

All-around Eye

June 23, 2013

One of the signs that your practice is progressing is that you're more and more able to protect yourself from unskillful mind states as they come up. In fact, that's what a lot of the training is about: to give you the tools you need to protect yourself.

The Buddha gives a teaching that focuses on the power of your actions because that's where your protection's going to come from. He teaches you to develop qualities like mindfulness, alertness, and discernment to help you see things clearly and to observe yourself more carefully. He also gives you lines of thinking to get a good perspective on what's happening in the mind. When the arguments for your greed, aversion, and delusion come in really strong, you can have a quick and effective response.

One of the principles of his teachings on protection was that you have to protect yourself all around. All too often, you hear the teaching boiled down to a few short phrases: let go, accept, don't be reactive. Even though simplifying your life is part of the practice, you have to make sure that you don't oversimplify the practice, trying to turn it into one activity and nothing else.

The stupa in Wat Asokaram has a room with the statues of 28 famous ajaans. In front of each statue is a little phrase about what was special about that ajaan. I remember walking around the room and really disliking it: the idea that a person's life could be boiled down into a little phrase. "Ajaan Suwat gained full awakening while he was walking." There was so much more to Ajaan Suwat; there was so much more to his teachings than just that one fact. Or that Ajaan Lee had really great powers of concentration: There was a lot more to Ajaan Lee than that.

Look in the Dhamma talks of the different ajaans. Ajaan Chah, for example, talks about one of the points that really struck him when he went to listen to Ajaan Mun: Ajaan Mun's saying that your practice has to be in the shape of a circle. It has to be all around. In other words, you keep at it at all times in every aspect of your life. That's pretty demanding. If the practice were just doing one thing, one thing, one thing over and over and over again, it would be pretty quick. And it wouldn't require much discernment. But here the discernment lies in keeping your vision all around. One of the epithets of the Buddha was

the all-around eye. He saw things from all angles. He was alert and aware all around himself.

Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a similar point about being with Ajaan Mun. Ajaan Maha Boowa would get very “straight arrow” in one aspect of his practice, and Ajaan Mun would try to point out his blind spots to him. For example, Ajaan Maha Boowa would take on a dhutanga practice, such as not accepting extra food after the alms round. And as he said, there must have been some element of pride in the fact that he was sticking to his practices better than anybody else in the monastery. So every now and then, Ajaan Mun would come – not too often, just enough – and slip a little food into his bowl. This broke the practice of not accepting any food that came after the alms round. But what could Ajaan Maha Boowa do? Here was his teacher doing this. So he took it, reflected on it, and realized that Ajaan Mun was pointing to some pride that he hadn’t been paying attention to. In both of these cases, Ajaan Mun exemplifies the all-around eye that sees things from all angles.

When the Buddha gave instructions to Mahāpajāpati Gotami, he talked about eight ways in which you can test the Dhamma – what’s Dhamma and what’s not Dhamma, what’s Vinaya and what’s not Vinaya – and it’s an all-around way of looking at things. It’s a good way of protecting yourself on all sides.

There are basically three categories. One is to make sure that you’re in line with the ultimate goal of the practice, which is to unfetter the mind and lead to dispassion.

The second category deals with making sure that your practices are in line with the goal.

For example, you’re practicing with contentment.

You’re practicing shedding – i.e., letting go of your pride.

And you’re working on making sure that you really keep up your energy and your effort in the practice. Don’t let yourself go slack.

The third category covers the factors that have to do with the impact of your practice on other people. For instance, you try to be modest. You’re not practicing to become famous or to stand out.

You’re trying not to be entangled with people. You don’t get involved in a lot of projects that entangle you in the affairs of society and pull you away from the practice. There’s a nice passage in the Canon describing the monk who’s practicing unentanglement: When he has visitors, speaks with them just enough

so they're content and they go away. In other words, you take care of whatever business there is and you don't string things out.

Then finally, you're unburdensome. You try to practice in a way that creates as few burdens on other people as possible.

So, as you notice, this is all-around: dealing with the goal, dealing with the means to the goal, and dealing with how your practice has an impact on others and how you relate to others. So you want to be observant all-around. This is how you become more and more your own protector, because you can see dangers coming from different sides.

For example, with contentment: The Buddha says that you see the dangers in getting tied up with your desire for nice clothing, nice food, nice shelter. But you also see the dangers of getting proud over the fact that you're content and other people may not be content. You don't lift yourself up or put other people down over this issue. You've got to watch out for that. In that way, you protect yourself on all sides.

The same with dispassion: That reflection we had on the body right now is a great way of protecting you from all kinds of things. I read a passage once in a *Harper's Magazine* where a very famous French actor and actress were having a conversation on the radio on the topic of seduction. The actor, who was very handsome, was saying to the actress, who was very beautiful, that the hardest women to seduce are ones who are ugly. They don't take you seriously. Think about that. If you learn to see your own body as unattractive, then it makes it a lot easier to fend off other people's attraction to you. That's an important protection. Then, of course, the contemplation of the body protects you from your own pride around the body. Because when you're focusing on the body, whose body are you focusing on as you do this analysis? "This body of mine": you're focusing on your own.

People always complain that this contemplation gives you a negative body image, but what they're missing is that there's a healthy negative body image and an unhealthy negative body image, and we're working on developing the healthy one. With the aspects of your body, we're not saying that your eyebrows are ugly and other people have nice eyebrows – or whatever. Take apart your human body and look at the parts that you have in common with everyone else. There's really nothing there that's worth all the narratives and all the other issues that people create around being attracted to one another or being attracted to yourself. As the Buddha points out, the fact that we're

attracted to other people starts out with our ability to be attracted to ourselves. So we've got to take that part apart, and that becomes your protection.

Think of that story of the nun going through the woods, and a very eloquent man comes and tries to seduce her. She sees right through it and she's not the least bit taken in. But if she had been concerned that "Maybe this person will see I'm good-looking...." If being attractive is an issue for you, and you're looking for somebody to confirm that you're attractive, you're setting yourself up for people to take advantage of you. But if you've given up on the idea of trying to find something attractive in the body, then when other people come on to you, you're less likely to be taken in. This is a protection.

Being unburdensome is protection, too. There will be cases where people try to influence you by withdrawing their support. If you learn to be light and able to live with little – contentment helps here, too – then you're better able to resist whatever they're trying to push you into doing.

So these principles here are for your protection on all sides. They have their subtleties. Like the principle of contentment: It doesn't mean that you sit here with a miserable mind and are content with the fact that your mind is in a miserable shape. That's not where the Buddha wants you to be content. He wants you to be content with the material support you've got, the physical surroundings you've got: As long as it's a place where you can practice, you don't get all worked up about trying to make it better here or there. You keep it clean; you keep it neat; but you focus your discontent on the fact that there's still suffering in the mind.

As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was that he didn't allow himself to rest content with skillful qualities. Even though he had developed powers of jhana, he didn't stay there. He didn't stay right at that spot. He kept trying to use those skillful qualities for something better and to develop things even further. That's where you want to focus your desire and passion: your sense that there's something you've got to do. You can't just sit here and accept the situation as it is. There's the part of the situation you've got to change: the state of your mind.

Now it may take time. This is why when we talk about putting an effort into the practice, the effort has to be just right – the amount that you've capable of attempting right now given your level of energy, given your level of skill, and what the particular issue calls for. Some issues require that you do

push yourself as much as you can, and others require that you just watch very carefully to figure things out.

So there's lots of room for checking things from different angles. This is why we say: Don't oversimplify the practice. Don't try to boil things down to one idea and then just run with that all the way—because you may run off the side of the road. Remember, this is a middle way; it's balanced. And finding balance is one of the most difficult things to do. It requires the most discernment. If this were simply a practice of running off to one extreme, everybody would just run off to the extreme, and that would be it: no problems, nothing to figure out, no real need for discernment. But the discernment lies in figuring out what is just right, right now, and also looking at things from all sides.

Whatever you're doing, ask yourself: Is this in line with the goal? Is it in line with the means that the Buddha recommends in terms of shedding and contentment and effort? And what sort of impact does it have on the people around you? To what extent is it getting you entangled with other people? To what extent is it allowing you to find some seclusion? We're living together here as group, so we have to interact with one another. But you want to keep that interaction just at the level of what's necessary to get things done and to have a sense of harmony in the group. Beyond that, you don't want the fact of being in a group to get in the way. The same when you go out away from the monastery: You've got to look at your practice from all sides.

Keep in mind that the goal of being unfettered is a really noble goal. It goes against the values of society, so you have to maintain your determination that this is what you want: You really do want to free the mind. And wherever the mind is placing burdens or constraints on itself, you have to check to see: Are these in line with the path or are they getting in the way? Because there are some responsibilities you have to take on as part of your path, developing the good qualities you want to develop.

Again, don't oversimplify. Remember that this path requires balance. You're training the mind on all sides of the mind. If it were just a matter of training the mind to note, note, note, note, note or to scan, scan, scan, scan, scan – or whatever the one practice is – it would be like going down to the gym and just developing your biceps. Everything else would be left undeveloped; you'd be all out of balance.

You're trying to develop all sides of the mind, the discernment in all areas.

This is why, when you train with the ajaans in Thailand, everything is part of the training, even how you wash a spittoon or wash your bowl. It's all part of the practice. Learn how to develop the all-around eye, so that you can see the impact of your practice in all directions.