

## *The Safety of Dualities*

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The Buddha generally wasn't the sort of person who'd go out to look for people to argue with. But there were a couple of cases where he would seek out teachers and ask them about their teaching because he'd heard they taught things that were really detrimental. And one group of teachers was the group that said that your actions don't make any difference. Everything you experience right now is determined from the past, either from what a god has decreed or from past actions. Another group were those who said that there is no cause and effect in the world. Things just happen randomly. Your actions don't make any difference.

In all those cases, he criticized those teachers because they were irresponsible. They were neglecting the two duties of a teacher, the first of which is to help the student learn how not to be bewildered. After all, we're all bewildered by suffering. If we want to find a way out of suffering, we have to get past that bewilderment. And secondly, he said, those teachers leave the student unprotected.

And he explained what that meant. It meant that they didn't give any basis for saying that something should or shouldn't be done, or for even wanting to know what should or shouldn't be done. After all, if it was determined that something had going to happen, how could you say it shouldn't be done? It's going to be done willy-nilly anyway, and you're in no position to make a choice. Precisely that—depriving people of the basis for making a choice as to what should and should not be done: That's what leaves them unprotected.

Nowadays there's another teaching that also leaves people unprotected and that's the teaching of non-duality: that good and evil are basically the same, that there is no basis for saying that one action is good or another action is evil. And this teaching on non-duality has made its way into Buddhism. In fact, I was reading just the other day a teacher saying that when the Buddha was teaching the four noble truths, he was coming from a position of non-duality, which doesn't make any sense at all. If any number is dual, it's four. It's a dual duality. And it's there precisely because the Buddha's trying to fulfill his duty as a teacher, his responsibility as a teacher, which is to give you a basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done.

After all, we're all active creatures. Our minds are active. We're not simply sitting here passively observing the world and asking as an idle pastime, "Well, what is the nature of the world? How does the world act?" We have to know how

the world acts because we're active. We're pulling the levers all the time, every moment. We're engaged in the act of fabrication. It's because we do it with lack of skill that we're suffering. And that's the problem the Buddha wants to solve. So as long as you realize that suffering is one thing and not suffering is something else, and you decide that you really want to stop suffering, you've got to think in dualities. And this is your protection. It's what discernment is all about.

The Buddha said that we start developing discernment by noticing what in the mind is skillful, what in the mind is not skillful. And then you develop greater and greater refinement in understanding what's skillful and what's not. In that way, you protect yourself. You have a basis for making that decision. If you believed that actions didn't have any effect, that everything were predetermined, or that there were no real distinction between good and evil, you'd be left unprotected in two ways. One, you'd have no basis at all for even thinking that there should be something you should and you should not do. And you wouldn't have any basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done. Yet the Buddha's trying to provide you with precisely those two things: first, pointing out that certain actions lead to suffering, are skillful, are blameless, whereas other actions lead in the other direction. And, second, he gives you the tools for figuring out which is which.

In some cases, he simply gives you the precepts. These are questions you don't have to test: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking intoxicants. He said those issues have been tested. You can simply follow the precepts and you'll clear up a lot of issues in life. That allows you to look deeper into the mind, because there are a lot of issues that are not covered by the precepts: things you might do or not do, things you might say or not say, and particularly things you might think or not think. You've got to decide whether they're worth doing or not.

In fact, discernment is a value judgment in that way: giving you a basis for deciding what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. Like right now, we've decided that meditation is something worth doing. That implies that our actions make a difference, and because our actions come from our intentions, and our intentions come from our minds, it's worthwhile to train the mind. So you want to get the mind really still so that you can see when it moves, whether its movement is skillful or not. As you get deeper into the processes of the mind, you begin to see these acts of fabrication—bodily fabrication: breath; verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation, in other words, the way you talk to yourself; and then mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions, feelings of pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and then the perceptions, the labels

you apply to things. All of these things are actions and they can take you in different directions.

Take perception, for instance. The way you perceive a particular part of the body, the way you perceive an action in the mind, is going to determine what you do with it. For instance, if there's a pattern of tension in the body, if you see it simply as a solid part of the body, there's nothing much you can do with it. For years, I had a blockage in my back and I thought it was because there was a bone there. So I simply accepted the fact that it was there. Then I went in for an osteopathic treatment, and the doctor released the tension. It turned out that what I perceived as a bone was really a muscle. And I suddenly realized, I could now breathe with that part of my body. I could move that part of the body. When you see these things as breath, there are lots of things you can do with them. If you see them simply as a solid lump or a bone, there's not much you can do.

So your perceptions will change your range of what you can do. And so some are skillful and some are not. This is why we have to develop right view, to get a sense of which perceptions will be skillful, which ways of perceiving ourselves, which ways of perceiving the problem of suffering will actually be conducive to putting an end to suffering. And why is putting an end to suffering a skillful thing? Because as long as you're suffering, you're going to cause other people suffering, too.

It's when you learn how not to cause yourself any suffering, that's when you don't have to cause anybody else any suffering, because as we're suffering, we're feeding, both physically and, more importantly, emotionally and mentally. If we don't get the food we want or need, we get pretty desperate. And there are lots of very unskillful things we can do because of this inner hunger. But if you can find the part of the mind that doesn't need to feed, then it places no burden on anyone at all. That's why there are shoulds and should nots.

When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, he immediately taught the shoulds that went along with them. Suffering should be comprehended, which means that you look at the clinging and look at what you're clinging to and realize that it's not worth it. That means you have to look at the cause of suffering, which is the craving that says it's very much worth it. That's something you should abandon. You have to develop the path so you can abandon the craving and then realize the cessation. Those are the shoulds. And making this distinction between what should and should not be done is basic to any worthwhile act of teaching.

The Buddha himself, although there were lots of issues that he would not take a position on, would come down hard on people who would not take a position on the question of what is skillful and what's not. Some people, he said, were

afraid to take a position for fear they might be defeated. Others were afraid to take a position because it would involve clinging. Other people, he said, were just totally confused and thought it was clever to say there is no such thing as right or wrong, good or evil, or that the idea you just go around floating around without taking a position was kind of a cool thing. He said that was utter stupidity.

So although there were some dichotomies, or some dualities, that the Buddha avoided—he called them extremes—he focused on teaching the dichotomy and the duality of suffering and not suffering, what should be done, what should not be done, what is skillful to do, what is not skillful to do to put an end to suffering. Those are important dualities to keep always in mind. They're his gift to us, because they do allow us to be protected.

I've been reading about people being abused by their teachers in those traditions where they teach non-duality, and you see how the teaching on non-duality lends itself so easily to playing mind games on people. Their normal defenses are down, and then the teachers abuse them. It was only when someone came in from the outside and said, "Look, this is abuse," that they finally came to their senses. So realizing that there are dualities is the beginning of your protection. And then when you see the distinction between what's skillful and what is not, what should be done and what should not be done, and you refine your discernment around those issues, that's when you end your bewilderment. That's when you're really protected.

One of the aspects of the Buddha's teachings that's underappreciated is the fact that it's a very safe teaching. And it gives safety all around. You follow his teachings and you will never, because of that act, have to suffer. You'll never go to a bad destination. It's only when we try to change the teachings into something we think is more clever: That's when we're left unprotected. The act of trying to be clear about what is Dhamma and what is not Dhamma, what is skillful and what is not, is basic to the whole practice. And it's basic to keeping you safe.