

Emotional independence or emotional alienation?

We have heard this at least once in our lives, when someone, usually angry or frustrated, cries out, saying, “I don’t need anyone. I’m capable of being happy by myself.” If we said this as a negative reaction, we are likely to fall into emotional alienation, that is, cutting ourselves off from what is good in us, so that we end up privately nursing our wounds and putting up a falsely positive front.

The problem with such a reaction is that we might make summary judgements, tarring everyone else with the same sticky brush. Then we are really alienated, incapable of love, and fearing even to believe in friendship. So we end up as cynics, waiting to point out the next self-prophesized fault or pain episode in ourselves or in anyone.

The universal law of change, however, has a silver lining: everyone changes. We too will change—for the better. Surely, we would rather change for the better, for greater happiness. We can only begin this positive inner change when we have learned not to own pain.¹ This simply means that we should not identify with any pain, that is, by avoiding the use of “I,” “me” and “mine” towards a painful experience or memory.

Once the self-healing and growth starts, we build up our emotional independence, too. Simply put, no matter what happens, when we are truly emotionally independent, we are not only able to cope with any situation, but we consistently see a bright rainbow and feel the fresh air enlivening us after the storm clouds have departed.

The path to emotional independence begins with unconditional self-acceptance. We simply need to constantly remind ourselves, “I accept myself just as I am.” This is a powerful mantra against those who have been telling us, loudly or tacitly, that we are no good. Or, we can keep telling ourselves, “I’m a lotus leaf standing well above the muddy waters. Rain-drops fall on me but they simply run off.” If we have difficulties visualizing, then sit by a lotus or water-lily pond and reflect on this.

The Buddha taught the five-element meditation to his own son, Rāhula.² The five elements (which are the dynamic states of physical existence) are earth, water, fire, wind and space. These reflections are very simple and effective so that they are a favourite in our children meditation classes.

When we see raw or rich earth (“raw,” such as in a farm or on a building site, and “rich,” such as the grounds of a vegetable or flower garden), spend a few minutes to reflect on it thus: People throw all kind of rubbish on the earth, and step all over it; trees and plants grow in it, and so on. The earth does not complain, but compassionately accepts, nourishes and supports all. May I be like the earth, compassionate and supportive of everyone.

The next time we sit by a lake or have a chance to look at a calm sea, reflect on water, thus: Water gives us life, quenches our thirst; we wash and clean ourselves with it,

¹ See “Don’t own the pain,” Inspirations 2010 No 4: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/100203-Dont-own-the-pain.pdf>

² See **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62.13-17/1:423 f) = SD 3.11 <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/3.11-Maha-Rahulovada-S-m062-piya.pdf>

and so on. May I be like water, giving life to others, making them happy, and clearing my mind of all negative thoughts.

Fire is an easy reflection subject. When you notice a flame (say, a candle light) or some bright light, reflect thus: May I be like fire: it gives us warmth, it cooks our food, gives us light, and burns away impurities. May I be like fire, I am burning away all negative thoughts and memories; I am putting warmth and light into my life and the lives of those I love and care for. May I bring radiant joy wherever I go.

The wind element can be detected by way of the movement of curtains and mobiles indoors, by the waving leaves and dancing flowers in the open, and we can feel its cool gentle touch. The wind is our breath, our life: May I be like the wind, giving life and comfort to others. May I treasure those whom I love like my own breath; for they breathe, too.

Space fills our bodily cavities: the mouth, the chest, the belly, and we fill the space around us with our own shape, just as it is. Space separates us from those we love, and yet connects us no matter how vast it is. May I be like space, allowing my loved ones, my children, friends, colleagues, and people I meet, to live their lives and I fully accept them like the space that embraces them just as they are.

We should choose our favourite reflection and use it as pillow talk, that is, the last thing we silently and joyfully remind ourselves with before we fall asleep. If we wake up in the middle of the night, simply get into this reflection mode. In due course, these happy words would become spontaneous. Oh yes, we will have a lot of sweet dreams, too. Sleep happily, live happily: this is to be truly emotionally independent.

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