

The Buddha's Safe Space

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The world outside is changing all the time—sometimes in ways we like, sometimes in ways we don't. And some of the changes we can have some influence over, and some of them we can't. Which means that there are going to be some things that we don't like that we can't influence—which is why we have to find a safe space inside.

The Buddha offers that safe space in two ways. One, in the practice of mindfulness and concentration. Those two practices are connected. They're not separate. The description of mindfulness that we chanted just now—staying focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—describes what you're doing as you're trying to get the mind into concentration. You stay with the breath, remembering to keep the breath in mind: That's mindfulness. You see clearly what the breath is doing and what the mind is doing: That's alertness. And then there's ardency, where you try to do this well, try to give yourself a really good place to stay here, as continuously as possible.

That's what gets the mind into concentration. That's your safe space in the body. As best you can, you try to fill the body with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, even a sense of fullness and rapture, so you've got your safe place to go. And this is safe not only with regard to events outside, but also with regard to events inside the mind. Because as the mind begins to settle down, it sees itself a lot more clearly. And it's going to see some things it likes inside, and some things it doesn't like.

At the very least, having a sense of well-being, a sense of comfort, and—at least in one part of the body—a sense of stability and feeling at home here in the body, enables you to deal with things coming up in the mind that you'd rather not see, but they're going to have to be dealt with.

The dealing with them is in terms of right view, and right resolve: the Buddha's second way of providing a safe space in the mind. These are thoughts you can revert to when you see aspects of yourself that you don't like: things you've done in the past, or things that were done to you, and all the reverberations over the years that have developed around those things.

You need a way of picking those things apart and putting them in a light that makes it easier to deal with them, easier to understand them and put them aside. In terms of right view, this is the view saying that what you're experiencing is the

result of your actions: past actions and present actions. And if there are things in your past that you find hard to deal with, things in the present you find hard to deal with, remind yourself that you're not alone. This is the larger perspective on kamma. The Buddha's not trying to assign blame to people by saying, "Well, you did bad things, and therefore you've got to suffer." He's saying, "Look, we all have bad actions in our past. And these bad actions have been going back and forth, back and forth, so you have no idea who started things, and it gets so that it really doesn't matter."

There's a story about Somdet Toh. A young monk came to see him one evening and said, "This monk came up and hit me. I hadn't done anything to him at all. He just came up and hit me." And Somdet Toh said, "No, you hit him first." They argued over this for a while, and then the young monk, frustrated, went to find another senior monk to complain about Somdet Toh, who he said wasn't listening to reason. So the senior monk came and asked Somdet Toh, "What's this all about?" And Somdet Toh said, "Well if this monk hadn't had any kamma with that other monk in the past, the other monk wouldn't have come up and hit him."

But then of course that raises the question, why did the first monk hit the second monk, or who hit who first? When you trace it back and back and back, that question becomes meaningless. And the funny thing is, is that making it meaningless takes a lot of sting out of it. The part of the mind that says, "I've got to right this wrong," that holds on to old wounds, gets weakened. The part that gets shamed by having been engaged in a bad back and forth can take some comfort in the fact that everybody's been engaged in bad back-and-forths. This is why we're here in the human realm. It's a realm of good kamma and bad kamma all mixed together.

The good part of the human realm though, is that we can make up our mind to develop right resolve. If we look at all the trouble that's been caused in the past, we see that certain resolves of the mind can keep the problems going, so we resolve to drop them. We resolve on renunciation—in other words, to drop our fascination with sensuality: planning this sensual pleasure, that sensual pleasure. We realize that that kind of thinking just weakens the mind, makes it dependent on things outside being just a certain way. And then we struggle and struggle and struggle to get it that certain way, and then they slip out of our hands. The anger and resentment and everything else that comes from that is going to lead to more unskillful action. It spirals.

Which leads to the second aspect of right resolve, which is resolve on non ill-will. In other words, you develop at the very least equanimity—or better,

goodwill—for all beings. Tell yourself that regardless of what your past actions have been, or other people's past actions have been, you're going to wish for happiness, for true happiness, true well-being. For everyone. Which means that you're going to try to be skillful in your actions. And to whatever extent you can influence other people to be skillful in theirs, so much the better. But the important thing is that you resolve not to repeat that old mistake, whatever the mistake may have been.

And then for the suffering you're having now and the suffering that other people are having, or the things that you're doing that are causing suffering now or that other people are doing: You learn how to have some compassion for yourself and others, realizing that we're going through this world acting on ignorance. We all want happiness, we all want well-being, but we're so confused about what genuine happiness would be and how we can find it that we keep creating suffering for ourselves.

You think about the Buddha after he gained his awakening: Even though he was freed of greed, aversion, and delusion, he didn't look down on people who still had greed, aversion, and delusion. He felt sympathy for them, because he'd come from that place himself. He'd realized how ignorant he had been in the past, in spite of his desires for happiness. He realized that right view and right resolve are the things that people need to develop for their happiness, and so that's what he taught—that along with all the other factors of the path.

The factors having to do with virtue—right speech, right action, and right resolve—those are simply an expression of your right resolve that you don't want to harm anybody, and they provide the foundation for building your safe space of concentration inside. So the different aspects of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—all help one another along. And they all provide you a safe space: a physical safe space inside the body where you can have a sense of ease; a mental safe space inside the mind where, whatever thoughts come up will come up in the arena of your understanding of kamma: your understanding of where suffering actually comes from and how it can actually be cured.

And you resolve to do what you can to put an end to the causes of suffering in your attitudes toward yourself, in your attitudes toward others. So regardless of whatever mess there is in the world outside, or in your personal life, or whatever mess there has been in the past, you can find a safe space in the present moment where you can sort things out: both with the sense of well-being of a mind in concentration, friends with the breath inside, so you have a sense of being grounded, a sense of belonging here; and in the safe space of right view and right

resolve: the right view that helps you see the past and the present in the light of kamma, in the light of cause and effect.

And in that larger light you can contemplate the Buddha's knowledges that gave rise to his understanding about cause and effect: realizing that we've been through many, many lifetimes, so many that it's impossible to count them. And our kamma has been taking us up and down. We've been people of the sort that, if we went back to meet them in the past, we wouldn't recognize ourselves at all. People, animals, all kinds of things: We've been all kinds of things, done all kinds of things.

As the Buddha said, the mind is capable of more things than you can imagine, and it's very, very changeable. Which means that some people are reaping the results of good kamma now, but their attitudes are no longer any good. They've changed. And other people are reaping the results of bad kamma of the past, but that doesn't mean that they're bad people now. Their attitudes have changed. It's simply that the impersonal nature of cause and effect has led to these paradoxical outcomes. So you have to develop a sense of paradox, a sense of infinity: just how huge and complex this process has been, all our interrelated actions.

As the Buddha said, it would be hard to find somebody who hasn't been your mother in a previous lifetime at some point, someone who hasn't been your father, someone who hasn't been your brother or sister, son or daughter. The relationships get all mixed up like that. So you develop a sense of *samvega*—which can be translated as dismay, or can also be translated as terror. It's the sense of how big this process has been; how long it's been going on. If you drive up Interstate 5 and look out across the ocean as you go past Camp Pendleton, remind yourself that the water you see is nothing compared to the tears you've shed over these many, many lifetimes.

And the right response to that is to want to gain release—realizing that if you're not careful, you can create a lot more bad kamma in the future. You may get your intentions in good order right now, but as the Buddha said, when a person who is reaping the results of past good kamma without realizing where they come from, it's very rare that that person won't get heedless and careless, and then start doing things that lead to a downward spiral.

So when you think about how complicated it is, and how huge this process is, and how changeable it is, the appropriate reaction is not to get down on yourself, or to get down on others. It's simply to want release—and to be happy for other people when they can find release, because that confirms the fact that it is possible. And it allows you to be happy about any thoughts inside you that want to gain release as well. Because ultimately, that's the only really safe space you can

find in the mind. It's absolutely safe because there's no more kamma there. Which means there can be no more bad kamma, no more harm. Up until that point, things are a little precarious, but at the very least, at the first taste of awakening you're sure that you're going to get your way out.

So that's what we aim for—to create the relative safe space through our practice of mindfulness and concentration, our development of right view and right resolve, so that we can find the absolute safety of a mind released.