Defensive Position

July 22, 2008

People often complain that there’s not much in the Pali Canon for lay practice, how to meditate in day-to-day life when you’ve got a job and a family. But actually, there’s more than people think. One of the more interesting sections actually has to do with kings. There’s a series of suttas where King Basanati comes to talk to the Buddha about various issues that he sees in his life as a king, even though we may not be kings or queens. Basically, King Basanati stands for how life is the best life can get for a lay person. And there are still issues, there are still problems, even for a king. And it turns out that the king’s issues are not that much different from ours. Even though he may seem to have power, he’s still hemmed in by all kinds of issues. And he, too, has to deal with people who cheat, people who steal, people who lie. And in the beginning, the king is portrayed as being not all that, but tuned in to spiritual matters. But gradually, bit by bit by bit, as he visits the Buddha, he likes to come and talk about some realization that he has in the course of the day. One of them is that people who are wealthy would think they would have enough wealth already. They’d be willing to share it, they’d be willing to settle back and not be so grasping. He says sometimes they’re the worst in terms of lying to get more wealth. Things haven’t changed. There’s one interesting passage where he talks about defense. A king’s defense policy usually is to have a big army, have a big stock of weapons, big fortresses. And one day the realization comes to him that the people who do that really don’t have themselves well protected. Because as long as they’re still doing unskillful things in their thoughts, their words, and their deeds, they leave themselves wide open to the results of those unskillful actions. And that’s a good principle for us to think about as well as we go through life. We live in a difficult world. In a world where there are a lot of people who would like nothing more than to take advantage of us. We have to think about what is our best defense. In terms of the principle of karma, it’s that if you don’t do anything unskillful, negative things won’t happen to you. You say, “Well, what about stuff from the past? Well, that’s obvious that things from the past will come. After all, anyone born in the human realm has got a mixture of good and bad karma. We have to accept that as a fact of life. But the question is, are you going to let the bad things come at you in such a way that you start responding in a bad way yourself? The fact that we all have old karma, that’s a given. Our choice, though, is what we’re going to do. We’re going to do and say and think right now in response to situations that sometimes are positive and sometimes are not. There’s a passage in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says,”If a hand doesn’t have a wound, it can hold poison and not get poisoned by it. If you’ve got the wound, then the poison can enter.” The wound here would be the unskillful things you do and say and think right now. There’s another passage where it says, “No one else can defile us. We’re the ones who defile ourselves. No one else can purify us. We’re the ones who purify ourselves.” Purity comes through discernment. You can’t sit and meditate and burn off your old past karma. That’s an idea that the Buddha expressly attacked. But you can use discernment in how you react to things. You can use it in difficult situations, remembering that no matter what anyone says to you that seems to besmirch you, their words can’t touch you. You besmirch yourself with your actions, so you’ve got to be very careful about what you say. In other words, you’ve got to have a good defensive position, a good defensive policy. Meditation provides a lot of that defense, because it gives you a good, solid place to stay inside. It provides you with something to hold on to, in other words, the breath, the energy in the body, which doesn’t have to be affected by anything anyone else does or says. So you’ve got your safe position. In commentaries, they talk about the foundations of mindfulness or the foundations of the mind. The frames of reference as your fortress, as your secure ground. When an army is going to engage another army in battle, you want to have the high ground, the position that’s difficult for them to attack. And the breath provides you with just that. Especially when you deal with the entire range of breath energy in the body. We mentioned this this afternoon that you find yourself dealing with people sometimes and it seems like their energy invades your space, and it’s not a positive energy. One thing you’ve got to make sure of is that there’s no room for them to invade. You fully occupy your body. We had that chant just now about the body as being unattainable. The work is not down on the body, per se. It’s simply down on the way we often approach it, i.e., as an object of lust. But if you’re serious about the practice, you want to use the body in a different way. It’s not so much the body as an object of the sense of something you see or touch or taste or hear or whatever. It’s something you inhabit from the inside. That’s called rupa, the body as form, as opposed to the body being a sensual object. The more fully you inhabit it, the less anybody else is going to be able to invade it, and the more you can develop a sense of ease and well-being inside. That’s one of the other functions of the body. As you meditate, you can work with the energy in the body to provide a sense of fullness, and ease. That’s food for the mind. Once you learn how to feed from within this way, you begin to realize that in the past you looked for your food outside. You wanted other people to say nice things. You wanted other people to act nice ways toward you. That was the food for your mind. But what kind of food is that? Sometimes people will say nice things, and it’s like handing you food on a platter. And other times they say horrible things. It’s like they spit out the food on the ground, and you get down on your hands and your knees and you eat it up. Think about that. The negative things that people say, you don’t want to feed on them, which means you have to learn not to feed on even the positive things they say. You’ve got to have your own internal source of food, which is food. That’s what this sense of fullness in the body can provide. One way of inducing that is to focus on a section of the body that seems to get squeezed when you breathe in or squeezed when you breathe out, and very consciously breathe in such a way that you don’t squeeze it when the breath comes in and you don’t squeeze it when the breath goes out. Allow it to have its own fullness. Ask yourself, where do you tend to create sensations to signal the in-breath and create sensations to signal the out-breath? Learn how not to create those sensations. Just let that part of the body be alone. Leave it alone for a while. Let it have its own fullness. And then think of the fullness spreading from that spot. More and more and more, the body feels full, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. And when you get the hang of this, you realize you can do this at any time. I don’t know how many people tell me that they were meditating along and then life got difficult and they just didn’t seem to have the energy to meditate. It’s when life gets difficult that you need the meditation the most, because it gives you energy. It doesn’t take energy away from you. It provides you with energy. It provides the mind with the food and nourishment it needs. Keep this point in mind and you’ll realize that your best position in any situation is to be able to stay with the breath and allow it to be as full as possible. Because when things get difficult, you’re going to need to be as mindful and alert as possible to make sure that you don’t act and speak in unskillful ways. The more you feel threatened, the more likely you are to say things without thinking them through. Your knee-jerk reaction is to go to your old ways of defense. But as King Vasanidhi said, those kind of attacks are not necessarily your best defense. Your best defense is to make sure that you don’t say anything unskillful, don’t do anything unskillful. And that means just being quiet for a second. That doesn’t mean that you’re giving the other person the advantage. In fact, you’ve got the advantage because you’re the one who’s stepping out of the situation a bit and you’ve got a position of strength. And even if you can’t think of anything to say at that particular time, or you end up saying something that might not have been the best thing to say, at least you’re in a position where you can correct for it. Some people say that as soon as the mind is still, you can trust anything that comes to mind. Well, no, you can’t. But the mind does still put you in a better position to think of the right thing. And if you find that you just said the wrong thing, well, you can recognize the fact and correct for it. Think of the story of Shackleton’s expedition. He went down to Antarctica. The plan was to cross the continent. They didn’t even get to the continent. The ship was locked in by ice. He had to leave the ship. He ended up rowing to an island off what’s called the Palmer Peninsula. From there, a small boat of them went over to South Georgia and eventually found other people who came and saved the expedition. Nobody died, which was amazing. What kept them alive was their sense of discipline, because there were many times during the expedition when it looked like everything was hopeless. But they all realized that if we give in to our hopelessness, that we’re going to die for sure. Our only way out is to remember our discipline, what should be done right now. You just do what should be done. And you look back from a position of knowing what the mendicant did not know at the time, you realize that the leader of the expedition, Shackleton, made a number of wrong decisions. But the fact that the group as a whole maintained its discipline meant that it could survive even wrong decisions. It could compensate for them. It didn’t make the situation worse. So as you take up your defensive position in life, and we may not like the idea that we have to be defensive, but there it is, the position maximizes your chances for survival, i.e., the survival of the goodness of the mind. So even if you do make wrong decisions, you can correct for them and you don’t compound the error by flailing around. So learn to use the body in a way that is helpful to the practice. As I said, the Buddha is not negative about the body. He just says it’s wrong to approach it as an object of lust. It’s right to approach it as something that you can use as a good foundation. After all, it’s one of the frames of reference or foundations of mindfulness, a place where you can develop the right concentration. And from that concentration, you can develop the wisdom. That’s your protection. So learn how to inhabit the body. We may say the body is not self, but for the time being, inhabit it. This is a basic principle in concentration. We talk about things being inconstant, stressful, and not self. But you’re actually trying to create a state of mind that is as constant as the mind. That you own as much of the space as you can, with as little stress as possible. It’s kind of like pushing against those three characteristics. But there are a lot of paradoxes in the path, and you’re never really going to know how much things are, maybe, in an ultimate level, inconstant, stressful, and not self, until you push against them a bit and create this position of strength. Because it’s your protection, and as you protect yourself, you protect others. You’ve probably heard the story of the acrobats, where one acrobat is standing on the shoulders of the other, and the teacher is on the bottom, and he says to a student, “Okay, now you look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and that way we’ll come down safely.” They’re standing on the top of a bamboo pole, and the assistant says to her teacher, “No, that’s not going to work. I look out after myself, and you look out after yourself, and that way we’ll protect each other.” If you look out after your words, your thoughts, your words, and your deeds to make sure that they’re not unskillful, you’re protecting yourself and you’re protecting the people around you. So it’s not just every person for him or herself. This is a practice where you’re protecting yourself. Protection is protection for others as well. You keep your balance, and you don’t throw other people off their balance, except for times when they want to be unskillful. It’s like martial arts. If you maintain your balance, the other person gets off-balance. Well, here, the other person is getting off-balance because they’re trying to do something unskillful. At the very least, if their unskillful activity doesn’t continue as a chain into your unskillful response, whatever is unskillful just drops right there at your feet, and you don’t have to pick it up. That’s how we protect ourselves as we protect others, and we protect others as we protect ourselves. In the long run, this is the best defensive policy of all.

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