

## 10

**Self-Reliance**

Therefore, O Ananda, take the Self as a lamp;  
 Take the Self as a refuge.  
 Hold fast as a refuge to the truth.  
 Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourself.  
 Work out your own salvation with diligence.

*The Buddha* (Maha-Parinibbhana-Sutta)

It is one of the beautiful compensations of life,  
 That no man can sincerely help another,  
 Without helping himself.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Having traversed the Path of Peace to its destination, the pioneer explorer, the Buddha, advised another explorer Ananda who was eagerly seeking the same destination, thus: “Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourself. Work out your own salvation with diligence”. In this gem of advice, the key message is *self-reliance*. In any effort we take to keep ourselves on the right track, moving in the right direction, ensuring progress all the way to our destination, we should pay heed to the Buddha’s advice on self-reliance, which he emphasized throughout his teachings. All-round existential self-reliance is something we need to develop, not partially or half-heartedly but with the utmost determination, our full commitment and our iron will.

For purposes of discussing self-reliance within the context of this book we may think of the Noble Eightfold Path as being comprised of two stages of development, that is mundane (worldly) and supra-mundane (higher spiritual) development. The latter relates to aspects such as meditation and is well documented in available existing literature and also elsewhere in this book. The former relates to aspects of ordinary day-to-day living such as livelihood, and seems to be inadequately addressed elsewhere and was therefore chosen for treatment in this chapter.

The importance of developing self-reliance in mundane aspects is easy to recognize. That is, if our minds are cluttered and pre-occupied with worry, anxiety and other unhealthy emotions over ordinary issues of daily living, imposed by various types of mundane dependencies, will we have any space left in our minds for higher spiritual development under the Noble Eightfold Path? The answer to that question, which is an obvious “No”, explains why many ‘Buddhists’ do not have the time, energy, determination and patience to practice Dhamma. Thus self-reliance at the mundane level becomes a pre-requisite for any higher spiritual development. The solution therefore, is for us to first develop the maximum possible self-reliance in every conceivable aspect of ordinary day-to-day living. That alone will alleviate or eradicate unhealthy emotions that stand in the way of the realization of our higher aspirations.

In passing, let’s note that it is easier for monks to move onto higher spiritual practice than it is for lay people. This is because factors (such as family responsibilities, ownership problems and employment issues) which are the breeding grounds of obstacles (dependency) for laypersons are by design not present in the traditional monastic life. So it is incumbent upon us laity to work harder than the monks to enter (and maybe even to maintain the momentum as we tread) the truly spiritual part of the Noble Eightfold Path.

It is harder to develop self-reliance in ordinary day-to-day living, than in higher spiritual living, because the former entails first *unlearning* and then learning, whereas the latter needs only learning. In mundane daily living we invariably are dependent on others or on worldly things, as a result of erroneous conditioning throughout our lifetime. This is where we need to work hard to discard old habits of dependency and gradually let habits of self-reliance take their place. In the following paragraphs we will first discuss the salient points about self-reliance in general. Then we will proceed to examine distinct areas of self-reliance in which we may have problems and what we can do about them.

As a first point, let’s recognize that dependency is rooted in the conditioned erroneous view that other people or external things are responsible for one’s happiness and wellbeing. Such an attitude in adults, apart from being an obstacle to spiritual progress by creating dependency, is the main cause of all interpersonal problems in relationships, as it invariably results in blame and interference in others’ affairs, and is compounded when others have the same attitude. The diametrically opposite view, which is in touch with reality and

healthy, is “I am responsible for my happiness and well-being.” That is the Dhamma approach and the self-reliant way. It gets one moving on the Noble Eightfold Path. A person living according to that rational view, if capable of providing guidance to others, may provide such guidance *if and when asked for*, yet the actual work has to be done by the seeker.

Second, let's note that self-reliance is not something we can produce on demand when a crisis hits us. It has to be nurtured gradually over time and developed with patience, so when a crisis occurs, we are already equipped to cope, with calmness of mind. We should learn to change a tire as soon as we acquire a car, not when we have a flat tire on the highway at 2 am in frigid winter weather. The same applies for self-reliance.

Third, it would be useful to recognize that a great aid to self-reliance is a life that is simple because simplicity implies fewer things in one's life to depend on. Hence the built-in simplicity of a monk's life.

Fourth, the only true and lasting antidote for loneliness is not the presence of other people, but self-reliance.

As a last point let's note that while self-reliance is something we develop for ourselves, and that implies a lack of dependency on others (adults), we can in reverse compassionately help others to be independent of *us*. Since the other person's self-reliance, which in this case we have facilitated, helps that person to accelerate his/her own journey on the Noble Eightfold Path, our action can only be considered as good karma that will bring merit to ourselves.

Now let's examine some distinct aspects of self-reliance. For practical purposes we may view our dependencies as falling in three areas: (1) *physical* (2) *livelihood*, and (3) *mental* dependencies. We will proceed to examine each type in some detail. But before we do that let's state one important but obvious point: by self-reliance we do not imply the ability always do the work by oneself. To get work done by someone else but recompense with money earned by oneself through 'right livelihood' is self-reliance, not dependency. Thus for 25-year old Tom to pay for the unexpected plumbing repair in his house by working overtime is self-reliance, whereas requesting his mother to pay the bill would obviously be a dependency on the mother!

## PHYSICAL SELF-RELIANCE

The most important aspect here is what one does to maintain one's body in optimum health. Instead of living an unhealthy lifestyle and being dependent regularly on the healthcare system including the family doctor, medications, and caregivers at home, we can help ourselves enormously through regular exercise, proper nutrition and by doing our utmost to manage our daily stresses. The cost of healthy exercise is almost negligible. Activities such as a daily brisk walk for 30 minutes, a swim or bicycling are within the reach of all of us. So is healthy eating that entails a balanced diet comprised of grain products, vegetables, milk products and sources of protein. And a healthy body weight is achieved easily with proper exercise and nutrition. The cumulative benefit we receive from these inexpensive practices of preventive healthcare is far greater than that received from any medication, medical help or any combination of these.

All the above is not to say that we can prevent all illness, decay and death. The law of impermanence still prevails, but while alive, we can live each day with the optimum health available to each one of us. That is, without being a burden on externals, and with the utmost self-reliance enabling our minds to focus on the important task of achieving Sublime Peace rather than spending mental energies on aches and pains. However, if we do have physical maladies already, then we still can provide much help for the rest of the physical self, with practices of self-reliance.

Besides taking care of the health of our bodies, we need to look at a long array of physical things and activities on which we are dependent, the non-availability of which has the potential to cripple us. A simple example is the total dependency of one spouse on another for meals or other mundane household affairs. Another common example is the continuing dependency of children grown to adulthood, on their parents for things that were only appropriate when they were younger.

## SELF-RELIANCE FOR LIVELIHOOD

Lack of self-reliance can create a potential 'time-bomb', particularly in difficult economic times. This is apparent when a breadwinner is dependent on one employer, on one type of career, or on dwindling resources for one's sustenance. It is also present in situations in which one spouse is totally or largely dependent on the other for essentials. Eventualities such as serious illness, injury or death of the provider or simply unjust behavior of the provider may leave the dependent person

helpless and distressed. In some such cases of dependency there is also the potential that the dependent person may have to live in subjection to, and at the mercy of, the provider, which in turn would lead to distress for the dependent person.

In all these cases the solution is to prepare oneself for eventualities by developing self-reliance. Thus, as an example take the case of the spouse who is dependent on the other for daily sustenance. No one can predict what the future holds for any relationship – the earning spouse may lose the job, there can be incapacitation due to an accident and so on. Therefore it is wise for the dependent spouse to take steps to develop the *potential* to earn a living, if not actual earning just now, for example by enrolling in a part-time study program in a subject area where the opportunities for earning a livelihood are good.

#### MENTAL SELF-RELIANCE

Because the ultimate driver of all modes of dependency and self-reliance is the mind, it is very important that we understand what mental self-reliance means. This understanding may be obtained by examining some of the more obvious manifestations of mental self-reliance as discussed below.

- (a) *Emotional self-reliance.* When we were infants and children it made sense to be emotionally dependent on others (especially parents), but this is not valid in the adult world. Nevertheless, there are many of us who have been unable to grow out of that dependency. One common example of an erroneous belief, which causes this emotional dependency to continue, is that an adult *needs* love and praise from others to feel good. Another common mistaken belief is that it is terrible to be alone. Here we need to ponder over these erroneous views and replace them with the corresponding right views – this can be achieved most effectively via Insight Meditation.

Another example of emotional dependency is to look for sympathy from others. “It must be awful to have gone through what you have. But I am sure all this will pass soon”. We may feel temporarily relieved upon hearing such “poor you!” statements but very likely will sink into greater distress when the next sympathy is long in coming or we find that the expression of sympathy failed to help solve our present problem. The Dhamma way is to take the problem in own hands, act to correct things where we can and equally important, learn to accept what we cannot change. We just

don’t need others’ sympathy. In fact dependency on sympathy can worsen things in the long run.

- (b) *Decision-Making.* Sometimes some of us depend on others such as family members and friends to think and make decisions for us. We stand to benefit in the long term by weaning out that dependency. We have a mind of our own and we need to keep it sharpened all the time by using it. “Use it or lose it!”
- (c) *Spiritual Self-reliance.* As emphasized by the Buddha right through his teachings (see quote from Kalama sutta in Chapter 2 and the quotation at the start of this chapter), it is very important to watch our attachments to, and dependencies on, spiritual teachings and teachers. Examples are gurus<sup>37</sup> (especially the charismatic ones) and other teachers, retreats and other group-based practices and communication media.

It may be said that an All-Enlightened-Being (e.g., the Buddha or an Arahant) is totally self-reliant. A person less developed than an Arahant will need guidance from well-screened outside sources, the degree being determined by how far the person has progressed on the Path, a beginner needing the greatest help. However, it is very important that we constantly watch ourselves and discontinue this temporary help when the adjunct tends to become a chronic dependency.

No guru can save us from our existential distress. Even a Buddha cannot. A wise teacher (who has understood and walked the path ahead of us) can only show us how. For our liberation, we have to understand and traverse the path ourselves.

- (d) *Relationships.* A relationship is comprised of two parties, both of which are subject to the law of impermanence. When we are not mindful of the fact of impermanence, relationships lead to distress. In practice this manifests in the form of rigid adherence (clinging) to views such as:
- One partner’s definition of the relationship
  - How the *other* party should behave
  - The belief that those relational rules are absolute reality, when in fact they are all human-made (worldly).

<sup>37</sup> *Guru* (a word from Hinduism, now in fairly common use in the West), means ‘A guide or teacher in philosophical or spiritual matters’.

The way out of the distress is to let go of the rigid adherence, or clinging, to these individual views and in the end the view of the relationship in total.

A general strategy for developing self-reliance is as follows. For each area ask “On whom or on what external thing am I dependent and for what purpose?” and write down the answer on paper. Next dig deep into your mental resources and obtain specific answers to the question “What can I do to eliminate these dependencies (to be self-reliant)?” and again write the answers. Then, most importantly, proceed without postponement to DO what has been identified as needing to be done – this *doing*, as always, is the most crucial part of our self-development.

For example, a sedentary person now bent on self-improvement recognizes a chronic dependency on doctors and medications for ordinary day-to-day health and to feel good. This person has identified that, to be self-reliant in this aspect he/she must (1) walk 30 minutes per day and (2) enroll in a nutrition course at the community college to learn the latest facts on healthy nutrition and (3) potentially benefit from a certain stress management book that helped a friend. By the end of the following week, this person has enrolled in the nutrition course, has bought the book on stress management, read it and begun to practice effective stress management techniques and exercises five days a week. It will not be long before this person has moved from dependency on the doctor and medications to self-reliance for ordinary day-to-day well-being – a giant step forward.

Another example, is the person who, dependent for his/her daily living on unstable employment, tries one’s own business on a part-time basis as a fallback, so that if the need arises, the person is better prepared to adjust.

In this chapter we examined how self-reliance can be developed in our mundane day-to-day existence, as a prerequisite for higher spiritual endeavors. Once we are past that hurdle, we can develop self-reliance for onward progress on the Path, which is addressed in later chapters (to the extent allowed by the objective of the present book).

If we are to undertake a long journey to a wonderful destination on another continent, we will obviously need a suitable means of transportation to take us to that destination. On a spiritual scale, the Noble Eightfold Path entails such a journey, the destination being Sublime Peace. Here our means of transportation is self-reliance. There is no other way to reach the destination.

### Chapter Insights and Highlights

- (1) The key to freedom, both worldly and beyond, is self-reliance. In the words of the Buddha, “Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourself. Work out your own salvation with diligence”.
- (2) The unhealthy attribute of dependency is rooted in the conditioned erroneous view that other people or external things are responsible for one’s happiness and wellbeing.
- (3) The healthy attribute of self-reliance is based on the diametrically opposite and reality-based view that each person is responsible for his or her own happiness and wellbeing.
- (4) Self-reliance needs to be nurtured gradually over time and with patience so when a crisis hits us, we are ready to face it with the necessary skills.
- (5) For practical purposes the self-reliance we need to develop may be considered as falling into three areas, i.e., physical, livelihood and mental.
- (6) Again for practical purposes, mental self-reliance may in turn be sub-divided into a number of categories such as emotional self-reliance, decision-making, relationships and spiritual self-reliance.
- (7) We can take stock of our current dependencies and work out a strategy for gradual elimination of them. That action will help enormously towards reaching the goal of inner peace in our lives.