

Something to Stand On

April 12, 2014

The Buddha felt that it was a teacher's duty to give you protection, as he said, in all directions. Of course, that didn't mean he was going to follow you around to drive off the dogs and cats, or anything else that might attack you. What he did offer was a series of skills by which you could protect yourself—something you could hold on to.

This is why it's very strange when you read about how people explain, "The Buddha said everything is changing. There's nothing you can hold on to; there's nothing solid; there's no ground on which you can stand." They say this, one, as if it were what the Buddha actually taught, and two, as if it were a good thing. But it actually goes against his principles of what it means to be a good teacher. A good teacher gives you something good to stand on, something you can really rely on.

The Buddha has two basic teachings that he says are categorical, i.e., true everywhere across the board. One is that you should abandon unskillful behavior and develop skillful behavior. And two is to look at experience in terms of the four noble truths, because those truths are what form what he calls *vijja*, the Pali word that means both knowledge and skill. This is a skillful way of looking at your experience so you can develop the other skills you need in order to overcome suffering. That's the protection he offers.

Like the truth of the path, which we chanted just now: That's to be developed. If you look in the path, you'll see that he doesn't mention acceptance once. We're not just accepting the fact that things change. The fact that things change means you can't really depend on them. If you want something really dependable, you've got to find something that doesn't change—something that's not fabricated, something that's not conditioned. But in the meantime, we can work on the path, which is fabricated and will get us to where we want to go. It's like one of those old cartoon films where people are riding along in a train, and they're taking a big bridge across a ravine. As they're riding along, the bridge is beginning to fall apart behind them. But they keep going ahead of time, ahead of time, ahead of time, and finally get to the other side before the bridge falls apart.

Fortunately, the path isn't quite that fragile. But in the very beginning, it's going to seem very fragile, especially as you're working on concentration. At that point, it sometimes seems wise to accept the fact that some days it's going to go well and some days, it's not. And true, you have to accept that, but then you have to work around that. When they say the Great Way is easy for those with no

preferences—if it's going to make any sense at all—it doesn't mean that you're totally without preferences. You *do* prefer the end of suffering to continued suffering.

Or as when we develop the brahmaviharas, the sublime attitudes, we prefer that everyone would be happy and that people would be able to overcome their suffering, us included. We're happy for people when they're happy or are acting on the causes for happiness. These are things we prefer. What it means to have no preferences is that whatever is required to develop the path, you're up for it—even if it's difficult, even if it asks a lot out of you. And there will be many times when it will. But once you realize that this is *the* way out, you put your other preferences aside and you work on it.

The attitude you develop is not just one of acceptance; it's one of a person developing a skill, because that's what we're doing here. We're not just dealing in sound bites, where everything is just acceptance or compassion—all of which sound nice but awfully vague and not really that helpful. They don't really give you that much protection. We're working on a skill that will protect us, and the skill requires that you be ardent, alert, and mindful.

Those are the attitudes you want to develop: alert in noticing what you're doing; ardent in wanting to do it well; and mindful, trying to keep in mind what you've learned from other people, from what you've read or heard, things you've thought about that have helped make sense out of the practice, and things you've observed through your own practice itself—lessons you've learned about your own breath, your own body, your own mind. You want to have these things at your fingertips so that ardency can do its work. You're not reminding yourself of all of them all the time. But you want to have them there, ready when you need them, because we are working on a skill, and that requires that you learn from past mistakes and past successes. So those are the three qualities you want to develop.

Ardent means that you try to do it well. You try to abandon whatever's unskillful and you try to develop what is skillful. That's when you're putting into practice the Buddha's categorical teachings. Like right now: What thoughts are going through your mind? You've got some that tell you to stay with the breath, and you've got others that have other ideas. Which ones are you going to follow? How about just sticking with the breath, as consistently as you can? See what happens.

And how are you going to do that? What makes it easy? Well, one is by making the breath interesting, realizing that when you breathe in, this is the energy that keeps the body going. It's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. There's a whole energy flow in the body that allows the air to come in and out of

the lungs. And that's the nourishment. The air provides the oxygen and other gases that the body needs, but the energy is what stimulates the different organs of the body.

How about allowing that energy to flow all the way down through your torso? See what that does. Try all the way down your back, all the way down your legs to the tips of the toes; from your neck through the shoulders, down the arms to the tips of the fingers; all around your head. Think of it being like a cocoon that goes around the body and comes into the body. Can you detect any parts of the body that are *not* being affected by the breath? See if you can get the breath to go there.

This gives you work to do because it's something to explore. And don't think that you'll explore it all within one hour. There are lots of lessons to learn about the breath that can take years. There's plenty to explore right here. So there's no reason to be bored, because the breath gets you in touch with what's going on in the body.

It also provides a mirror for the mind. When you get sensitive to the breath, you begin to realize that when there's an unskillful thought and it starts flitting through the mind, there's going to be a pattern of something—tension or something like that—that'll pass through different parts of the body. Can you sense that? Can you see the connection? Can you take advantage of that connection? That pattern of tension is your little marker that keeps that thought in mind. If it's an unskillful thought, just let it go. Try to dissolve it away as you breathe the breath energy through it. This is how breath provides a mirror for the mind.

And then, at the end of each meditation, ask yourself what went well. What did not go well? Sometimes you'll remember; sometimes you won't. But if you *can* remember, try to keep that in mind for the next time you meditate, to see if you remembered it rightly. Again, don't complain, "Well, I remembered that it went this way, and then next time around, it didn't go that way!" Don't get upset. Just tell yourself, "There must be more to learn." Just look at it again.

I told you that story about that woman I knew who went to study with a potter who was a living national treasure in Japan. In the beginning, she found it frustrating because every day, she'd put her pots into the kiln. Next morning, they'd come out all burned and warped and crooked. He'd put his pots in the kiln, and they'd come back perfect, perfect, perfect—every day until one day, she came in and he was the kiln. Some of his pots had burned, so he was trying to figure out why, right then and there. That's what made him a living national treasure. He didn't get upset by the fact that things didn't work out. He just went in to figure out why.

That's the attitude you have to develop as a meditator. You want to be ardent *and* alert *and* mindful. These are the attitudes you want to develop. Acceptance might come in there in the sense that you accept when things didn't go well, or you accept when you've forgotten. You accept those facts, but you don't accept them as good things. You just accept the fact that this is what has happened, and then you try to work beyond that. You don't stay there. You're not floating around in a shimmering matrix of conditions, as someone once said. You're dealing with cause and effect, and they have an impact on whether you're going to experience suffering or not. There's nothing shimmering or beautiful about that. But there's a lot to learn, a lot that you should want to learn, because after all, it is your mind.

You're learning about your mind, and your mind is complex. So don't be upset when it shows some of its complexity in that something that worked today is not going to work tomorrow. There's simply more to learn. Dig down. Then dig down deeper, because we're not here just to mold ourselves to the Dhamma. We're here to use the Dhamma in order to explore what's going on inside to understand it. When the realizations come, they're going to be very personal. They're your defilements, and you're going past them. They're your voices in your mind, and you're going to learn how to deal with them. The terms of the Dhamma may seem foreign—after all, that chant we did just now was all in Pali—but it's speaking about something very direct: the way the mind fashions suffering for itself.

There's a lot to learn right here, and the Buddha gives you the tools with which you can master it. That's the protection he provides. He doesn't leave you floating around in a sea of conditions that are changing all the time. He says that this is how things change; this is the pattern. And these are the tools that you can use in order to divert that pattern toward something really worthwhile—the ending of all suffering.

So learn how to use that. Develop the attitude of a craftsman. You're here to master a skill, providing protection for yourself. But nibbana doesn't stop just there at the borders of your self. It spreads around. It's good in all directions.