Be Prepared

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There was a famous Buddhist teacher who once said that the events of 9/11 had burst his “complacent Buddhist bubble.” Now that’s an oxymoron, “complacent Buddhist.” After all, the Buddha said that the basis of all skillful action, the basis of the whole path, was heedfulness, uncomplacency. But it’s good to think about how that attitude might have developed, that you could be complacent and Buddhist at the same time. There is that school of thought that says if you develop thoughts of goodwill and loving-kindness enough, you can ward off dangers and make the world a better place. And within limitations, that’s true, but there are very severe limitations. You can’t hope that just goodwill will get you through all dangers. So you’re born into this human realm. Once you’re born, you’re lining up for aging, illness, and death. And here in the human realm, to be born here, you have a mix of bad and good karma. If you had nothing but good karma, you wouldn’t be here. So the Buddha said you have to be prepared for the fact that there’s a lot of unknown bad karma in your karma field. There’s really nothing of previous lifetimes. There are a lot of things we’ve done in this lifetime that we can’t remember at all. And those things can bear fruit. You can have intentions, good or bad, and not really be fully alert to them. And yet they have their karmic consequences. So you have to be prepared, as the Buddha says. If you develop virtue, if you develop discernment, if you train the mind to not be easily overcome by pleasure or pain, and if you develop all the Brahma-viharas, that good karma in the present moment, that state of mind in the present moment, will mean that some bad actions from the past, if they’re of a limited nature, will not overcome the mind. Notice that caveat, “of a limited nature.” Sometimes you’ve done some really bad things in the past, and the seeds are going to sprout at some point. So you have to be prepared. And there he talks a lot about not being overcome by pain, learning to sit with pain, understand pain, as you meditate. See how it is that physical pain makes inroads into the mind, especially because the mind is doing things with the physical pain. Through its perceptions, through the way you breathe around the pain, the way you talk to yourself about the pain. When you have physical pain, do you tend to avoid letting the breath flow through there? Do you treat the pain as an obstacle? What happens if you don’t treat it as an obstacle? Think of the breath being there before the pain, or flowing through the pain. First, you’ve got to get the breath comfortable, of course, and have a part of the body where you feel at ease. Then you use that as your foundation. So you’re going to ask questions about the pain. This is how the Buddha has us develop discernment. It’s through asking questions. Does the pain have a shape? Does the pain have an intention toward you? Does it mean you’re ill? Obviously you would say no, but then part of the mind actually might be saying yes. Remember, our first encounters with pain in this lifetime came before we had any knowledge of language. So we may have some attitudes toward the pain that we’re still holding on to. So you’ve got to investigate those. Is the pain solid? Is it in individual moments? Are they coming at you or are they going away? Which perception is better? This is one of the ways you prepare yourself for dealing with pain. After all, it’s one of those things the Buddha says we have to accept. For all the talk of acceptance in Buddhist circles, it’s interesting to note that there are not that many things the Buddha said you have to accept. For example, you have to accept the fact that there will be unpleasant words because, again, you may have some very bad verbal karma in your past. When somebody’s died, you have to accept the fact that they’re dead. When you’ve done bad things in the past, you have to admit that fact and then resolve not to repeat those things. It’s about lots of goodwill. As for not being overcome by pleasure, you’ll notice as the breath gets comfortable and the mind begins to settle down, it’s easy to blur out as you just focus on the pleasure. Now, it may be hard to distinguish between a breath sensation and a pleasant feeling. They tend to go together. But as long as you keep that perception in mind that you’re with the breath, that gives some shape to your body, your sense of the body, and allows you not to blur out and wallow in the pain, that’s the work of discernment and the work of concentration in working together. Then there are the plain precautions that you have to take, no matter where you are. If you’re in the city, there are dangerous things in the city. If you’re in the forest, there are dangers in the forest. This is where the goodwill comes in, because you want to know that at the very least you’re not adding bad energy into whatever the situation is. But that doesn’t mean you can’t or shouldn’t be careful. You have to be careful. And goodwill is a way of being careful, thinking of it that way. It’s part of a larger repertoire of learning how to be prepared. And it goes together, of course, with equanimity, because there will be things happening that you don’t want. I mean, if the world would be a better place because we’re just spreading thoughts of goodwill, it wouldn’t be the world we see right now. Sometimes you find that the power of your goodwill is just not enough. So be prepared. Use goodwill as part of your general approach of being heedful, of not being complacent. But realize that goodwill is no substitute for being heedful. It’s part of a larger project.

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