

Taking Care of Yourself

In developing lovingkindness we have to learn, first and foremost, to develop lovingkindness for ourselves. We have to learn to take action that's an expression of lovingkindness for ourselves. We have to learn to take good care of ourselves.

In any given day, we're faced with countless decisions about what to do, what actions to take. In cultivating lovingkindness, we seek to make decisions that are in accord with our wish to know true happiness.

It might not be that easy. The person most of us have the hardest time relating to, being kind to, is ourselves. When it comes to taking action informed by lovingkindness, there isn't anybody who presents quite the same challenge.

Typically, unskillful intention motivates the actions that we take with regard to ourselves. Self-aversion frequently influences the way we treat ourselves. Most of us aren't connected to feelings of lovingkindness for ourselves. As a result, we're not inclined to take actions that are good for us, that are in our best interests. We're not inclined to take good care of ourselves.

In teaching students to cultivate lovingkindness, I suggest they purposefully take one action every day that's an expression of lovingkindness for themselves. It doesn't have to be a big

action. It might involve making a healthy dinner, or going for a walk, or exercising, or reading. I remind the students to use the five-step process. Before acting, see what your mind is like. Develop skillful intention, the intention to act out of lovingkindness for yourself. While acting, be heedful, make sure you're staying to your intention. After acting, see the benefits, take joy. Sometimes when explaining the exercise, I say, "This will probably be the hardest assignment I ever give you." I say it jokingly. But, in fact, most students find the activity challenging. They struggle with it. Often times, students follow the assignment for a couple of days and then drop it. It's nearly impossible for them to stick with it.

Most students, in trying this exercise, are entering uncharted territory. They're taking action that's radically different from the kind they normally take. They're attempting to adopt an altogether different attitude, an attitude of lovingkindness.

It's often a difficult exercise. But if students put some effort into it, things begin to shift. Even if they take a heartfelt action just once or twice during the week, things begin to shift. They begin to move in the right direction. They begin to learn to take care of themselves.

If you're going to find a reliable, lasting happiness, you're going to have to learn to take actions that are in support of the wish you have to be happy. It seems obvious. But unfortunately, many of us don't know how to do this. For this reason, developing lovingkindness for yourself should be a priority. It should be a primary theme in your dharma practice.

You have to resolve to develop lovingkindness for yourself.

As you approach your life you have to learn to ask:

What do I have to do in order to fulfill my wish to be happy?

What actions can I take that are an expression of lovingkindness for myself?

In studying your actions you have to learn to ask:

Is this action motivated by lovingkindness for myself?

Is this action in alignment with my wish to know true happiness?

You have to grasp the importance of developing lovingkindness for yourself. As you foster this understanding, you'll deepen your resolve to take action that's in support of your wish to be happy. Explaining the criticalness of taking care of ourselves, the Buddha offers the parable of the two acrobats. One acrobat sits atop a bamboo pole. The other acrobat sits on his shoulders. The acrobat sitting on the pole says to the acrobat sitting on his shoulders: "I'll look after you, and you look after me, and we'll be alright." The acrobat sitting on his shoulders disagrees. She says: "No. I'll look after myself. And you should look after yourself. Then we'll be okay." The Buddha sides with her. The Buddha says you should look after yourself. If you maintain your center, keep your balance, you'll be able to support others. If however you don't keep your balance, you'll bring others down. If you take care of yourself, the Buddha says, you'll be able to take care of each other. "When watching after oneself," he declares, "one watches after others." In the Buddha's scheme, this is a basic law. Take care of yourself properly and you'll be able to take care of others. You have to take care of yourself. That's your first priority. You have to take actions that are a reflection of lovingkindness for yourself. If you do that, you'll put yourself in position to help others. If you treat yourself with kindness, you'll be equipped to treat others with kindness. You'll be able to love others.

Think about relationships you've had with people who didn't love themselves, didn't take care of themselves. Think about this kind of person. Is this the kind of person who's going to be able to support you? Is this the kind of person from whom you want to receive help? Is this the kind of person you'd want for a dharma teacher? For a therapist? What's it like to have an

interaction with somebody who doesn't act in a loving, compassionate way toward him or herself? What's it like to interact with somebody who's riddled with self-loathing? What's it like to have a relationship with somebody who's chronically unhappy?

The bottom line is you can't have a loving relationship with another person unless you have a loving relationship with yourself. It's just not possible.

As we've noted, if a parent is making an effort to take care of herself, it will have a positive effect on her kids. On the other hand, if the parent isn't doing what she needs to do to take care of herself, if she isn't taking actions that are an expression of lovingkindness for herself, her children will suffer. It's hard to imagine a worse scenario for a child than to have a parent who's unhappy, who's besieged with self-loathing. It's a set up for a lot of pain.

As we've indicated, a parent who's attending to her dharma practice, who's developing skillful qualities, is in good position to help her kids. She's taking care of herself, and consequently, she's going to be able to take care of her kids.

People often object when it's suggested they develop lovingkindness for themselves. Some people believe it's a "selfish" pursuit. Some people think it's "wrong." But the Buddha's teachings certainly don't suggest this. It's helpful to remember that, according to the Buddha, we're as deserving of our lovingkindness as anybody else.

There are any number of arguments that people put forth in an attempt to explain why it's "wrong" to practice lovingkindness for themselves. These arguments, in general, are manifestations of resistance. Most of us resist, to some degree, taking action that supports our wish to be happy. The notion that we should act in the service of taking care of ourselves runs counter to our habitual patterns of belief and behavior. In many ways, at the core of our

resistance is the simple fact that it's hard to change. In taking action toward ourselves that's informed by lovingkindness and compassion we're effecting change. And change is hard.

As always, we have to be heedful: we have to recognize our resistance. We have to question it. Is it useful? If we're going to learn to take care of ourselves, if we're going to change, we have to work skillfully with our resistance.

As you make an effort to take action in support of your wish to be happy, you'll experience resistance. That's okay, as long as you work skillfully with it, as long as you remember to look at it as a doorway. Meeting resistance and learning from it is an integral part of the process of bringing about change.

We can change. If we develop the skills the Buddha teaches, there's no doubt we can change. We can learn to take good care of ourselves.

One of the most important ways that we cultivate lovingkindness for ourselves is by practicing breath meditation, following the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness of breathing. The first task in being mindful of the breath is finding a place to put our attention, a place where the breath feels good. In selecting a place where the breath is comfortable, we learn to take care of ourselves. When I first learned to meditate, I wasn't given this key instruction. I was told to focus on the breath at a specific spot and stay with that spot no matter what. Every time you meditate, I was told, be mindful of that same spot. The problem was, that spot wasn't always comfortable. The spot I used was located in the abdomen, but there were many times when I sat down to meditate when there were unpleasant sensations in that region of my body. There were times, for instance, when I was stricken with indigestion. Diligent student that I was, I stayed with that spot. What I was doing, of course, was reinforcing a pattern of putting myself in painful situations, not taking good care of myself. Fortunately, I learned another way of doing

things: I learned to put my attention on the breath at a place where the breath was comfortable, easeful. If I typically felt the breath in my abdomen, but on a certain day I had a stomach ache, I shifted and felt the breath at my nostrils. Practicing in this way, I learned to care for myself. It may seem like a small thing. But small things, as we've noted, often yield big results. For me, learning to choose a comfortable place at which to feel the breath led to a significant shift in the way I related to my experience, the way I made decisions about what actions to take as I travelled the roads of my householder's life.

In the phase of breath meditation known as "evaluation," we continue the process, we build a further understanding of what's good for us, what we need to do to take care of ourselves. In this step, we take a close look at the breath, we scrutinize every breath, in-breath and out-breath; we discern where in the breath there's dis-ease, where there's ease. Observing the breath, we learn to recognize dis-ease and ease, to differentiate between the two. This isn't a skill many of us have learned. We've never learned to cultivate this kind of sensitivity, this kind of insight. In evaluating the breath, we learn to be sensitive to our experience. We learn to comprehend what's good for us.

Gradually, as we evaluate the breath, we focus our attention on the easeful part of the breath. We allow the easeful breath quality to unfold, expand. We cultivate the ease. We let ourselves breathe in the most easeful, pleasurable way. We let ourselves reside in this easeful place.

In cultivating the easeful breath, in putting our mind on the easeful breath, we choose to act toward ourselves in a way that's loving, compassionate. We take good care of ourselves.

As for myself, it's been through practicing breath meditation in the manner described that I've been able to make the most strides in learning to take actions that are in my best interests,

loving, compassionate actions. I've learned to choose what's good for me. Developing the ability to discern the ease in the breath, and, in turn, to put my attention on the ease, has been pivotal in my journey.

As I've developed the ability to choose to abide in an easeful, pleasurable breath, I've developed the ability to choose what's good for me in other areas of my life. I've begun to incline toward acting in a more loving way toward myself in other parts of my life, in work, in relationship, and so on.

It wasn't something at which I had much, if any, skill. I didn't know how to take actions that were an expression of lovingkindness for myself. It wasn't my habit. I worked at the same job for 20 years. It wasn't a terrible job, but I didn't particularly enjoy it, didn't find significant fulfillment in it. It certainly wasn't something I should've been doing. Working at this job, I wasn't in harmony with my wish to find true happiness. But I just kept doing it. I didn't know any better.

Most of us don't know how to take good care of ourselves. We put ourselves in all kinds of situations that aren't good for us. We engage in work that isn't good for us. We get involved in relationships that aren't good for us. We develop habits that aren't good for us. We take lots of actions that aren't a reflection of lovingkindness for ourselves.

But we can change. We can learn to develop lovingkindness for ourselves. And one of the most important ways we can learn to take good care of ourselves is by practicing mindfulness of breathing, by learning to build an easeful, pleasurable refuge in the breath.

As we develop the quality of lovingkindness, we learn to change the habits of a lifetime. We learn to look at our actions with a discerning eye, the same way we learn to look at the breath. We learn to take actions motivated by lovingkindness for ourselves.

In developing lovingkindness, we learn to take care of ourselves. We learn to love ourselves.

Like it or not, it's something we've got to do.

-from *The Skill of Living*

Copyright©Peter Doobinin 2013