Protected by the Practice

November 8, 2003

There’s a phrase in the Theravada, that dhamma protects those who practice it. So one of the things we’re doing here as we meditate is looking for protection, bringing the mind to concentration, developing mindfulness, developing discernment. All these things offer protection to us because they prevent us from doing things that are going to harm ourselves and harm other people. This is probably one of the biggest dangers and the most unsettling thing in the world, the realization that you can’t trust yourself always to do the best thing, always to do the thing that’s going to be in your own true best interest. It’s scary. Because if you can’t trust yourself, who can you trust? You’ve got to turn yourself into a trustworthy being. That’s why we practice it. And when you turn yourself into that trustworthy being, that trustworthy agent, then you find there’s a lot more protection for the mind. In other words, even though you may see people misbehaving around you and the world is full of this kind of stuff, and it has been full of this kind of stuff since who knows when, you have to make up your mind that you’re not going to be influenced by their behavior. You’re not going to be influenced by other events outside. You need the stability inside that keeps you from being influenced by these things. This is why we have to develop concentration in the mind. So we start with thoughts of goodwill, both for ourselves and for others, reminding ourselves of why we’re here. Develop that sense of refuge, because when you have that inner sense of refuge, you’re protection has become a gift not only to yourself but to the people around you. Many times Theravada is characterized as being a selfish path. Sometimes even we begin to pick up the stereotype, thinking, “Well, I’m here to protect myself and take care of myself. That’s all I’m worried about.” But you can’t think that way, because your protection has to involve the protection of others. As the Buddha once said, when you practice the precepts, you’re protecting yourself and you’re giving unlimited protection to those around you. It’s because you’re giving unlimited protection to them that you take a part in that unlimited safety. In other words, under no circumstances would you kill, steal, engage in illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants. When your precept has that quality of absoluteness, then it becomes a real gift, a real protection. But in order to maintain that level of restraint, the mind needs another kind of nourishment. That’s one of the reasons why we train ourselves in concentration. So it has a good place to stay. It feels good being here. Make sure that you always have that quality of feeling good when you’re with the breath, that you’re coming home to a place of rest, a place of well-being. That way, not only do you add to the stability of the mind, you also add to the sense of strength, refreshment, rapture. That’s one of the factors of right concentration, the word bhitti in Pali. It may best be translated as refreshment. It’s related to the verb for drinking. You drink in the quality of well-being. You drink in that quality of feeling full. So there’s no sense of lack. When the mind doesn’t feel a sense of lack, it’s not hungry and it’s not going to go out looking for food in inappropriate places. It looks back on its greed, its anger and delusion and realizes that there’s nothing there that really offers any kind of satisfaction. Because all too often the reason we do unskillful things is because we think that somehow in there there’s going to be a sense of satisfaction. A sense of gratification, that we will somehow gain something by it. When the mind has this inner sense of well-being, this inner sense of strength, and it looks at the kind of pleasure that comes from acting on greed, anger and delusion, on any other unskillful mental states, you realize there’s no real satisfaction there at all. It’s a lot of harm, both for yourself and for the people around you. So when you feed the mind well in this inward way, you find that you can begin to trust it more, that you’re less and less likely to go along with the current of either your own greed, anger and delusion or the greed, anger and delusion of people around you. This becomes your protection. This becomes your safety. So try to develop that sense of being secure here in the present moment, being nourished in the present moment, looking for your happiness here rather than scurrying around and trying to look for happiness elsewhere. Your search for happiness outside is bound to lead to disappointment. When it leads to disappointment, it leads to other sorts of reactions, ones that you really can’t trust yourself. So to avoid that, develop this sense of inner security right here. This is where your true safety comes, is found. As you practice the Dhamma, the Dhamma does come to protect you. And that big fear of not being able to trust yourself gets less and less and less as you see more and more in your practice that you can trust yourself to do the right thing, to do the skillful thing, to do the harmless thing, to do the circumspect thing. And when you find that you can trust yourself, then the dangers of the world seem less imposing, less threatening. Because you realize your most valuable possession is this state of mind. And the only way that it can be destroyed is if you choose to destroy it. Nobody else can come in and touch it. So we work on making ourselves more trustworthy so that we pose less of a danger to ourselves. That’s how the practice of the Dhamma protects us.

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