

## *Protection Through the Practice*

*March 8, 2019*

The Pali word “*mangala*” is sometimes translated as “blessing.” More precisely, it means protection. Prior to the Buddha, mangalas were little ceremonial things done to protect you—tying a string around your wrist, sprinkling some water on you, uttering words of encouragement. But the Buddha basically changed the meaning, or changed the means by which protection came, and also changed the meaning of what protection meant. The kind of protection he’s talking about is the kind you give yourself through your own actions, protecting yourself not only from things outside but also, and more importantly, from things inside your own mind. Because that’s where the real dangers lie.

As he pointed out, probably the worst thing someone else can do to you is to get you to do unskillful things because that then becomes your bad karma. And from that you can suffer for a long time. They can rob you, abuse you, or even kill you, but the results of that last only one lifetime. But if you do something really bad, it becomes your karma, and the suffering from that can last for many lifetimes. So you have to train your mind to free it from the greed, aversion, and delusion that would allow it to be easily influenced by other people’s unskillful ideas.

Here again, the protection has to lie inside. You start off by trying to find wise people to give you an idea of how to deal with your own inner dangers. Then you carry out their instructions and you become more discerning yourself about what those dangers are.

When you meditate, you don’t simply follow instructions. Meditation is designed to make you sensitive to cause and effect as they’re happening in the mind, and that requires that you experiment and observe the results of your action. Meditation is also designed to give you a sense of solidity so that when something happens, you’re not blown away by it, not influenced by it. You can watch things arising and passing away in the mind, good or bad, and not give in to their power unless you see that it’s something really skillful to do.

That’s the kind of quality you’re trying to develop, that kind of stability—along with the alertness to see clearly what’s happening. Because all too often, the unskillful things come into the mind disguised. You don’t really know what’s happening. All you see is the disguise, and you don’t see what’s lurking behind it. But if you become really alert, you begin to see that there are layers to your intentions and you can begin to see where something unskillful is slipping in

between the layers. So the purpose of the meditation is to make you capable of relying on yourself.

We see this in the concept of refuge. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. On the exterior level we take them as examples: This is how wise people live. This is how they find genuine happiness. But then you have to internalize their example. That's the second stage, when the refuge comes inside in the qualities of mind you develop through your being generous, being virtuous, through your meditation, developing a solid, centered state of mind along with the alertness and discernment where you can see things clearly. Ultimately, it takes you to another level of refuge. One of the names for nibbana is "refuge." It's the ultimate refuge, totally safe, because it's not affected by anything at all.

So there are levels of refuge and there are levels of protection, recognizing that the big dangers are the ones inside. But you also have the potential to develop good qualities inside that can counteract those dangers. That's why the Buddha teaches heedfulness. Heedfulness means having a sense that there are dangers you have to watch out for, but also that you can be careful enough to avoid those dangers. The focus is not just on the dangers. It's also on the potential for your actions to make a difference, to offer you protection. If there are nothing but dangers and you couldn't do anything about them, then heedfulness wouldn't make any difference. It's because you can make a difference by developing good qualities, skillful qualities, solid qualities, inside, that's why heedfulness has meaning.

So, keep an eye out for the dangers outside. But remember, the worst thing that someone can do to you is to get you to do something unskillful, to internalize their bad attitudes, their unskillful attitudes, and then start acting on those. That's because a lot of our attitudes do come from other people. But we've got to clean things up ourselves. We can't totally blame them. After all, if you didn't have the germs for greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind, then other people's germs couldn't affect you. You've got those potentials and when you meet up with them in other people, it's very easy for them to grow. But if you develop mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, you're developing the tools by which you can step back from those influences and begin to see them for what they are.

Some of them are firmly entrenched, the really big issues in the mind. They've been around for a long time. And your mind gets distorted in the same way that, say, if you've been wearing a bad pair of shoes for several years it's going to have an effect on your feet and on your posture. When you get good shoes, they don't feel right. It's going to take time to get used to the good shoes, i.e., to get used to the attitudes that the Buddha does recommend. But the fact that it's going to take a

long time shouldn't be an obstacle. It shouldn't be discouraging. It *can* be discouraging, but you can't let it be discouraging.

The Buddha recommends that you question anything in the mind that seems unskillful. At first the mind is going to put up all kinds of resistance. It's like a politician. There are politicians that tell us there's no way that there can be universal healthcare, so they just want us to put the question away and forget about it. If you're intimidated by them, that's the end of the matter. But if you keep questioning why, why, why, why, after a while they'll have to respond. It's the same with the mind. You have unskillful attitudes, unskillful perceptions, and they don't want to be questioned. So they try to discourage you, they try to look bigger than they are, like those frogs that puff themselves up or like the lizards that do pushups to look bigger. But if you're bigger than they are, then you begin to see how puny their pushups are.

You've got to make your mind bigger than the attitudes that are unskillful inside. You've got to make your concentration bigger, your goodwill bigger: All the good qualities of the mind you have to make large. Remember the Buddha's examples: making your mind like earth, making your mind like the river Ganges, making it like space. Space is infinite. If your concentration or discernment get larger, then you begin to see that the perceptions you've been holding onto are not quite so big. And their efforts to intimidate you are not so scary. They're not so convincing anymore.

So we protect ourselves by developing what's good inside. We stay confident that the influence other people have on us is possible, the dangers they can do to us are possible only because we have unskillful attitudes within us. So, if we can get rid of those internal attitudes, nobody can really do us any serious danger. They can harm the body, but it goes only far as the body. It doesn't go into the mind. And you always have to remember that your mind and heart—that's what the Pali term *citta* covers, the mind and heart together—is your most precious possession. That's what really matters.

As we live in this world, we need to have a sense of priorities. There are some things we do have to sacrifice. We can't have everything we want, and there are times when different parts of us are in danger, and you have to decide what's really valuable inside, so you know what to sacrifice for the sake of something more valuable. If you remember that your mind is what's valuable, your actions are your treasures, then you protect those. Your goodwill is a treasure. That's why the Buddha says you protect it in the same way that a mother would protect her only child. Whatever else you have to sacrifice in order to keep that protection solid, you're willing to sacrifice it, because you realize it's not nearly as important. When

your priorities are clear in this way, and the good qualities you've developed in the mind are really solid, that's when you can be really secure.