

Facing Danger & Hardship

June 7, 2020

Again and again, when we're facing hardships or danger, we're told to recollect the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and there are many reasons for this. One of the reasons is that the Buddha and the noble Sangha were free of passion, free of aversion, free of delusion, and for that reason, they're free of fear. We should take heart in that they have faced dangers and were able to come out, at the very least, with their goodness intact. And we should follow their example.

Another reason is in that passage we chanted just now: The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are limitless. There is a limit to creeping things, other dangers. So our immediate reaction to danger should be not to follow our instincts to get angry or fearful, but to think of the larger principle of maintaining the good state of our minds. And we've got good advice from the Buddha on how to do that.

There's a passage where Ven. Sariputta talks about recollecting the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And it's interesting for several reasons: One, he says if you're being attacked, you should remember the Buddha's teaching on what to do when you're attacked. Even if bandits were sawing off your limbs with a two handled saw, you should not have ill will for them. Even for them, you should have goodwill. And so, you should make a resolve, "I'm going to follow the Buddha's teachings." And Sariputta says you also try to develop what he called skillful equanimity. Notice he places a condition on it: It has to be skillful.

Not all equanimity is skillful. Indifference is not skillful; just giving up is not skillful, saying, "Well, I'll just have to accept whatever." Even if you have to submit physically to danger, you have to work on your mind. And as the Buddha says elsewhere, if there are ways that you can escape the danger, go for them. But you do it in a way that's skillful. But still, it's largely a matter of training your mind. And Sariputta talks about four qualities that are worth training in.

You try to develop your mindfulness and keep it relentless. In other words, always keep in mind the Buddha's teachings on how to deal with hardships. Second, try to make your concentration well-established. Third, develop tranquility, and fourth, put forth effort. It's interesting that tranquility and effort go together there, but sometimes it requires a lot of effort to remain tranquil in the midst of dangerous situations. So mindfulness, concentration, tranquility, effort—this is how you create a skillful state of equanimity.

This is the equanimity of a warrior who faces the fact that, yes, there are going to be setbacks, there are going to be hardships on the way to victory, but you don't let your mind get knocked out of alignment because of them. Remember that your primary duty is to maintain the state of your mind, because even if you have to die, the state of the mind is the one thing you've got that doesn't have to be lost when you die. Now, if you let your state of mind get ruined by how you die, you've lost everything. You've lost your body, and you've lost your mind.

So you have to remember what's important here. Keep your priorities straight. Sariputta goes on to say that if you can't develop that kind of skillful equanimity, then you should have a sense of apprehension and *samvega*. Remember, *samvega* sometimes means dismay, and sometimes it means terror. In a case like this where you're facing danger, the fact that you cannot maintain your mind—that's really serious. It's terrifying. This is a way of motivating even more effort to develop that skillful state of equanimity. So notice: You regard defeat as the real danger, defeat of the state of your mind. And you'll do everything you can to avoid that. You see it as a real danger. That's where the real danger in death lies, in the possibility that the state of the mind gets destroyed.

What all this points to is the importance of your mind, and how you should be willing to make other sacrifices for the sake of maintaining the state of your mind, because this is your true belonging. This, Sariputta says, is what it means to recollect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

It's interesting in the course of that, he does mention the fact that the Buddha taught the simile of the saw. But he doesn't mention the word Dhamma or Sangha at all, yet both of them are implicit. One in the fact that what the Buddha taught is, of course, the Dhamma. And there's one point where he says, "This is how the Buddha's bidding is done." In other words, this is the example that's been set by members of the noble Sangha before us, as they did the Buddha's bidding. There's a passage in the Theragatha where a monk is off in the wilderness and he's come down with a disease. The question is: "Is he going to go looking for a doctor?" And then he remembers the noble Sangha, the example of the noble Sangha before him. So, he tells himself, "I'm going to try to develop the factors for awakening, to try to develop the five strengths, and use them to fight off the disease."

There are cases in the Canon where people recollecting the seven factors for awakening—Ven. Moggallana, Ven. Maha Kassapa, even the Buddha himself—do recover from their illness because of recollecting these things. But if the illness doesn't go away, you've at least got your mind with a good topic. You've furnished it well. This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha talks about the factors

that lead to a good rebirth—i.e., a rebirth in the heavenly realms—learning is one of them: having learned the Dhamma, learning how to keep it in mind. This is one of the reasons why the forest ajaans emphasize learning how to chant when you go out into the wilderness, having a fund of chants so that your mind has something good to stay with when it suddenly hits you that there are dangers all around you. Protection is far away. And what have you got? You've got your chants as your friends. And, of course, the devas like to hear these things. So you protect yourself with thoughts of the Buddha, thoughts of the Dhamma, thoughts of the Sangha so that you don't forget and just go to your old instincts when you react to danger.

Here we chant about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every day. And it becomes something of a ceremony. But you have to remember that when the forest ajaans went out into the forest, into the wilderness, they really were putting their lives on the line. The idea of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha took on extra meaning, realizing that their survival of the good state of their minds was the important survival. That's what makes the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha unlimited, because the dangers that face your body are limited only to the survival of the body. When the body dies, that's it as far as those dangers are concerned. They're not dangers anymore.

But the mind doesn't die with the death of the body. So it goes beyond whatever those dangers were as long as you don't focus on the dangers, making a big issue out of them and letting the state of your mind fall because of them.

So to recollect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is basically to take on a fighter's attitude—the attitude of a warrior. And a warrior wants to come out winning. There's a very clear sense of what victory means. Remember the principle in the Dhammapada: Victory over a thousand others is nothing compared to victory over yourself, because victory over others can turn into defeat. But when you've gained victory over your defilements, that's a victory that lasts.