can you do to make sure you don't carry the defilement around? Either the greed or the aversion or the delusion—how do you not carry that around?

Otherwise, things happen in the course of the day and your mind is like a garbage pail. People throw all kinds of garbage in, and you come home with nothing but garbage inside. With the first person you meet, you just pour the garbage out. That's not a good way to live. A much better way is to think of garbage pail as having a big hole in the bottom, so that everything just goes right

through, right through. In other words, you know what people are saying, you know what they're doing, but you don't take that as something to focus on. You keep breathing easily, breathing easily, no matter what. That opens the bottom of the garbage pail, so that you're not carrying things around.

The thing is, it's not just what other people do; it's also what *you* do that can cause you to lose your spot, lose your awareness, lose your mindfulness of the spot. Two big issues have to do with the precepts and with restraint. When you break any of the precepts, it's like a wound in the mind. Then when you sit down to meditate, either you have an open wound, which you're very sensitive about—it's very uncomfortable to settle down in the present because you think about the harm you did—or it can be a wound around which a lot of scar tissue develops. It doesn't heal properly; you've just got a knot of scar tissue. That stands for denial—you go into denial about what you've done.

Either way, it's not good for getting the mind to settle down in the present and see itself, because when we hit the wound, the mind recoils. If you run into scar tissue, you don't really know what's there, because it's all hardened.

So for the mind to be open to itself—particularly for your mindfulness to be able to remember things for long periods of time—you want to make sure that your precepts are solid as you go through the day. Of course, practicing the precepts gives you practice in mindfulness and alertness. You have to keep the precepts in mind and be alert to what you're doing, to see if what you're doing might go against the precepts. Those qualities then help your meditation.

So it's important to see that the precepts are there as part of the meditation. They're not just something that happened to get picked up after Buddhism came from the Buddha. They're an important part of training the mind, for developing the qualities you need for the mind to be able to look after itself.

It's the same with restraint. Restraint is of two types. One is restraint of your mouth—what you say as you go through the day. You want to make sure that it's true, beneficial, and timely. You went through all the trouble to be a human being with a human mouth that can express things, so take care of your mouth. Use it to express things that are truthful, beneficial, and timely. As Ajaan Lee used to say, bow down to your mouth every day. You've got this mouth that can do all kinds of good things, so use it to do good things. Even when you're trying to be humorous, make sure that your humor is true and beneficial. Principles of right speech don't mean that you have to be stern and serious all the time, but they do require you to be careful about how you express your humor. That's one kind of restraint.

The other kind of restraint is in what you bring in—through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Be careful about how you look at things, how you listen to things, because the *how* is what makes all the difference. There are things out there that can very easily incite passion or anger, but it's possible to look at them in ways that don't incite passion, don't incite anger. As with the human body: There are some bodies that are really attractive, if you look at them in the normal way. But if you start thinking about what's inside the body, you apply a different perception that'll cut through a lot of the passion that you might otherwise feel.

So you want to look at *how* you're looking at things, *how* you're listening, *who's* doing the looking, *who's* doing the listening. Is greed doing the looking? Is anger doing the listening? You want to take your ears and eyes back from them, so that what you look at, what you listen to doesn't destroy your sense of the center here in the body. Or how you look, how you listen doesn't destroy these things.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a house. When you have a house, you know when to open the windows and doors and when to close them, who to let in who not to let in. You also know what you should be sending out into the neighborhood and what you should keep inside the house. For most of us, our minds are not like houses, they're like bus stations. All kinds of things can happen at the bus station, because anybody can come in, anybody can go out. Drugs are being sold in the bathroom. Who knows what's going on in there. You want to chase everybody out and then let in only the things that'll be helpful to you, and—from that point on—send out only the things that'll be helpful to the world.

This helps you maintain the sense of the center that needs to be protected, needs to have a balance. As you maintain that center, it gives you grounding as you go through the day. You're coming from a position of strength, a position of solidity. That makes it a lot easier to do the right thing, think the right thing, say the right thing, because you have the right feeling, a sense of well-being inside.

Most of the time when we're easily angered, it's because we don't feel good inside. We've been breathing in a way that's not helpful. Nobody has forced us to breathe in a way that's not helpful. It's just that we haven't paid attention to our breathing. That gets us irritated, and the irritation spreads out from there. So if you can maintain a sense of having a comfortable center inside, your sensitive point inside, then you're cared for regardless of whatever else is going on. You find that that sensitive point actually becomes a position of strength. This is true not only as we go through life but as life ends.

You need to have a sense of a firm foundation when the mind realizes that it can't stay with the body any more. In Thailand, when they have funerals they'll

usually print some books, and there will be a little biography of the people who have passed away. When you read the biographies, you see that they tend to follow the same pattern. The person was born, grew up, got educated, had a family life, children, maybe grandchildren, and then after a while started to have a little disease here, a disease there. At first, the doctors were able to take care of it, but as things got more and more serious, there came a point where the doctors couldn't help anymore. And then the person died.

The question that that raises is: What are you going to do when the doctors can't help anymore? Who are you going to look to then? If you've developed a refuge inside, that becomes your source of strength. It's the only thing you can depend on then, i.e., the qualities you've developed in the mind, the ability to keep your mind centered regardless of what's going on around you.

Like the skill we've been developing here as we meditate: Thoughts come up in the mind, but you don't have to pay them any attention. One of the best ways of dealing with distractions is not try to chase the distractions down and erase them; it's just to leave them be but not get interested. After a while, they'll go away.

At the point when you realize that you're going to be leaving the body, lots of things are going to come rushing into the mind. So you have to be able to say, "No, I'm not going to go for those things." Things that you did in the past; incidents in your life will appear to you; places where you may go after you die may appear to you—sometimes good, sometimes not so good. You have to remember that you have the choice—you don't have to with whatever appears first. So when events in your life come up that you feel regret for, you don't have to get pulled down in regret. Or if some very unpleasant place appears, you don't have to go there. You have the choice: You're going to stay here in the present moment and not go running out after whatever appears.

So this skill that we're developing here is a useful skill—the skill of having your place here in the present moment, feeling at home in the present moment, looking after your home in the present moment. Even when the times comes that you can't focus on the breath anymore because you're leaving the body, at least you've got this home in the present moment in the mind, with your awareness in the present moment. That becomes your refuge.

That's what's meant by taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as refuge: practicing these skills so that you can depend on yourself.

So look after this skill. It can help you through life; it can help you through death; it can help you as you stay; it can help you as you go. It's hard to find any other skill like this in the world. So make sure you care for it. Look after your spot inside; look after the breath inside. That's what keeps you anchored in the present

moment; that's what gives you solidity as you go through life, and solidity even when you have to leave the body. Because your sense of being here—totally in the present: That's what's going to give you the strength to withstand anything negative that appears or seems to be ready to pull you away. You can stand your ground and come out unscathed.