How the Dhamma Protects

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There’s a story they tell when there was a fire in the market in Surin in Thailand. A lot of people lost all their possessions. Some of them went to Lumbudun and complained that all those years they’d been making merit and they didn’t see how the merit had protected them from the fire. They were going to give up and stop coming to the monastery because they didn’t see that the Dhamma had protected them. And Lumbu’s response was, “Well, that’s not how the Dhamma protects. When you practice the Dhamma, it strengthens your mind.” As for the affairs of the world, those are going to have to go along in their ordinary way. Where there’s gain, there’s going to be loss. Status, there’s also going to be loss of status. Where there’s praise, there’s criticism. Where there’s pleasure, there’s pain. The hunts have to put up with these things, but the difference is that their minds are not shaken by them. That’s how the Dhamma protects, as we develop the mind, develop our powers of concentration, develop our powers of discernment. It puts us in a position where these things don’t touch us. After all, look at the human mind. Look at the human world. Look at your body. Once you’re born, there’s going to be aging, there’s going to be illness, there’s going to be death, even inside your own body. Then you look at the world around you, the people you love. If you don’t leave them first, they’re going to leave you first. The image the Buddha has is of a person being swept down a river and there’s grass along the side of the river. You grab on to the grass so you don’t get swept along. What happens instead is either you cut your hands on the grass or the grass gets pulled out of the bank. It’s as if all you can think of is clutching at things around you. That’s what happens. They cut your hands and then they pull away and they go along with you. They don’t protect you at all. The mind’s best protection is the qualities it develops inside. When you’ve developed good powers of concentration, your mind doesn’t get pulled after this or pulled after that. That, in and of itself, is a lot of protection. When you develop good will, try to develop good will for everybody. Think of yourself sitting right here and sending a message to somebody. Sending thoughts of goodwill off to the east, off to the west, to the north and the south, including everybody in all those directions. Thoughts of goodwill above and below, all around. That helps in two ways. One is, the more you develop a sense of goodwill, the harder you find it is to do harmful things to other people. And at the same time, the Buddha said, it actually helps protect you from really strong, bad karma from the past. He said it weakens it. It doesn’t mean that it doesn’t happen, but the power of the goodwill weakens the bad karma from the past. But that’s still not the best protection. The best protection, once the mind is solid and secure in concentration, is that you start looking at where the mind is still attached. Where it hankers after sensual desires, where it gets caught up in anger, where you’re attached to things, where you’re attached to your body. You have to examine these attachments. The reason the mind is attached is because it feels that its happiness has to depend on these things. And that if it were forced to leave, it would be miserable. Well, as long as you think that, you’re going to force yourself to be miserable, because you’re going to have to leave these things. Sometimes it’s gradual, sometimes it’s sudden. But if you can begin to see that the mind is perfectly fine without having to depend on these things, then you can begin to let go and you see how much of that attachment is on the one hand based on ignorance, but on the other hand based on your own actions. As Ajahn Lee once said, “We’re attached to food, but food isn’t attached to us.” If we don’t eat the rice, the rice isn’t going to cry. We’re attached to the body, but the body’s not attached to us. It’s made up of physical elements. If they come together to form a body, it doesn’t mean anything to the elements. If the body starts falling apart, it doesn’t mean anything to them either. All the dramas and narratives and fears are on our side. So what we’re doing is we’re creating a lot of unnecessary suffering for ourselves, putting the mind in a position where it can be attacked from all sides. If we learn how to let go, then there are no bridges by which dangers can come in. We’re the ones who build the bridges so that anything can come in and out. As a result, a lot of suffering, a lot of insecurity, comes into the mind. Because we know the things that we’ve built our bridges to are all going to change. Whether we like to think about it or not, we know that fact deep down inside. So to protect yourself, you have to learn how to let go and realize that the mind is actually a lot better off when it does let go of all those ideas we had that we had to depend on this thing or that person in order to be happy. You see that it comes from misunderstanding. The mind is a lot happier without leaning on these things. This doesn’t mean that you have to leave them, but you learn how to live in the world without having to depend on the world for your happiness. That puts you in a much better position. When things go well, you can function well. When they go poorly, you can function well. So many of us are in a position where when things go well, we’re good, and then when they turn, then we turn as well. In that case, we can’t even depend on ourselves, much less depend on the world outside. So you want to develop this sense of independent well-being inside the mind. To do that, you have to look at the world in a very objective way, realizing that all of us in the human realm have a mixture of good and bad karma. Even Arahants have bad karma from the past. Moggallana, many lifetimes past, had killed his parents, and that karma still dogged his heels all the way up to his last life. But he’d put his mind in a position where it wasn’t shaken, it wasn’t harmed by it. The image they give in the canon is of a stone pillar, sixteen yards tall, eight yards buried down in the ground on a mountain. It’s so well-planted that no matter what direction the wind comes from and no matter how strong it blows, the pillar doesn’t shake. That’s the kind of mind you want to develop, the one that’s ready to face whatever the consequences of its past actions are. As the Buddha pointed out, our experience of each moment is dependent on two things, the results of past actions and our present actions. As far as your past actions are concerned, you don’t really know what you’ve got there in the past. But you can’t know what your present karma is because you can develop the powers of the mind that make you more and more clear about what your intentions are. And you can focus on making sure that whatever you’ve got coming from the past, you know that you’ve got skillful intentions here in the future. Intentions that don’t aim at harm, they don’t aim at attachment, they don’t aim at anything unskillful. That’s your protection. So work on developing the powers of mind. Concentration, discernment, mindfulness, that help you to be clear about your present intentions and also help you shape those intentions so that you can will the skillful thing at all times. The trick here is looking at things that you might want to do in the present moment. There may be things that you like to do, but they give bad results. Or you don’t like to do them, but they give good results. That’s where you have to exercise as much discernment, as much wisdom as possible. We tend to think of the Buddha’s teachings on wisdom as being very abstract, but they’re not. They’re very down-to-earth. What are you doing? What are the consequences of what you’re doing? If you know that there’s something you’d like to do, but it’s going to give bad results, how can you talk yourself out of doing it? That’s a lot of wisdom right there. If there’s something you don’t like to do, but you know it’s going to give good results, how can you talk yourself into doing it? Now can you focus on this question and not let other issues get in the way? That, when you come down to it, is what wisdom really means. It’s pretty basic, but we don’t like to look at this question. We want to do what we want to do and we want to make sure that we’re promised that the results are going to be good no matter what. That doesn’t work that way. The Buddha’s teachings on how to be happy are very realistic. Someone once said that the events of 9/11 burst his complacent Buddhist bubble. A complacent Buddhist is an oxymoron. Buddhists are not complacent. They’re heedful. They look at the world for what it is, but they also know where the true protection is, so they don’t waste their time. They don’t spend their time on false protection. They don’t sit around hoping that bad things won’t happen to them. They prepare, because they know bad things do happen to everybody. But the difference is how you react to them. If you can develop your mind so that it’s really strong, then it doesn’t matter what comes. You’re ready for it. You’re not shaken. You can keep on doing the skillful thing. You can trust yourself. That’s how the Dhamma protects, because it teaches you how to protect yourself. How to protect yourself from your own ignorance and craving, from your own attachments. Once you’ve taken care of those dangers, then there’s really nothing to pose any danger for the mind at all.

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