

A Safe Space Inside

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The Buddha had lots of names for the goal that he taught. Nibbana, nirvana is the one we're most familiar with. It means unbinding—a state of freedom. But he also had a lot of names that suggest that it's a place of safety. It's a harbor, it's a refuge, safety, security. A place where there are no dangers at all. Fortunately, we don't have to get all the way to the end of the path to find safety. Absolute safety is found there, but relative safety can be found along the path. As we develop good qualities within ourselves, think of them as a solid grounding, a good foundation that keeps you safe.

Remember when the Buddha talked about making your goodwill as large as the earth, solid as the earth. People come along and try to chip away at it, dig at it, spit on it, urinate on it, but they can't make earth be without earth. You want to make sure that your goodwill is that solid, realizing that no matter what people do, they cannot change earth to be something that's not earth. It's just too big, too solid. You want to develop a goodwill that's solid like that.

There's also that passage where the Buddha teaches Rahula, before he teaches him breath meditation: Try to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on earth, but the earth doesn't react. Even if they throw nice things on the earth, the earth doesn't react. It's solid.

How do you develop that solidity? A lot of it has to do with what the Buddha said are the two requisites for getting the mind into right mindfulness and right concentration. You're sitting here meditating, your mind settles down. How does it settle down well? How does it settle down so it's really secure? You come at it with what the Buddha calls views made straight and virtue pleasing to the noble ones.

The views made straight, of course, refer to seeing that suffering and happiness come from your actions. You don't blame your suffering on the world outside and you don't attribute your happiness to the world outside. These are things you have to find within. And it's going to have to be through your own actions, through the practice of virtue, concentration, discernment. You want to hold to those views so that your goodness, your solidity, doesn't have to depend on other people being solid.

The world is full of winds. I was reading today of a hurricane that's going to come and hit the area where I was born, and that's just one of the many hurricanes that are out there right now. But those are winds outside. The winds inside are the winds that affect the mind most are gain, loss; status, loss of status; praise and criticism; pleasure and pain. You have to realize that these things are the ways of the world. It has its good side but also has its un-good side, you might say, and you have to make your mind solid in the face of that.

Otherwise, if your goodness depends on things being good outside, when you look at the way of the world right now, there's a lot that's very discouraging. If your goodness did depend on things being good outside, it would be very wobbly and undependable. But the Buddha says you can find resources for happiness within, again, through right view: that if you're going to find true happiness, it has to be through your actions.

So you make up your mind that you're not going to harm anybody: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. These, the Buddha said, are the basis of morality. They apply both to laypeople and to monks. Monks may have a lot more precepts, but these are the major ones for everybody. You make up your mind you're going to follow through with them. That's how you develop the virtue that the Buddha says lies at the basis of making your mind like earth.

But it also has to be nurtured by right view. Otherwise, other people mistreat you and even though you may not want to get back at them, you might say, well "This person deserves to be punished. This person deserves to get his comeuppance." That right there leans the mind in the direction of doing something unskillful. You've got to protect your goodness with your right view.

We live in a world where people are uneven, as the Buddha put it. Think of an uneven road—has its ups and downs—but we want to be even, we want to be solid. After all, what they do is not going to take us to hell and it's not going to take us to heaven. It's our own actions that will do that. Even people who are close to us can't drag us up or drag us down. We're the ones who drag ourselves up, drag ourselves down. So ask yourself: Why drag yourself down? Why let events outside determine how skillful you're going to be in your choices?

The Buddha has an image of building a house. You put up the rafters for the roof, and as the rafters go up they're not really secure until the ridge pole is in place on top of them. You've got lots of rafters working together in your practice, so simply having right view is not going to be enough. You need support.

This is where you develop other strengths. Conviction in the principle of action is the beginning of right view. Then there's persistence. You really stick with it. Whatever is going to be skillful, you try to give rise to it. Whatever is not skillful, you try to abandon it. You also try to be mindful of the lessons you've learned about what's right and what's wrong. These are lessons you learn from outside, lessons you learn from your own practice.

Once you've learned a lesson like that, treat it like a valuable—something you don't want to forget. There are so many good lessons we learn as we go through life and yet we throw them away. Then we complain because we're unhappy. So try to think back: What are the lessons you've learned about how to behave in a skillful way?—how to be successful in getting rid of unskillful qualities, giving rise to skillful ones. Regard that memory as something to be treasured because that's one of the things that will provide you with safety. You'll have something good to fall back on when outside events knock the wind out of you. You may lose

your balance for a bit, you may lose your bearings for a bit, but you have to remember: No matter what other people do, you're not going to stoop to their level if it's unskillful. You're going to stay on a skillful level.

It's in this way the mind gets into concentration. It's protected by virtue and it's protected by right view.

So when thoughts come up in the mind that would pull you away from the concentration, you've got the right view to say, "No, not right now. I have to work on something really important here in getting the mind as solid as possible."

Work with the breath. Think of the breath filling the whole body, with no gaps in the breath. The out-breath turns into the in-breath; the in-breath turns into the out-breath. It's a continuous process with no gaps. Even when there's stillness, as the tide turns between the in-breath and out-breath, or the other way around, you're right here—fully inhabiting the body right here—with a strong sense that your center of gravity is really low. It would be hard to knock you over.

When you can develop this kind of solidity in your concentration, nurtured by right view, nurtured by virtue, that's when you can really begin to trust yourself. And that's one of the greatest types of safety of all. There are people outside you can trust, people outside you can't: That's a normal part of the human world. But if you can't trust yourself, you're really set adrift. If you can trust yourself, you're safe.

So look out for any wrong views that would make you want to listen to what the world out there has to say about how you have to get back at certain people, or that you have to fight in an unfair way for what you think is right. The idea that ends justify the means is really destructive because there are no ends in samsara. It's like a series of meadows I walked through one time near the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. You came across a meadow and you could see to the end of the meadow. But then when you came to the end of the meadow, it turned out there was a slight turn in the path, and there was another meadow. You saw to the end of that meadow and when you walked there, there was another meadow. It just kept going and going and going like that.

So remember: There are no "ends" out there in samsara, there are just "means." They only real end is nibbana. You may not be sure whether you can attain any of the ends that you want, but you can be sure that your means are good. Those are the things you can be sure about. You can look directly at your intention and directly at what you're actually doing. As for how the results will work out in the long-term, there are a lot of factors beyond your control. So you focus on what is in your control: what you're doing right now.

In this way, your right view helps your concentration; your concentration helps your right view. Virtue helps both of them; both of them help virtue. You're grounded in what's called the Triple Training: training in heightened virtue, heightened mind or concentration, and heightened discernment. And even though it's the path—it's not the goal—it's a safe path.

The Buddha gives an image of a highway, with people going down the highway. Some people decide they're going to leave the highway because they have a personal preference that will take them someplace else. But they get off into a side road and it turns out to be rugged and uneven, and they end up breaking the axle for their cart. The wheel gets broken and they're stuck—whereas all those who remain on the main road are safe.

So try to find the safety of right view, good virtue, discernment, concentration—all the strengths. Even though that safety is not ultimate, you're going to a place that really is safe, and the means there are as safe as you can find in this world. It's a safety that can't be lost because it's built right into your mind.