

Your Goodness is Your Protection

December 30, 2018

There are several passages in the Pali Canon where King Pasenadi has been reflecting about the Dhamma and then he comes and he tells the Buddha about his amazing discoveries. They're all pretty basic—he's someone who never thought about the Dhamma before—and one of his discoveries one day is that people who behave unskillfully are leaving themselves unprotected. Even if they have a huge army, they're still unprotected. Whereas people who behave skillfully, even if they have no army at all, are very well-protected.

It's good to think that, good to keep that point in mind.

We look around us and civilization seems pretty uncertain: The economy, the society, the values of the society—everything seems to be falling down, falling apart. And how do you keep yourself protected in a case like that?

Through your virtue and generosity and your goodwill. The qualities that the Buddha calls treasures: your sense of conviction in the principle of kamma, your virtue, your compunction, your sense of shame, your knowledge of the Dhamma, your generosity, your discernment. These things are your protection. So we work on developing these things.

Sometimes we're afraid that the things we've tried to build up as we go through life will get torn down. And you have to face the fact that, yes, they will. Maybe they get torn down more quickly than you might have thought, but they're all going to get torn down one way or another. We'd like to leave our marks on the world, but who knows what will be left?

Years back, I was visiting my father in Virginia. He was living in Williamsburg at the time, but when I was a teenager we lived in Charlottesville, and as a family we'd built a house. We'd hired some builders but the family worked together on the house as well: designing it, painting it. Dad did the cabinets in the kitchen. And one day he decided he wanted to go see the old house. So we drove up and discovered that the current owners were not taking care of it at all. It was beginning to fall apart.

On the way back, he mentioned to me that as he looked back on his life, he couldn't see that there was anything he had left. It'd all been destroyed one way or another—starting with the farm, and then his job with the government. Of course, I like to think that at least I was there, something he'd created that was good. But it got me to thinking: If you try to measure the worth of your life in terms of things you can accomplish outside, it's all going to seem pretty hopeless.

The more you try to build up protection against the changes that are going to happen, if you build it up in things that have nothing to do with the goodness of the heart, the more is going to get torn down. And sometimes the things that you build up as your security are going to get turned against you.

So you have to remember, as you're thinking about what kind of life you want to live that's going to have some meaning—and it will continue to have meaning even if things change very quickly and drastically—you have to look at the qualities of the mind. These are the things that are really solid and are not destroyed by events outside—unless you *let* the events outside destroy them. In other words, you decide that life becomes so hard that you're going to abandon the Dhamma to survive. But otherwise those inner qualities are there. As the Thais like to say, fire doesn't burn them, water doesn't wash them away, the wind doesn't blow them away. Nobody can steal them, or in the phrase of the Canon, "Kings and thieves can't take them"—it's interesting that they put kings and thieves in the same sentence.

These are the treasures we're working on right here. It's because of our conviction in the principle of kamma—that our lives are shaped by our actions, and our actions are shaped by our intentions, and our intentions are shaped by the mind—that we realize we've got to train the mind. That's the principle of conviction. And it carries through our outside activities as well, in terms of virtue, shame, and compunction, all of which center on the realization that we don't want to harm anybody.

Now, not harming doesn't mean not hurting their feelings. This is an important distinction to make. If you let other people's feelings run your life, you're going to start doing some things that really have nothing to do with the Dhamma at all. Harming other people means basically getting them to see things in such a way that *they* start breaking the precepts. So you don't break the precepts yourself; you don't get others to break the precepts. You would be ashamed to engage in behavior like that, and you realize the consequences. And you're alive to the consequences: that's what compunction means. It's the opposite of apathy. And as you begin to develop a sense of well-being inside here, it's a lot easier to be more generous with others.

Then, of course, there's discernment, realizing what's really important in life and what's not: that the goodness of your mind is what will see you through.

So we're working on many of these treasures right now.

You read about times when civilization has collapsed, and the people who survived the best were the ones who were spontaneous in helping one another. This is where the qualities of generosity and goodwill come in. Because if you

amass a lot of wealth for yourself, do you think the people around you are going to rest content and say, “Well, that’s his wealth and because it’s his, we’ll leave it alone”? You’re going to have to share if you’re going to survive. So it’s good to develop the attitude that survival is best when it’s done skillfully. And it’s worthwhile when it allows you to maintain skillfulness of your mind.

Then, of course, there’s the principle that whatever good you do is going to go with you wherever you go. So you benefit now, you benefit on into the future by working on your genuine protection, which is also your genuine inner wealth.

So think about that: generosity, goodwill. The two principles go together but they’re different. Goodwill is something you can make universal. In fact, you *have* to make it universal if you want to get the most benefit out of it. But this doesn’t mean you’re going to go around protecting everybody.

That’s a huge misunderstanding that comes from the passage in the Karaniya Metta Sutta about developing an unlimited mind of unlimited goodwill for the world in the same way you a mother would protect her only child. This doesn’t mean that you try to protect the entire world as a mother would protect her child. There’s no way you can do that. It’s humanly impossible. What the Buddha’s saying is you protect your *goodwill* as a mother would protect her child. In other words, no matter how badly people behave, you need to have goodwill for them.

As the Buddha said, even if bandits were sawing off your limbs with a two-handed saw—they had you pinned down, there would be nothing you could do to stop them—you’d still have to have goodwill for them. That’s something you would have to protect, even as you realize you couldn’t protect your life at that point.

So goodwill can be unlimited. Generosity, however, has its limits. Each of us has only so many resources—so much time, so much energy. And you have to be careful, if you want to make the most of your generosity, where you’re going to give and where you won’t. There are a lot of people for whom you have goodwill but you realize that you can’t help them because it’s beyond your capacity. These can include not only people who are far away but often people in your own family. It’s not an act of kindness just to give into people’s demands. You have to decide, are the demands reasonable? Are they in line with the Dhamma?

As the Buddha said, generosity is best when it doesn’t harm you or harm the other person. So there are limits on generosity. Now, the Buddha did say to give wherever you feel inspired, where you feel the gift would be well-used. In other words, he’s not imposing any restrictions on your generosity. But then the question comes up: “Where is a gift is given so that it bears the best fruit?” And the Buddha said, “That’s a different question.” That’s where you have to be very

careful about who you give to, what you give; looking at your intention, looking at the gift itself, looking at the recipient, looking at the time and place, exercising your discernment around these issues so that generosity becomes a skill and really does become a protection.

So we work on these qualities not just because they're sentimental and nice, but because they really do make a difference between where it's worth surviving, and not.

The ajaans going into the forest in Thailand had to take along a lot of goodwill for all the animals, all the thieves and other people living in the forest. It's not as if you go out into the forest and meet only the best people all the time. You have to learn how to be accommodating with all kinds. And your goodwill and your generosity will help you survive no matter where you go. If you go into a new society where you don't know anybody, goodwill and generosity are the things that will carry you through. When things begin to break down, goodwill and generosity will carry you through.

So remember: Your protection lies in your goodness, in the skillfulness of your intentions and the discernment with which you carry those intentions out. Those are the things that will see you through no matter what happens. That's why the Buddha taught them as the Dhamma, because they've been true all the time, as civilizations rise and fall and then rise again. These are the qualities that make human life worth living, make it the kind of life that we can get the most out of it, regardless of how things arise and fall outside.