

The Buddha's Protection

December 8, 2022

One of a teacher's duties to a student, the Buddha said, is to offer protection in all directions. In this case, he didn't mean that he would go around with a sword and a shield to fight off your enemies. Instead he would give you the knowledge you could use to depend on yourself.

That knowledge begins with the principle that what you experience right now is not totally coming in from the past. You have choices you can make in the present moment, and those choices will have an impact both on the future and on the present moment. In fact, the choices you make right now will make the difference between whether you suffer in the present moment or not. It's a question of learning how to be skillful.

This is the most basic of the Buddha's teachings: the distinction between skillful and unskillful actions. One of his students was accused one time by people who said, "This teacher of yours is a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything." That was because the Buddha wasn't giving answers to the hot questions of the day: whether the world was eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite—that sort of thing. The student said, "No, the Buddha's not a nihilist. He does teach something important. He teaches the distinction between what's skillful and what's not."

So, right now, what's skillful? Focusing on your mind. Focusing on your breath. Trying to get the mind to settle down, because the mind, when it's settled down, is in a much more secure place. It can watch itself. It can see its actions clearly.

You're going to need to see them clearly because following the Buddha's teachings is not just a matter of following the rules. When the Buddha says that certain types of actions are unskillful, you do avoid them. When he says certain actions are skillful, you do try to give rise to them. But there are a lot of areas where it's going to be up to your powers of observation to see how to apply those general principles. Your powers of observation will be a lot clearer if you can get the mind still. This is another way in which we create a refuge for ourselves and provide protection for ourselves.

We live in a world where there's a lot of danger, but some of those dangers—in fact, the biggest dangers—are the ones that come from within. We have a lot of anxiety. When I was on the trip this month, I noticed a lot of the questions had to do with anxiety. Some of it, of course, is a result of all the news that we hear, but there's a basic anxiety that comes from the fact that we've been born. When you're born, you take hold of a body. That body leaves you exposed to all kinds of dangers. It can get sick. Other people can attack it. So you have to realize that this is not your most important possession. If it were, the Buddha would advise you to do everything you can to defend the body. He's more interested, though, in having you defend your mind. So he says you take yourself as a refuge for the sake of your mind, and you

do that, he says, by taking the Dhamma as a refuge.

What does it mean to take the Dhamma as a refuge? You learn how to establish mindfulness. The Buddha's instructions on establishing mindfulness are to protect us from our thoughts that go out into the world and cause us trouble. At the same time, those instructions give us a good, solid place to stay within the mind itself, so that our happiness has a source coming from within. It doesn't depend on things outside—the word *outside* here meaning from the body on out. The mind doesn't have to depend on things outside being a certain way.

The ways of the world are many, and a lot of them are beyond our control. When we're born into this world, each of us has karma, and we have no idea what karma is coming in from the past. Fortunately, the state of our mind right now doesn't have to depend on past karma. The things that are really important in life don't have to depend on past karma. They can depend on your karma, your intentions, right now.

So, how do you establish mindfulness? You stay focused on the breath. This is an aspect of what the Buddha calls the body in and of itself. At the same time, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The *world* here means sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, and the senses that allow you to see and know those things. As we chanted just now, those things are on fire with the flames of birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair.

Our problem is that we want to find our happiness there in the world. We're looking in the wrong place. So as you're focusing in, learn how to put aside any thoughts you have that may be greedy for things in the world to be a certain way, or that get distressed by the fact that things in the world *are* a certain way. You've got this area inside—the body as you experience it from within, but more importantly, the mind as you experience it from within. This, the Buddha said, is actually the forerunner of all things you're going to experience. So when you get the source down, the results that come from the source will have to be good.

To maintain your focus here and to put aside all unskillful thoughts, the Buddha recommends developing three qualities. The first is mindfulness itself—the ability to keep something in mind. Once you've made up your mind to stay with the breath, you remember that, you hold on to that. At the same time, you remember from your past experiences, when disturbances come up, when distractions come up, how to recognize them as distractions and what to do with them.

All too often, when hindrances come up—such as sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, or doubt—we tend to side with them. Lust comes, and we decide that the object really is worthy of lust. We feel ill will for someone and we think that that person really does deserve to suffer. We feel sleepy, and we tell ourselves it's a sign we've really got to rest now. When you're anxious about things, there are lots of reasons to be anxious—and so on down the line. Mindfulness is what recognizes these things as hindrances. Once you know that something is a hindrance, you remember what to do with it—how to deal with lust, how to deal

with ill will.

When you're anxious about the future, you can ask yourself, "Do I really know what's going to happen in the future?" Part of the anxiety, of course, is that you don't know, but you can remind yourself the Buddha taught certain skills that apply to any situation. As he says, you apply appropriate attention to every situation you encounter. It's not that each present moment is totally brand new or unheard of. It may be a new moment, but it falls under the same patterns that all the other moments of the past have fallen under.

In other words, it's a mixture of your past actions and your present actions. You don't simply accept it as the way things are and leave it there. Each present moment has some potentials—good potentials, bad potentials. You want to learn how to activate the good potentials. So remember that. It's what you do right now—what your mind does right now—that's the most important thing. What's going to happen to the body, what's going to happen to the world outside—that's secondary. You can train the mind to do skillful things. These are all things you keep in mind. This is the quality of mindfulness.

The second quality the Buddha recommends is alertness. You watch what the mind is actually doing and you see the results you're getting. If you've slipped off the breath, you bring it right back. While you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Even though you may not be able to create a sense of well-being in every part of the body, find the areas where you *can* create a sense of well-being. Focus on those. If you find the mind slipping off again, bring it right back again.

The "bringing it right back again"—that's part of the third quality, which is ardency. You try to really do this well. I don't know how many people I've talked to who have said that when things in life get bad, you just have to surrender to them and admit them. Well, you admit them, yes, but you admit also that you have some potentials. There are some things you *can* do about the situation. Even as the body ages, even as it grows ill, even as it dies, there are things the mind can do so that it doesn't have to suffer. It has choices, and you want to do them well.

So right now, if you slip off from the breath, put the mind on a short leash. Bring it right back. While you're here with the breath, try to be ultra-sensitive to how it feels—how it feels coming in, how it feels going out, where you can make it feel really satisfying. What are the most sensitive parts of the body that respond most quickly to a comfortable or an uncomfortable breath? Focus there, and provide them with what feels really good.

Some people will say this is teaching you to be attached to pleasure. Well, it's a skillful pleasure. The Buddha said that if we don't have this pleasure—the pleasure of concentration—then the only escape we see from pain will be to go for sensuality. And that's not skillful. If you get involved in sensuality, then, of course, there's going to be sensual craving, and sensual craving will lead you on to bad places.

So try to create a sense of well-being right here, where the mind focuses on the breath. Think of the breath bathing the body. When we talk about "watching" the breath, it makes it

seem related too much to the visual field in your mind. Think of it more as something you're going to *feel* throughout the body—feel down the arms, feel down the legs, feel in the torso. It's bathing the body. Wherever you can create a sense of well-being through that feeling, allow it to develop, to grow, to stay. It's in this way that you build yourself an island.

The Buddha's instructions to his monks shortly before his death were, "Make an island for yourself. Make a refuge for yourself. Make yourself your refuge. Make the Dharma your refuge." You do that by establishing mindfulness in this way—keeping track of the breath, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, and doing it by being mindful, alert, and ardent.

It's in this way that you provide protection for yourself, because ultimately, as I said, the real dangers are not so much the dangers outside—they're the dangers in your own mind. The dangers outside can harm you only up to death, but the dangers in your own mind can harm you beyond death if you're not careful. So focus your attention here. Invest as much time and energy as you can in training the mind—this island you have.

You can have wealth on the island through the good qualities of mind you develop. So invest in that kind of wealth. Invest your time in developing the mind as much as you can. In that way, you find safety—the safety that goes beyond aging, beyond illness, beyond death.

By teaching this, the Buddha provided us with protection. Of course, that protection will work only if we provide protection for ourselves—and that's something we *can* do. We have to keep reminding ourselves of that. We *are* capable of doing this. As long as you have that confidence, you can go far.