Source of Blessings, The

December, 2002

We just chanted the Mangala Sutta, which is sometimes translated as “blessings” and sometimes as “protection.” The word “mangala” comes from little ceremonies that people used to do in India. Say, your son or daughter was going to go off someplace, and you tie a string around the wrist or do some little ceremony as a blessing and as a protection. Well, the Buddha took that notion and turned it around. He said, “You can’t get blessings. You can’t get protection from outside. It has to come from within. It has to come from your own actions. What you do is either your own curse or your own blessing. It’s your own punishment or it’s your own protection.” This is a principle that we should always keep in mind. Someone once said that there’s no way to peace. Peace itself is the way. In other words, the means are what make all the difference. How you do things is what makes all the difference. This is why we’re meditating, to put the mind in really good shape so that it can do things carefully, can do things wisely, can do things in a way that doesn’t lead to any harm to anybody. In this you provide yourself with your own protection. We don’t often talk about protection in American Buddhism, but it’s a constant theme over in Thailand. People come to the monasteries wanting a blessing or wanting an amulet, something to protect them from the dangers they sense all around them. I think it’s largely because of our own complacency that we don’t come for protection, too. Of course, there may be very little protection in amulets and blessings, as the Buddha would obviously point out. But we can come for protection in terms of training ourselves so that our actions are done with clarity, our actions are done with mindfulness, alertness. We’re very clear about our motives, very clear about what we’re doing, and as clear as possible about what we anticipate the results of our actions to be. Instead of just acting out on what we feel we want to do, we exercise some restraint. We have to exercise it wisely so we don’t feel trapped by the restraint. That’s just another step in the practice, gaining more and more skill in the practice. There’s a passage in the Dhammapada that says that a hand without a wound can handle poison without any problem. If there’s a wound in your hand, you can’t handle poison because it’ll seep into your blood. In the same way, if you don’t have any bad karma, if you don’t create bad karma for yourself, then there’s nothing bad that can happen. Our problem, of course, is that being human beings, we’ve got a really mixed bag. Our protection there is how we react to the times when bad things happen. This is important. The teachers are not just for nice times when you’re up here in the monastery with your eyes closed, sitting in the meditation hall. They’re to be applied at all times, no matter what happens, no matter how extreme the circumstances, you hold to your principles. This is why we have precepts to begin with. They’re so easy to remember. There’s no killing or stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicating beverages. The reason they’re so short is to make them easy to memorize, clear-cut, because when things go bad, those are things that are so tempting to do. You can remind yourself, at the very least, “No, you don’t do that, no matter what.” Then as you look more deeply into your mind, you realize the real problem is lapses in mindfulness, lapses in alertness, the times when the mind pulls the curtains on itself. It’s as if you’re going from one train of thought to another. It’s like changing scenes in a play. They don’t want to destroy the illusion, so they close the curtains while the scenery is changed, and then wait until the new scenery is in place, and then they open the curtains for you. If you saw the old scene being taken apart and the new scene being put together, it would destroy some of the illusion. Well, it’s the same with the mind. There are all these mechanics in putting a particular train of thought into the mind. The mind has a way of averting its gaze, blocking things off, so you don’t see these things. You just see the finished thought. And when you see only the finished thought, it’s a lot easier to fall for it. So this is our next protection. Mindfulness is learning how not to be heedless, how to be mindful at all times, to watch for those little cracks in the mind between thoughts, because all the interesting mechanisms of what’s going on in the mind will be revealed right there if you watch carefully, if you watch consistently. So this is why we meditate. We try to make our mindfulness as consistent as possible. That’s our protection. Because if mindfulness is consistent, then the real dangers in life—your own greed, anger, and delusion—have no way to come in and fool you. So this is our protection right here. They often talk in Thailand of mindfulness as protection. Sometimes a monk will hand out amulets and say, “Look, the amulet can’t help you unless you’re mindful at all times. And the amulet is there to remind you.” It has to be found in the mind. Because even your own body opens you up to all kinds of dangers. As soon as you’re born, there’s this seed, there’s that seed that comes along with the body. This is why we have that chant on the Four Requisites every day. When you’re born, it’s like being born with an open wound. It constantly needs care. You have to feed the body. You have to clothe the body. You have to provide shelter for the body, medicine for the body when it gets sick. It’s not the case that once you’re born, “Oh, that’s it. That’s the end of the problem. That’s the beginning.” Because once you need these things, then there’s always the concern, “Well, I may have them now, but will I have them in the future?” As long as the needs of the body come first, it’s going to lead to all kinds of problems. Many of the horrible things that human beings do to each other is because they’re afraid that they won’t have enough for their bodies. So they’re trying to secure this resource, secure that resource, protect yourself from that person, this person, because those persons may be able to harm the body. So as long as we have this attachment to the body, we’re going to fear death. We’re going to fear danger. So you realize that’s the next step beyond just being mindful. It’s looking at where your attachments are and seeing how they leave you open to all kinds of space for inner dangers to come out. The mind can rationalize all kinds of stuff when it’s latched to the body, when it’s latched to sensual pleasures. It’s because of these things that we do evil. It’s because we have fear over these things that we do evil. This is why we’ve got to learn how to develop a much more solid basis inside, so that we realize that the happiness of the mind doesn’t have to depend on those things outside. In fact, it’s threatened by any attachment to those things outside, so we have to be really careful. So we do what we can once the mind settles down and develops a consistent level of concentration, a consistent level of mindfulness, just to analyze these attachments. Why is it so quick to jump out? Because in the act of trying to protect these things you’re attached to, you expose yourself to all kinds of dangers. So we try to develop a source of happiness that lies entirely within, one that’s not threatened by any kind of change to the body, to the sensory realm at all. In doing this, you find that you protect yourself from the other two reasons for fear of death. One is that if you’ve done anything harsh or cruel to other people, there’s a fear that comes up. There may be a punishment after death. But if you know that you don’t do those things, there’s no fear of punishment. The last one is doubt about the Dharma. Not knowing what the true Dharma is, having doubts about this and that, “Did the Buddha really teach the truth?” or “Didn’t he teach the truth?” or “Who’s teaching the truth these days?” Once you get to that level in the mind where there is no need to depend on things outside, where everything is totally opened up inside, there’s no more doubt. You realize there is that element of the mind that is deathless, and no death of the body can touch it. That forms your basis. It’s a much more solid basis than even the concentration and mindfulness we’re working on. So this is our protection. This is why there are so many teachings on protection, on refuge, on guarding. We learn what’s worth protecting, we learn what’s worth guarding, and let go of the things that actually open us up to other dangers. This is where real protection lies. King Pasenadi came to see the Buddha one time. He said, “You know, I’ve been thinking. The people who look for armies and defenses, their protection, they don’t really protect themselves, because they often take those armies and go out and do all kinds of horrible things, which creates bad karma for themselves and opens themselves up to all kinds of problems in the future, to say nothing of the misery in the present. It’s the people who are guarded in their thoughts, their words, and their deeds. Those are the ones who protect themselves. Those are the ones who love themselves. Those are the ones who free themselves from danger.”

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