

True Protection for the World

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People sometimes ask: With all the evil out there in the world, with people willing to kill in order to maintain their power and wealth, how can you sit here with your eyes closed? There are two answers to that. One is that we're not just sitting here with our eyes closed. We're training the mind. When you understand that, the other answer is: How can you *not* sit here and train your mind given all the bad examples out there in the world, all the dangers out there in the world? Where else are you going to find the strength to maintain your virtue, to keep your goodness alive? The nourishment that keeps your goodness alive has to come from within.

Your goodness is something that has to be independent of whether other people are good or bad. Otherwise your virtue is not dependable. And that's one of the scariest things there is in the world: when you realize you can't depend on your goodness. You can't depend that you will always be kind and compassionate. If the mind's food source is outside, there can always come a point where when you feel that your food source is threatened, and you'll want to fight back.

When your happiness depends on things outside, it's not just the case that your happiness can be threatened from outside, but your goodness—your determination not to harm anyone, not to engage in violence—can also be threatened from within. You run up against lines that you've drawn: "As long as this isn't threatened, I'm okay. If this gets threatened, then there's trouble."

But if your happiness base is within, it's secure. Your goodness is secure. And that's important. Because what do we have as our treasures in life? Our own actions. The material things that we use, the relationships that we have, those are not really ours. We use them for a while, and we take care of them for a while, but then we get separated. *Sabbe sankhara aniccati*. All things fabricated, all things conditioned, are inconstant. They're stressful, not self. You have to think long and hard about that.

When you do, you realize that the only way to respond to that reflection is to try to find something of solid worth inside. That has to be your top priority, so that you can find a goodness that's unassailable, something that's truly dependable, that nobody else can touch. Once you've got that, you're safe. You can trust yourself as you go into the world and deal with untrustworthy situations or untrustworthy people, knowing that they can't touch what's really valuable inside. The world needs more people like this. If the Buddha had waited until the world was straightened out before he was going to go for awakening, he never would've gotten there.

You have to work for awakening, for inner perfection, in the midst of an imperfect world. You're as generous as you can be. You're as virtuous as you can be, both because it's good for the world and because it's good for you. You spread goodwill to all beings without thinking about whether they deserve your goodwill, because *you* need your goodwill. You need your goodwill for all beings because that's the beginning point in learning how to be trustworthy in your dealings with everybody, people good or bad. If there are people out there that

you think don't deserve good treatment, don't deserve your goodwill, you're not going to treat them well. Then that becomes your karma: your lack of skill. Some people believe that you have goodwill for other people because everybody has Buddha nature, as if only Buddhas were deserving of your goodwill. But if you realize that anybody out there is going to be subjected to your actions, you want to make sure that the impact you have on that person is harmless. Only then are you safe.

This is why all the Buddha's teachings are considered to be protections. They're part of our refuge to protect us from ourselves, from our own lack of skill. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, not in hopes they are going to come down and save us, but because they're good examples. You think of the example they set, or the hardships the Buddha went through in order to find awakening, and the standards of the Dharma that he left behind, and that inspires you to find protection in those standards, to follow his example, as well.

There's that famous simile of the two-handed saw. The Buddha said that if bandits were to capture you, pin you down, and to saw off your limbs with a two handled saw, anyone who would direct ill will toward those bandits, would not be doing his teaching. This is an extreme example but it's meant to be extreme so that it will stick in your mind, so that when other people say harsh things, or do harsh things to you, or to those you love, or to those you feel sympathy for, you can't wish ill to those people, because you realize they're creating a lot of bad karma for themselves. This is a part of compassion. When you see people who are creating the causes for suffering, you've got to have compassion for them, even if they haven't yet started suffering yet from that.

This is an extension of goodwill. The four brahma-viharas, or sublime attitudes, basically come down to two. There's goodwill and then there's equanimity. Then goodwill gets applied. When you see people are suffering or are creating the causes for suffering, you feel compassion for them. When people are happy or creating the causes for happiness, goodwill means that you rejoice in their happiness, or the wisdom of their actions. You appreciate what they're doing, or what they're experiencing. That's goodwill applied.

Then there's equanimity. When you realize that certain things are beyond your control, either because of that person's past karma or your past karma—people for whom you wish well but they keep on doing unskillful things or they are suffering in ways that you can't stop—you have to have equanimity there so that you don't waste your time trying to change things you can't change. That way you can focus your time and energy on areas where you *can* make a difference.

This is one of the reasons why we have that chant on the four brahmaviharas every evening before meditation, to remind us of our motivation in the practice. We need those attitudes, both to help immediately in the course of the meditation, and to carry into our daily life to protect ourselves from our own unskillful impulses, our unskillful intentions—so that we can become our own refuge.

In other words, when you internalize the example of the Buddha, and the Dharma becomes part of your daily behavior in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, there will come a point where you touch the Deathless. And from that point on you become a true refuge for yourself, and a refuge for others. Again, you can't save them from their unskillful behavior. But you become an

example for them. You're part of the Sangha refuge, or the gem of the Sangha.

So this practice of sitting here with your eyes closed training your mind is not a selfish thing. It's protection for yourself so that you eventually become a refuge for others. We can't wait until the world gets straightened out before we straighten out our own minds, because the cause is in the mind. The world out there is the realm of effects. The realm of causes is in here: That's one of the basic lessons of dependent co-arising. All the causes of suffering come prior to your engagement with the world. If you want other people to change their behavior, you've got to straighten out your behavior. You have to walk your talk, so that your talk is compelling. You can't force other people to follow your example, but at least you establish that example here in the world. It's good to have these examples in the world. Otherwise the world would be a totally depressing place.

So as you remain true to the practice, you learn the truth of the practice. That's what's special about the Dharma. Unless you are true, you can't find the truth of the Dharma. And then you can embody that truth in your actions, in your words, in your thoughts. That's when it becomes a kind of protection.

There's a passage in the Canon where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha. Pasenadi is an interesting character. He starts out totally clueless, but he gains faith in the Buddha, begins spending time with the Buddha, and starts thinking about the Dharma on his own. He comes to the Buddha every now and then, and he reports, "You know, I've been thinking about this, and I realized x, x, x," whatever the issue is.

In this instance he's been sitting in judgment on a court case. That was what kings did back in those days. They didn't have judges. The kings themselves were the judges. He told the Buddha he had been sitting on a court case where people who were wealthy and had everything they should need were still willing to lie and cheat and kill in order to get more wealth. He said, "I'm sick and tired of judging this human race. People never have a sense of enough." And the Buddha said, "Yes, that's the way it is. You will never get people to a point where they have a sense of enough unless they start looking elsewhere for their happiness aside from material things."

At another point Pasenadi tells the Buddha that he's suddenly realized that people who spend all their time building up armies aren't really protecting themselves. As long as they're still acting on greed, anger, and delusion, they leave themselves wide open for suffering. And the Buddha says, Yes, that's right. Armies are not a protection. Your good karma is your protection. Your good thoughts, your good words, your good deeds: those are your protection; protection against yourself, your own unskillful habits and protection against the unskillful habits of other people.

So as you meditate, you're creating protection: protection for yourself, protection for the world. The best protection that a human being can create. Don't ever let yourself be swayed from this practice.