Protection

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The Buddha’s last instructions said that we should attain completion or culmination in our practice through heedfulness. It’s good to stop and think about the implications of what that means and why he would stress the quality of heedfulness more than any other as the basis for success in the practice. It’s not the only place where he stressed that. He once said that the basis for all skillful qualities of the mind is heedfulness. Heedfulness is a recognition of several things. One is that there are dangers. We have to watch out for dangers inside and outside. Yet they are things that we can watch out for and we can prepare for. It’s not like the dangers are totally overwhelming or that we have no recourse against them. They are things we can prepare for. But we have to watch out. We have to be vigilant. We have to be wakeful. This relates to one of the main differences I noticed between Buddhism here in the West and the Buddhism I was familiar with in Thailand when I came back to the States. Here the Buddhist teachers talk a lot about being open and being vulnerable. Their picture of how we relate to one another has only two alternatives. Either you’re closed down like a clam and you miss out on the beauty of life and the wonders of social interaction out of fear of being harmed. As a result, you miss out on all the good things that people have to offer. Or you’re totally open and vulnerable. And even though being vulnerable can hurt, it’s the only way that you’re going to experience the joys of human interaction—interaction with the world at large. That is so often the case. The Buddha didn’t see things in just those two alternatives. And it relates to the attitude I saw in Thailand, which was that most people come to Buddhism for protection, a very strong sense of the dangers in the world. One of the favorite verses over there is that the Dhamma protects those who practice it. And even people who don’t want to practice the Dhamma come to monasteries for protection. They want amulets, they want protective charms, whatever. But even the more serious practitioners hold by that principle that the Dhamma protects those who practice it. This is what gives the monks who go out in the forest a sense of confidence, that even though they’re facing dangers, the fact that they’re virtuous, the fact that they have goodwill, the fact that they’re developing the mind in terms of concentration and discernment, that’s a form of protection. The Buddha himself encourages this attitude. He says that when you’re out in the forest, terror overcomes you as you think of all the dangers that could happen. And the dangers are very clear. There are thieves in the forest, wild animals in the forest, all kinds of diseases, and you’re far away from any help. So where do you turn? The Buddha says, “Think about the Buddha. The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.” Remember that they are limitless. The good qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are limitless, and there is a limit to creeping things. Snakes, lizards, scorpions, whatever. He says it’s the same way that when the devas did battle and their Nira failed them, as long as they saw that the top of the banner for their forces was still held high, they could take confidence in the same way. This is the top of the banner for all of us, thinking about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Of course, it’s not the case that they’re going to come down and help us in those situations, but it’s the qualities that we develop in the mind that are our protection. We’re not shutting ourselves off so much from other people. After all, we do have good will for others. We wish no one any harm. But we have to recognize that people can do us harm, and it doesn’t serve any purpose to open ourselves up to that harm. You look at the harm that people do to you, and oftentimes you see that you’ve opened the way for them to do this. Part of this has to do with the fact that if their words can get to you, it’s because the words in your own mind can get to you. The voices in your mind can tell you all kinds of things that you believe without any reason. Which is why when other people come up and say unreasonable things, it’s very easy for them to make inroads into the mind. So this is one of the things we have to learn to be careful about, to be heedful of. We have to look at how we react to what’s being said in the mind. This is why concentration is such an important part of our protection. Because where are you protecting? You’re protecting your goodness, your sense of well-being, your sense of inner strength—all of which are necessary to goodness. We tend to think of goodness as kind of a weak quality against the strength of what’s evil. But actually, your goodness has to be strong. That’s why we have to develop strong concentration. So no matter what comes up in the mind—when memories arise, thoughts arise, self-recrimination, whatever—we have to learn how to be resilient toward it. You don’t have to listen to it. You don’t have to believe it. Always ask yourself, “Is that true? What is it coming from?” It’s good to learn the tone of voice that anger takes, or greed, or fear, or any of the other unskillful emotions when they’re speaking up in the mind. You have to learn how to recognize them and develop that quality of not believing everything you hear. So regardless of what the mind says—whether it shouts at you or whispers at you or whatever—you have to say, “Nope, nope, nope. I’m not going there. I’m not letting that come into me. I don’t have to listen to it.” Just think of it as a loudspeaker blaring in your head. You don’t have to believe everything in the loudspeaker. In fact, this is your first defense, just not believing. It’s like when they teach Thai boxing. The first thing they teach you is how to retreat. When things get difficult, you just back out. At the same time, in backing out, you keep your defenses up. You don’t just run away. You back out, but you protect yourself. So you still can’t see through a particular unskillful line of thought. You learn how to back out of it and say, “Nope, just not going to get involved.” And at the same time, you want to use your breath as your ally. This is why we talk so much about getting the breath comfortable. Think of the breath energy moving freely. In a coordinated way throughout the body. Because that’s your position of strength. And you learn how to inhabit your space so these voices inside the mind don’t come in and take up your space. The head belongs to you. The neck belongs to you. The torso, the arms, the shoulders, the hands, your hips, your legs, your feet—everything belongs to you. You might even want to think of a cocoon spreading out a couple inches outside of the body. That belongs to you as well. That’s your space. And you want to fill it so these little voices don’t move in and erase your space. Like that old cartoon of the meditator. She’s sitting there and very still, and all of a sudden the word “think” appears on her forehead. Then another “think” appears on her shoulder, blotting out. Then another “think” appears, blotting out her knee. And by the end of the cartoon, it’s just “think, think, think, think, think,” blotting out her entire body. You can’t let those little thoughts invade you. Think of them hovering around the outside. They’re going to be there, but they don’t have to invade your space. This is one way, in line with what the Buddha said to Rahula, to try to make your mind like earth, like wind, like water, like fire. These things don’t react. You have to keep in mind that there’s always a possibility that a thought can come in and just really make you miserable and actually destroy your goodness. So you just have to learn to say, “Don’t believe everything you think.” Ajahn Mahaprabhu once said that one of the most valuable lessons he learned from Ajahn Mun, the one that he took as his refuge when strange things came up in his meditation, was just to say with a sense of the knower, not get involved in whatever strange stuff was coming through or happening. You take the breath as your first step to just being aware of awareness in and of itself that doesn’t react, that doesn’t respond, that doesn’t take in these thoughts or emotions. And then when you learn how not to be affected by your own thoughts, you don’t have to be affected by the thoughts of other people, especially when you know for sure that it’s unhealthy, unhelpful. To take in their thoughts, you just think of your space as something you’re occupying and you’re not going to let them occupy your space. Often it’s not just their words that occupy the space. You also begin to feel their energy occupying your space as well. You can’t let that happen. And this doesn’t mean that you’re totally shut off like a clam because you’re fully occupying the body with awareness. So you’re aware of what they’re saying. And it’s strange that you’re also more and more aware of exactly where they’re coming from. If you see that it’s unskillful, you just let it pass. That’s the skillful response. If there are other skillful responses, you’re coming from a position of strength. You’re not allowing them to invade you. So you’re coming from a greater sense of security. This is why you’re not being heartless. You’re not being shut off from humanity. You’re coming from a position where you can actually extend goodwill without fear of being invaded. That goodwill becomes your protection. Goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. These qualities are all here. They’re your best line of defense. In not allowing other people to invade your space, you’re not just shutting yourself off and closing yourself down. You’re aware. There’s a sense of openness, but it’s protected. You’re not just open for anything that comes in. Your awareness is all around. Your space is filled with good energy. The mind is resilient. In that way, you find you can deal not only with the words of other people, their energy, their actions, but events in general. When you’ve got your stronghold here, you’re in a much better position to deal with whatever comes up. You see the dangers, but at the same time not to have your goodness wounded. This is why heedfulness is the basis for all skillful qualities. You realize you’ve got to develop what’s good in the mind, what’s protective in the mind, not only to ward off dangers from outside, but to take care of dangers that come from within. You need to be aware and to be alert, because once you deal with the blatant dangers, you’ll find, well, there are the subtle dangers you missed the first time around. So you go back again and you look at the more subtle ones. You take care of those, and you find there are layers and layers of potential dangers, both from without and from within. But as long as you can maintain your space, maintain your strength, that’s your best line of defense. That’s your best protection.

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