Protection from Fools

January 1, 2005

Today is the first day of the new year. People came this morning for blessings. Just now we had a chat on blessings. It’s interesting that the word for blessing, mangala, can also mean protection. Where do we need protection more than anything else? Not from our own unskillful intentions. These tend to run rampant through the mind, and they, more than anything else, cause us trouble. So in that chant on blessings, when it says, “Not consorting with fools, consorting with the wise,” the main fools are inside our own head. The opinions we have that we’ve picked up from who knows where, either from other people or from our own reasoning, tend to take over. Some of the most powerful ones are the ones that we’ve barely articulated. We don’t notice them. They seem to be in the background all the time. So they move in like stealth. They move in and do their work, and then they move out and hardly notice that they’ve been there. This is why we need a lot of mindfulness and a lot of alertness in order to see them. This is why the mind has to be very still, because these waves come through the mind. If you’re moving around all the time and another wave comes in, you don’t notice it because you’re obsessed with your own motions of the mind. So a few extra motions don’t register. So the skill you need is to be still, and to keep the mind still requires mindfulness and alertness to protect it. Mindfulness to keep your meditation object in mind, and alertness to see how you’re staying with it. And then there comes discernment, the ability to see how you can maintain this state in the midst of other activities. For most of us, either the mind is very much in meditation or very much out, and there’s no in-between. Or if there is in-between, it’s not skillful. It’s just kind of a mess. But we want to find the level that we can take with us in terms of the causes that we develop, so that no matter where we go, we’ve got this place to stand, where we can trust our perspective. As we all know, so much depends on where you’re standing, how you see things. It depends on what angle you’re looking at them from. And as the Buddha pointed out, what better angle, what better perspective to have than the one that’s gained from standing right here, here in the present moment, right where the mind and the body meet at the breath. Because when you’re here, you can see what’s going on in the mind, you can see what’s going on in the body. You’re in the present moment, where, as the Buddha said, everything starts from here. All your potential for happiness and unhappiness lie right here. There may be things coming in from the past, past karma, but it’s how you deal with those things. That’s what makes all the difference. So the skills you need to learn are skills to be learned right here. The place to stand, to watch things, is right here. And it’s a space where you can get out of some of the obsessions of the mind, so that when the fools come into the mind, you can step back. You don’t have to consider what to do with them, you can just watch them from a distance. This, more than anything else, saves you from a lot of things. It’s one of the basic principles of meditation, that when something dangerous comes into the mind, and you don’t know your way out of it, just stay with a sense of being the observer, watching this. You don’t have to act on it, you don’t have to do anything. And eventually it’ll go away. No matter how strong a desire may be, or no matter how strong your anger may be, it can’t last forever. So many times, these emotions get into us, and we think, “If I don’t act on it, I’ll explode.” Well, exactly what’s going to explode? Your mind doesn’t explode. All there is is some tension in the body, whether it’s some pressure on your blood vessels, but you can work at that with the breath. So why do we feel compelled that we have to act on things just because they come into the mind? Often it’s because we don’t see any alternative. And yet when you step back like this, you begin to see that this is one alternative, the ability to step back. And when you have a different perspective, you begin to see other things as well. This voice, or these voices that come hounding you, telling you to act in this way, or to worry about this, worry about that. You can watch that, too. You don’t have to sing along with them, as we so often do. You don’t have to see things the way they do. One of the Buddha’s greatest insights is that you have to watch out for the questions that are implicit. When someone says, “You’ve got to do things this way. You’ve got to do things that way,” exactly what question is that way of acting supposed to resolve? Think of it that way. Then you realize also you don’t have to ask every question that comes into the mind. Some questions do nothing but entangle you. It’s only a few sets of questions that liberate you. Questions dealing with, “Where is the stress here? How can I comprehend it? What’s the cause of the stress? How can I let it go? How can I let it go? What qualities need to be developed?” Those kinds of questions deserve answering. The other kinds of questions are, “What’s going to happen if you don’t control this situation? What’s going to happen if you don’t try this, don’t try that?” Those are not necessarily questions you have to answer. You can just let them hang in the air until they go away. They may come back again, but they’ll go away again. You have to decide what questions are the important ones to answer in your life. It’s best to do that from the perspective that lets you know that you don’t have to answer everything. When something comes up in the mind, look at the question implicit behind it. That helps you see through a lot of false issues. The real issues in life are not all that many. They’re complex enough so they require your full attention, but they’re not that many of them. Once you start with this issue of, “Stress and its ending,” and focus on that, then you can sort everything else out from that perspective. Where is stress seen? It’s seen right here. Where is its cause seen? Its cause is seen right here, too. That’s another reason why it’s good to take your stance right here in the present moment. The stance that allows you to step back and look at all the dramatic issues the mind tends to build out of this issue of stress. When you reduce it to stress, one thing, it’s right there. It’s in the immediate present. So many times the issues we’re worried about are things that we’ve spun out from our sensations in the present moment, our expectations. Our memories can create all kinds of things. But look at the raw materials. What have you got here? Well, there’s stress. That’s the problem. There’s a sense of stress, of disease. And the Buddha’s reducing it to stress. It also helps de-romanticize it. It makes it a lot less dramatic. So many people carry around their stress and their pain and their suffering as if it were precious possession. After all, it is their identity. I’m afraid that they’d be nothing without it. And this was the Buddha’s great insight, that you’re not nothing without it. But whatever you lose by letting it go is nothing to be regretted. But first reduce it to these very basic issues. Look at the issues in life with a minimum of dramatization, giving them excess importance. Reduce them to these very basic things. It’s just plain old stress, nothing dramatic. It’s something everybody has, everybody can talk about. But it takes someone who’s focused like the Buddha to really look at it and tease out its implications, that this is the big problem in life. What does that mean in terms of other problems? Some of them you have to work on. A lot of them you can learn to let go if you focus exclusively enough on this issue. Once this issue is taken care of, that covers everything. So try to get to this level where it’s just the issue of stress arising and passing away in the present moment. When you can stand at that spot where you can see this, then everything else falls into perspective. Then you have your magic protective skill that protects you from all the fools in the mind as well. When they spin all their complicated issues, you can see it’s just cotton candy. A lot of fluff, but no real substance. The real substance is just a little stream of sugar. Once you resolve the stream of sugar, then there’s nothing else left.

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