

Shoulds & Should Nots

December 29, 2016

In the time of the Buddha, people would go to him for refuge. It was obviously a custom in those days that you would go to any teacher for refuge. Of course, the kind of refuge a teacher would provide depended on what that teacher were teaching.

In the Buddha's case, he was teaching you how to protect yourself. He would point out to people, "There is a should and a should not in this world." Nowadays it tends to be forgotten. In fact, that's what leaves us exposed to danger on all sides. If nobody has any sense of what should or should not be done, there's no way you can trust them. And if we don't have that sense strongly within ourselves, then we can't trust ourselves.

So the Buddha provides us with a should and a should not. We shouldn't harm ourselves; we shouldn't harm others. Then he goes into how to do that. And it's in the *how* that he provides his most detailed help, most useful help. It's for us to pick up the how, to work on our own minds. Because the big danger of course is inside: our own greed, aversion, and delusion.

There's an interesting passage where the Buddha says that if you want to harm yourself, you break the precepts. If you want to harm others, you get *them* to break the precepts. Which means that if somebody else gets us to break the precepts, of course then they're harming us, and we're letting ourselves be harmed. So one thing you can do is to make sure you don't let anybody do that to you. That way, you start protecting yourself.

And then you go deeper into the mind, to find out where the real dangers are—in terms of your greed, aversion, and delusion—that would make you want to do something harmful. When you can root those out, then as the Buddha said, you're giving universal safety to everybody, and you're going to have a portion of that safety yourself. Now there may be some past bad karma coming in, but at the very least you know how to handle that in the present moment so that it doesn't turn into more bad karma.

Now to protect yourself in this way, the mind needs to be really solid. This is why we keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath. You've *got* to have a good solid place to stay. Otherwise the mind is hungry, and when the mind is hungry it can do almost anything. Anything looks like food. So you find people taking joy in doing really harmful things, because their minds are so hungry.

So you look outside then you look back inside. You have that potential, too.

And if you find that you have that potential for doing harm, you've got to really work on developing something really solid inside.

As the Buddha said, concentration is like food for your soldiers. The soldiers here, of course, are the soldiers of right effort: trying to abandon what's unskillful, trying to develop what is skillful.

It's in this way that you find the refuge inside. This is the refuge that the Buddha provides. You take his qualities, you take his instructions, and you make them part of your own mind. And when the mind can rely on itself, then it's genuinely safe.