

The Dhamma Protects

November 17, 2010

Dhammo have rakikhati dhammacāriṃ: The Dhamma protects those who practice the Dhamma. Sometimes it seems like those that practice the Dhamma are at a disadvantage. Other people get to lie, but we don't. Other people can push for their own advantage without any scruples, but we have to stick by our principles. But those principles are what protect us. The advantage that people gain by harming themselves, harming other people, doesn't last very long. It's good to remember that, because we're here for long-lasting well-being. That's what wisdom is all about. Which means that we have to train the mind to be patient.

When the Buddha gave his synopsis of the teachings at that gathering of 1,250 arahants, he started out with the themes of patience and endurance. Of course, his listeners didn't need any more patience or endurance themselves, because their minds were already beyond defilement. But the Buddha was giving them a basic rundown of the teachings for when they went out to teach, because some of them had gained awakening simply by listening to one Dhamma talk. So the Buddha wanted to sketch out the larger picture.

The Dhamma was to be spread, he said, for the good of human-beings and divine beings, and it began with patience. "Patient endurance is the foremost austerity." Now the concept of austerities, or *tapas*, in those days—no matter how it was defined—was always seen as a means to a higher end. So the Buddha was saying something very important there: that patience is not an end. We're not here practicing just to be equanimous or non-reactive in the face of everything. Patience is a means to a higher end, which is total freedom. The Buddha said as much in the line that following that, "Nibbana is the highest, say those who know."

So we practice patience as a means, as part of the path. We learn how to endure painful sensations, hurtful words, we train the mind to be like earth, as the Buddha told Rahula. Painful words can be said, but we don't have to react, just as horrible things are poured on the earth but the earth doesn't react. This ability to withstand difficult situations is very important because we learn an awful lot that way. Our problem is, when we feel weak in the face of a threat, we're often tempted to give in to unskillful reactions. And so when you can't think of just the right word to say or just the right thing to do in order to end the painful situation, it's good not to do anything, just to be resilient.

But things don't end at being resilient or non-reactive, as we can see from what the Buddha taught Rahula next: the sixteen steps of breathing mindfulness. Breathing mindfulness is not just a matter of sitting there and not reacting to anything or letting the breath do its own thing. It's full of all sorts of trainings. Once you've gotten sensitive to how long breathing feels and how short breathing feels, then you start training yourself to be sensitive to the whole body, to breathe in a way that calms bodily fabrication. Then, to get sensitive to feelings of pleasure or rapture, you have to breathe in a particular way to induce

those feelings to begin with. They're not just going to come on their own. They're the result of a conscious effort.

Then you notice the impact that those feelings have on the mind. Sometimes they're strong feelings of energy—which for a while feel good if you're feeling tired, weak, rundown; the strong energy is a good way of charging your batteries—but after a while they become excessive and unpleasant. That's when you patiently have to look: "Okay, where's the more subtle energy in here?" Tune-in to a different level of energy present under the radar, one that doesn't have such a strong impact on the mind. That's how you train yourself to calm mental fabrication.

So there are things you *do* during breath meditation. It's not just a matter of sitting there watching whatever comes up. So the purpose of patience, here, is not just to be non-reactive. Being like earth doesn't mean becoming a clod of dirt. The purpose of being patient is so that you can observe. After all, if we're very reactive, we can't see things clearly. Someone says something and immediately things light-up in the mind. That's not lighting-up with insight, it's lighting-up with fires of passion, aversion, delusion. They're blinding.

I was talking the other day to a couple, and the wife was saying that she'd returned from Thailand and she was really angry at her husband. She turned to her husband and said, "That's why I didn't see you when I came back." At first, I thought she was speaking metaphorically. But she left for a while and her husband told me that a couple of years earlier they'd been back in Bangkok and she'd gotten so angry at somebody along the way to her house that when she arrived home she literally did not see her mother. Anger can get that strong. And so that little spark, which can so easily ignite the mind, can be blinding. If we don't have patience, we can't see what's happening, we can't figure out what's the skillful thing to do.

This is why the Buddha teaches patience, equanimity: so that we can observe carefully. When the mind is very still, it's like putting scientific equipment on a very stable table. You don't have to worry about the table jostling and messing with the results of the experiments. In the same way, if you want to see something in your mind, you have to be very, very patient, very, very enduring, very, very non-reactive. This goes for painful feelings, this goes for hurtful words, all the things we don't like. If you want to learn, you have to watch. If you want to watch, you have to be stable.

Now the Buddha's not saying that you put up with everything. Again, there are things in the mind, he says, that you don't want to just sit there and watch. Greed comes, aversion comes, lust, jealousy, fear: You don't just sit there and watch them overcome the mind. If you can't figure them out, you watch them for a while—but there's a purpose to your watching, which is to figure out what triggers them.

When something unskillful comes up in the mind, how can you learn to not run with it? How can you learn, as they say in Thai, not continue weaving it? That's what you're looking for. You want to see that when unskillful thoughts or unskillful reactions come up in the mind, they're not one solid continuous run. They come in bits and spurts, and then they stop for a while. Then they come again and then they stop again. You want to watch

for those spaces in between to see if you can stretch them out a little bit, to see what moments of clarity can do, so that you're not taken over by these things.

Your protection lies in this ability just to watch and not get involved. The thoughts will come and the thoughts will go. The thing is, they're going to come again unless you figure them out. So you're watching them to figure them out, to understand them, to understand what happens where those moments of total mindlessness come in, when you suddenly realize you've been running with these things. Okay, which part of the mind was blanking out which other parts of the mind? Which part of the mind wants to run with the things, which other part of the mind does not want to run with the things?

There's a battle that goes on in the mind, and you want to learn the tricks of the unskillful side so that you're not fooled by them. It's like people in a war who learn the language and customs of the other side—not because they want to go over to the other side, but because they want to figure out how not to be defeated by them.

As Ajaan Lee said, a large part of the practice is learning your own defilements. But to learn a defilement doesn't mean you run with it, it means *not* running with it. You don't see it clearly if you're running with it. You see it more clearly when you're standing still and the defilement seems to run out from the mind but you're not running along with it. That's when you see how it happens.

So patient endurance is an important protection in the path—but it has to be done with wisdom and discernment. I was reading a passage where Ajaan Chah talked about going to the palace in Bangkok. He was invited for a meal with a couple of other forest ajaans. Apparently there were some political difficulties at the time, between student groups and the army, and the king asked the advice of the different ajaans. The two other ajaans recommended that the king be as equanimous as possible. But when it came to Ajaan Chah's turn, he said, "Equanimity has to be combined with wisdom, knowing when to be equanimous and when to act."

This, I thought, was interesting for several reasons. We often hear Ajaan Chah's name is yoked with the a single teaching: "just let go, let go, let go." But obviously there's more to his teachings than just letting go. You have to let go with wisdom, you have to know what to let go of and what to develop, what to endure, what to watch for. Then when you clearly see, "Okay, this is what needs to be done, this is what needs to be dropped, this is what needs to be developed": That's when the equanimity and patience bear their real fruit.

After all, we're not here just to be equanimous and patient, we're here for freedom. That's what the essence of the practice is. That's what the heartwood of the practice is. And freedom lies beyond equanimity, beyond patience. It comes from discernment, when you see how you're causing suffering to yourself. All too often we're focusing on the suffering caused by other people, other things, so we're ignorant of what we're doing. This is why the patience and the equanimity are needed, so you can step back from what you're usually doing to see that it's optional. You don't have to harm yourself in that way.

This is how the Dhamma protects you. It doesn't send out protective rays. It doesn't come around and clean up your messes. Instead, it protects you from doing unskillful

things. The Dhamma of patience and equanimity provides the openings so that you can develop the wisdom that will free you to the point where you don't need protection anymore. That's what the Buddha promises, and it's up to each of us to test how far that's true