Protecting Others, Protecting Yourself

December 31, 2012

Take the breath right here, right now, and make that your frame of reference. You don’t have to think about the world outside or any worlds that come up in your mind, aside from the world that’s centered on the breath. As the Buddha said, you’re trying to bring three qualities to the breath. The act of staying with the breath. And alert, mindful. Take those in reverse order. Mindful. You’re trying to keep the breath in mind. This is the one thing you’re going to remember to stay with. We stay with the breath, we’re staying with the sensation of the energy that flows through the body. You can sense it anywhere in the body. Focus on where it’s clearest. And remember to stay here. The alert is the quality of being right here with what’s going on. Being alert to the breath, being alert to your mind as well. Noticing when the mind is beginning to slip off. Noticing when it’s staying here. Noticing when the breath is coming in. Noticing when it’s going out. Noticing whether it’s comfortable or not. And you try to do this well. In other words, when you notice these things, you don’t just sit there and say, “Oh, that’s the way it’s going to be,” and just leave it there. If there’s anything unskillful going on in the mind, you try to get rid of it and try to develop skillful qualities in its place. In other words, if you notice that the mind is slipping off the breath, you just bring it right back. If you notice that the breath is uncomfortable, you can just change it, because you want to make the breath a good place to stay, something where the mind feels at ease, where it feels stable, staying in the present moment, feels at home. Then, as the Buddha says, you put aside any greed or distress with reference to the world and any thoughts that have to do with the world outside. Just put them aside for the time being. You don’t have to be concerned about them. You are right here. And right here is what matters. That’s the attitude you’ve got to have. Of course, part of the mind will be concerned. Are you just taking a little time out here? What about all the other important issues in life? One of the things you can be confident of is that if you have the right attitude toward the practice, then, in the Buddha’s words, you’re protecting yourself and you’re protecting others. If you think about any of the issues that might happen in the future, you realize that you don’t really know what’s going to happen in the future. You don’t know how much longer you’re going to live. There are people who are alive right now who will not live to see 2013. And with the future so uncertain, what do you do? You prepare as you can. Make plans. But one of the most important things you can do is train the mind so that whatever comes up, you’ll have qualities of ardency, alertness, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, and all the other good qualities you need to deal with the unexpected. So as you’re looking after the present moment, you’re looking after the future as well. You’re developing good qualities in mind, things that will stand you in good stead as you move into the new year. That’s for protecting others. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that when you practice establishing mindfulness in this way, you have the attitude that you will protect others, you’ll protect yourself, or in protecting others you’re protecting yourself, and in protecting yourself you’re protecting others. For instance, if you really are ardent, alert, and mindful in trying to keep skillful qualities growing in the mind, the things you do with regard to other people are bound to be a lot more skillful. So as you’re looking after your own mind and taking care of your own actions, the people around you are bound to benefit. This is why the Buddha says that the way you benefit others by first looking after yourself is by being ardent in the practice, staying here with the breath, keeping the breath as your foundation as you go through the day. Some people will complain that it’s just adding one more task to the multitask they’re doing. But you can look at it in another way, which is that the breath gives you a good, solid place to stand. So it’s not one more thing. It’s a place you have to stand with a sense of stability as you juggle the rest of your life. That puts you in a better position. So you stay with the breath. And you really do try to develop whatever good qualities can be developed around the breath. It’s not just a matter of watching things coming and going. After all, when the Buddha set out the Four Noble Truths, that’s the basic principle of his teaching. Each truth has a duty. Suffering or stress is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. You try to realize the cessation of stress, and you do that by developing the path. There’s a fair amount of abandoning and developing that has to go on. So you stay here, and you try to develop what’s good, and you try to develop what’s good, and you try to abandon what’s unskillful. And you keep pursuing this. In other words, you try to make it better and better and better all the time. And as you develop these qualities of staying with the breath, developing, and pursuing the practice, the people around you are sure to benefit. So you get rid of unskillful qualities in the mind. Unskillful qualities are going to come out in your words and your deeds. That’s a form of protection right there. You’re protecting people from your greed, aversion, and delusion. And that’s not a minor thing. The analogy the Buddha gives is of two acrobats. One acrobat is standing on the shoulders of the other one. Then the acrobat whose shoulders are being stood on is standing on the edge of a bamboo pole, the tip of a bamboo pole that’s set upright. So he’s really got to have a good sense of balance. In a case like that, the Buddha says, each acrobat has to look after his or her own sense of balance. And in doing so, it makes it a lot easier for the other person. If one person tries to worry about the other person’s sense of balance, they’re both going to fall down. So here’s one case where you look after yourself, and in the course of that you protect others. But it’s also the case, he says, that when you look after others, when you protect others, you’re protecting yourself. He doesn’t give any analogy for this one, but there are four qualities he lists as attitudes you want to bring to the path and attitudes you want to bring to the way you deal with other people. The first is endurance, or patience. Kanti is the Pali word. There are a lot of harsh words out there in this world, and if you let yourself get worked up about them, you’re going to suffer. The people around you are going to suffer. So you endure what you have to endure, and you don’t make a big deal out of it. And Ajahn Mahaprabhu has a nice discussion of this. He says, “You know, when people say harsh things, it’s just a little bit of breath coming out of their mouth, and a little bit of sound, and it hits the ears, and that’s it. The problem is that we take it and let it reverberate around in our minds for a long, long time.” And why did that person say that? Why did that person disrespect me? Why does that person treat me this way? It just goes on and on and on. And as a result, you suffer. When you feel weighed down, when you feel oppressed by the other person’s words, it’s sure to have an effect on the way you treat the other person. So you learn to forgive, and you learn to be patient. You learn to have a sense of endurance. You learn to take these things. You remind yourself that this is the way speech is in the human world. Try to depersonalize it as much as possible. The problem is we personalize it. It’s not just a sound. It’s not just a word. It’s that person’s intentions, that person’s attitude towards you, or whatever. It makes it a much bigger issue than it has to be. You want to learn how to minimize issues. Instead of creating problems for yourself and other people, you’re trying to solve the problems. One of the ways is by learning to have a sense of endurance. There are a lot of things you can take and you don’t have to get worked up about them. Just let them go, let them slide off, and that’s it. Just keep reminding yourself this is the kind of speech people encounter in the human world. You were the one who wanted to be born here, so here you are. And if you have the attitude that you can take it, you find you really can. Because after all, it is just. An unpleasant sound makes contact at the ear. That’s what the Buddha has you say to yourself when that sort of thing happens. That’s not what you say. “Why did so-and-so say that? I’ve got to show them that they can’t treat me like that.” And it goes on and on and on. Is that what you want? So you’re learning how to take the things that are there to be taken. In other words, that you can endure them. And it’s no big deal. So when you learn how to endure other people’s words, endure their unskillful behavior, you protect yourself at the same time that you’re letting the issue just drop right there. You’re protecting the other person. That’s the first quality. Endurance. The second quality is harmlessness. However harmful that other person’s words or actions may be, you’re not going to respond in a harmful way. You try to choose the action that doesn’t harm the other person, doesn’t harm yourself. This is one of the reasons why, as we deal with other people, the precepts are so important. They give you basic guidelines. They’re the kind of behavior that in any situation is going to cause harm. You don’t kill, you don’t steal, you don’t have illicit sex, you don’t lie, and you don’t take intoxicants. As you protect other people from unskillful behavior or harmful behavior in yourself, you benefit. Your own mind is a lot more open. If you’ve harmed somebody else, there’s a lot of denial that goes on in the mind. There’s a lot of regret, neither of which are conducive to any kind of stable, wide-open concentration, the kind of concentration that you would want to give rise to discernment. So as you adopt the policy of being harmless, your mind benefits as well. This is when you adopt the policy of learning how to be patient and have endurance and tolerance for other people’s unskillful behavior. It teaches you not to get worked up about pains and unpleasant things inside, which means that you can observe yourself a lot more clearly. These are two of the ways in which protecting others protects yourself. Then there’s an attitude of goodwill. When you show goodwill for others, it makes life with them a lot easier. Because even when you have unpleasant things to say, when you have to point out that they’ve done something wrong, say, if somebody’s working for you and you’ve got to talk to that person about how their behavior is not up to standard. If you approach that person with an attitude of goodwill, the other person will be a lot more likely to listen and take it to heart. Both sides benefit. Together with goodwill, there’s an attitude of sympathy. When you’re dealing with other people, you realize they have feelings too. All too often we want to express our feelings. And the other person’s feelings just get pushed off to the side. But when you stop and think of this, the other person has feelings that are very similar to yours. So again, if you have to say something that’s unpleasant, you find a way to say it so that the other person doesn’t feel threatened, doesn’t feel insulted. And then taking the time and the care to think about the other person’s feelings. To see where that person is coming from, you learn to open up yourself inside to parts of your own mind that you may have closed off. So it’s in this way that, protecting others, you protect yourself by having an attitude of sympathy. You create a much better environment for the training of your own mind. It’s much more likely that the mind will settle down in a state of stable concentration. You will be able to develop the discernment you need to understand why you’re suffering, what you’re doing to cause yourself suffering. So we practice with this attitude that in developing the mind in this way, we’re protecting ourselves, and in protecting ourselves, we’re protecting others. And the attitude we have in protecting others, we protect ourselves. This is why there’s a great deal of safety in practicing the Buddhist teachings, because they’re harmless all around. Not only harmless, they lead to positive good all around. So as you stay with the breath, develop the qualities of the breath, develop the mind, and they’re needed to stay with the breath. You’re covering a lot of the rest of your life as well.

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