

Independent in the Dharma

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Sometimes it's good to know what the goal of this practice is all about. It's kind of like, then you know what direction you're going. If you're sent out into the world and are told, just walk. Walk anywhere. Just walk. There's an important place you have to go, but just... I'm not going to tell you what it is. Just walk.

And maybe you begin that walk in the middle of a desert, and you look around like, there's a lot of choices. Where am I supposed to go? And so you walk for many days just directly west, and it just seems to be deserts forever. Maybe it wasn't this way. There's nothing here. And then you walk another place.

And, you know, eventually, maybe after a few years, you discover, oh, I was supposed to go south-southwest. And then I found this great place. This is where I was supposed to be. I feel home here. This is right. Couldn't someone have told me to go where I was going?

You know, because there was a mountain peak I could have seen. And just if someone said, there, that mountain peak, go there. I would have gone right away. Anyway, so there's a time and place to have it, know what the goal of this practice is. So I'm going to tell you today, there's many names for that goal, but here's one. The Buddha described it as becoming independent in the *Dhamma*, becoming independent in the practice, becoming independent in the truth.

And so that's where we're going. But don't think that you have to go there quickly. If you're, but for example, I really benefited tremendously from having teachers and had practice communities I practiced in. And I couldn't have practiced as much as I did without that. But the time came at various points where I had to clearly become independent of all that.

I had to make my own choices. I had to... stand up for myself. I had to find how to be a certain kind of self-reliant. I asked a Zen teacher, kind of in that whole process, I practiced many years

ago, when does, in Zen, when does someone become authorized to be a Zen teacher? You know, back then it was called *Dharma* transmission.

When does someone... And the teacher answered, when they can stand on their own two feet. You know, maybe, I don't know what I was expecting to hear from him, but maybe I was expecting to hear some great stories of some wonderful spiritual experience a person had, or some wonderful states of mind, or some wonderful process of letting go, or some wonderful deep penetration of the nature of the teachings, of reality. Right? Nope, just being able to stand on your own two feet.

The Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi said something like, the point of the practice is to, if you're standing, just stand in that place. If you're sitting, just sit in that place. Can that be enough? So I don't know what enough is, but this idea of becoming independent in the *Dhamma*, to understand something about this practice, that you practice it, but you know enough of what it's about. You know for yourself why you're doing it, what it's for, and kind of where you're going so that you don't need it.

You can be your own teacher. So the idea of becoming independent in the *Dhamma* means becoming your own teacher, that that's where we're going. So if that's the orientation, if that's the understanding, perhaps that's something we slowly... we slowly grow into, meaning we start in small ways to do that. And then we do it more. We do it more.

And so, for example, if you're a beginning meditator, no one can tell you exactly what your meditation posture should be. And so you have to become independent. Right? In finding that you might, a teacher might recommend postures and might give you ideas of what to do and different things you can do. So you might be helpful to hear that.

But sooner or later, you're the only person to really know what is right for you. And so you have to read your body, your posture, the effect. And so after a while, you become, you feel, oh, I can find my own posture in meditation now. I don't need to follow anybody else's instructions anymore. I become independent in knowing how to find a good way of meditating, good posture for meditation.

And then you have teachers like, you know, crazy teachers like me who give a lot of instruction. Oh my God. So you have to deal with all the instructions. And so at some point you start maybe simply and you do some of the instructions and follow it and you understand what instructions work for you and what doesn't work and when certain instructions work and when some instructions don't work.

And after a while you learn how to practice what is right for you. That if you're sick, that you

can figure out how to practice. You know, maybe the posture is laying in bed and you know that's the posture that's right given how sick you are. It's possible that it's a time when you're, maybe there's a lot of emotional energy in you and it's hard to be with it. So the right way to practice is to do walking meditation, to walk fast, back and forth.

And the walking somehow holds the strong emotions better than sitting. It's possible that you're really calm and settled and you've had a good day. You did something that was very focusing. And you say, oh, I think I'm really ready now to do really mindfulness or breathing. Just kind of hone in.

That's be really good. Given what I'm feeling now, that would be the most aligned, the most connecting, the most valuable way of sitting now. So after a while, in all the different ups and downs and changes of a human life, we learned how to know, okay, now I think this is what I need. This is what I need. Right now I need loving-kindness meditation.

And that's what's useful for me. Now I've done enough loving-kindness. I think I'm overdoing it. I think I need something else. Now I need to do something, you know, really kind of be with my difficulties, my emotional difficulties that I was using loving-kindness to kind of get more settled and more useful and accepting.

But now that I've done that, now it's time for me to bring my attention to my anger, my grief, whatever it might be. So, as we learn more and more, the idea is that there's a switch, switching that goes from taking the instructions, taking ideas, taking suggestions from outside of you, to being able to know for yourself what you need and how to take care of it. And to become independent in the *Dhamma* is to have the ability to find your own way within any circumstance that you're going to be in, at least most. That no matter the challenge, no matter the joy, no matter the situation, you're able to find, you know, okay, this is what I can practice here.

No matter, like one of the things that has helped me to become independent in *Dhamma*, in the *Dhamma*, is that I've been practicing mindfulness in so many different circumstances, so many different situations in my life. And I've seen so much the rewards, the benefits of being practicing mindfulness that I have this unshakable confidence in the value of being mindful. Even if I don't know what to do, even if I don't know what's the right practice, even if I don't know, understand what's going on, I have unshakable confidence that I don't have to know if I can at least be mindful. Just be present. And so I become in a certain way independent of the *Dhamma*, just simply for that reason.

I always know that mindfulness is the way to bring to any situation I'm in. And that makes

me, to that degree, independent in this life that we live. So that's the North Star. That's the direction we're going. So if that's the direction we're going, how does that translate?

How does that... orient you when you practice day by day. How does this help you understand what you're doing? You're not expected to do this overnight, but just to know that that's the direction you're going, does that shift and change the path you take? Does that shift and change the direction you're going?

Or does that kind of inform you that's something about how you practice? And... what does that highlight for you, what does that reveal for you, what does that show you about yourself, if that's the goal. So I offer this to you as the, that it's good to have some sense of where you're going, and one of the places we're going is to become independent in the *Dhamma*, independent in this life in a certain kind of *dharmic*, spiritual way, and maybe that's... is useful for you to take into account as you find your way in this practice. So, thank you.