The Three Dangers

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The insight that drove the Buddha to seek awakening was that we live in a dangerous world and we’re dangerous people. In other words, there are dangers outside and inside. The main danger that he focused on to begin with was simply the fact that wherever there’s birth, there’s going to be aging, illness, and death. And that all the things that he could look for, for happiness, were subject to aging, illness, and death. And he realized the only safety, true safety, would be in something that didn’t age, didn’t grow ill, and didn’t die. But the question was, did that safety exist? In the course of his quest, he also discovered that there are other dangers as well. The other danger outside is simply the teachings out there, the attitudes, the beliefs that we can pick up very easily from the people around us, can lead us to do some very unskillful things. And the reason we’re susceptible to that is because we have some unskillful attitudes inside us. It’s not the case that we’re basically good and society makes us bad. If we’re really innately good, nothing outside could affect that goodness. Or if we were innately bad, we wouldn’t be able to help ourselves. The thing is, we have a mixture of good and bad within us. And the problem is that our delusion sometimes makes us mistake things that are unskillful for things that are skillful. So these are the dangers we face. After the Buddha gained awakening, people who came to listen to him would often take refuge in him. And specifically, they were taking refuge in his awakening. So they don’t talk that much about faith in the Buddhist teachings. Although, that is mentioned. Conviction, sattha, is definitely one of the strengths along the path. But the conviction there is a kind of refuge. It provides a place of safety for those three kinds of dangers. Here in the West, we come to Buddhism and oftentimes we’ve been burned by issues of faith. Being told that we have to believe in things that are unreasonable and that if we don’t fully believe, then there’s something wrong with us. Faith operates in a different way in the Buddhist teachings. To begin with, it’s a working hypothesis. The Buddha knows that you’re not going to have confirmed faith until you actually see it the deathless for yourself. So he’s perfectly fine with the fact that you’re going to have some doubts. But then the things he’s asking you to do require that you do make certain assumptions. Of course, as we live in the world, we have to make assumptions. It’s good to examine what our working hypotheses are and then compare them to the ones that the Buddha is recommending. In his case, he’s recommending the belief that our actions really do make a difference and that there is something that survives death. So we’re not just here for one brief fling and then melt into nothingness. There’s something that goes on. Unfortunately, what goes on is clinging and craving, and these things are not all that selective in what they latch on to. But the mind can be trained. That’s another aspect of this working hypothesis the Buddha is asking you to take. He was able to train his mind so that it could be skillful in thought and word and deed. And the qualities that he used and the qualities that he developed to find that path are qualities that we all have in potential form, which means that we too can find that path. So he’s asking us to have faith in the power of our actions and in the fact that our actions have results and that we do have choices. These are good things to believe because they encourage you to act skillfully. The realization that your actions do make a difference and that you have to be very careful about what you do lies at the base of all skillfulness. So having faith in this as our working hypothesis protects us from a lot of views that say, “Well, you’re just a biological organism here, and there’s only so much that an organism like that can know and do.” So content yourself with some very limited ideas of what happiness can be, saying that the best you can hope for is a kind of equanimity that’s not disturbed by things. The Buddha says there’s more. Our actions can find more, and they’re naturally determined by our genes. A couple months back I was giving a Dhamma talk in the Bay Area, and after I was done, I was talking about the Buddha’s teachings on actions and how you have freedom of choice. One woman came up and said, “You know, maybe my life isn’t totally controlled by my DNA.” Here was someone who had been to this Buddhist group for I don’t know how many years, and she’d missed that point. The Buddha teaches us that we have freedom of choice and we should make the most of it. So that’s the first way he gives us refuge. When we take refuge in his awakening, we believe in the power of action, in the power of our actions. We realize, of course, that we can’t totally shape reality as if it were putty in our hands. There are some things that come in from our past actions that we can’t change, but we can change our attitude toward them. This is where the Buddha provides that second level of refuge, or faith. Refuge in his awakening provides that second level of safety, and it gives us some ammunition against our own greed, aversion, and delusion, primarily the delusion that says we’re suffering because of outside circumstances. Only when outside circumstances are perfect, then we’ll be happy. As we saw today, when the Buddha teaches dependent-core arising, the emphasis is on the fact that suffering comes from things that we bring to our experience. The contact of the senses, which is shaped by our past actions, actually comes after our internal intentions, our choice of what to pay attention to, the perceptions we hold in mind. These will make all the difference as to whether we’re going to suffer from something painful or not, or suffer from something that’s pleasant or not. Suppose that there is some pain coming in from the past. The simple fact that you’ve got a body leaves you open to physical pain. You have to ask yourself, “What can I do so I don’t have to suffer?” The Buddha gives you recommendations. The primary question is, “How do you perceive the pain? What’s the label you apply to it, and how many layers of labeling go on in there?” Often we glom the pain together with our sense of the body. So it seems like the body itself is inflamed by pain. But in the Buddha’s analysis, the body is four elements, and the pain is a feeling. They’re different things. It’s as if they’re in the same location, but they’re on different frequencies. Like the radio waves going through the room right now. They’re the waves from Worcester, the waves from Boston, the waves from Springfield. And depending on where you tune your radio, you’re going to pick up those different messages, those different signals. Well, it’s the same with the issue of pain and the body, the properties of wind, fire, earth, and water, or energy, warmth, coolness, solidity. They’re on one level of frequency, you might say, and the pain is on another. It comes and goes. And if you can see these things as separate and see your awareness that approaches these things as something separate as well, if you can hold that perception in mind and actually confirm it for yourself that, yes, you can see the difference, then the pain can be there and it doesn’t have to have an impact on the mind. Or if you find that you have the perception that the pain is coming at you, try to reverse it. Think of yourself as sitting in the back seat of one of those old station wagons, facing backward. And as you look back behind you as you’re going along the road, things will appear first in the periphery of your vision and then go away, further and further away. So instead of coming at you, they’re going away from you. So if you learn how to see that the pain itself is not one solid block of pain, but it’s lots of little pain sensations, and if you can hold in mind the perception that they’re going away, going away, going away, then you don’t feel attacked by them. So what we’re doing is we’re using some of the Buddha’s recommendations for how to deal with our perception so that we don’t have to suffer. In his instructions on breath meditation, when he’s talking about feelings, first he says, “Try to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture and breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure.” In other words, find some part of the body that you can make pleasant with a feeling of fullness, ease, either by the way you breathe or simply by the way you probe around in your sense of the body and find where is it in the body that there’s a relative sense of well-being. Establish your awareness there. Then as a matter of fact, the next step is to be aware of mental fabrication, i.e., your perceptions and your feelings. The big issue is the perceptions. What perceptions are you having, say, about a pain? Then he says to calm those perceptions, i.e., find perceptions that calm the mind. Change your perceptions so you can perceive the pain in a way that it’s not attacking you and it’s not in you. It’s just there. It’s going away, going away. Or whatever unskillful perception you may have around the pain, find an alternative perception that counteracts it. This is one of those areas where you have to use your own ingenuity. But the Buddha gives you the basic framework. The reason you’re suffering from the pain that comes from the contact of the body is because of the perceptions you bring and because of the way you’re talking to yourself about it. These are all forms of fabrication that come prior to the contact. So in this way, the Buddha gives you some tools based on his own awakening, his insight into the fact that the reason we suffer is from our ignorance of what we’re bringing to experience. As we pick up those tools and learn how to use them, we get a sense of how they apply to us and how we can develop our own skills around them. That, too, provides us with a level of safety, safety from our own defilements. The same applies to emotional pain. Ask yourself how you’re perceiving the issue. How do you talk to yourself about the issue? Can you talk to yourself in another way, a way that is just as true? You’re not lying to yourself, but in a way that allows you to see the situation in a way so you’re not stabbing yourself or poking yourself with a knife. You’re shooting yourself with extra arrows. The one arrow of the emotional pain is bad enough. But how do you make sure that you’re not aiming a bow and arrow at yourself and shooting yourself with more arrows? Well, look at the perception you’re bringing. Look at the questions you’re asking yourself about the situation. And try to get the mind in a place where it can ask these things with a measure of calm. So you’re not doing this out of desperation. This is why we practice concentration, why we need to bring the mind into a place where it feels stable and secure in the present moment, with whatever object you find works to keep you here. Whether it’s the breath in the body, the breath around the body, thinking about the parts of the body, something as you’re grounded here, right here. So that you feel at home here. And John Cha has the image, he says, it’s like you have a house with one chair. And you want to make sure that you’re the one sitting in the chair and the people coming into the house don’t take over the chair from you. As long as you’re sitting in the chair, then they’re standing. And they stay there at your pleasure. But if you lose mindfulness and you forget to be in the chair, then someone else might move in. Then you have difficulty sitting down there. So you’re trying to give yourself a place here in the present moment where you’re in the chair. And then everything else that comes into the mind, comes into the body, can simply be guests. And the guests can come and go, but you’re the one in charge. And that allows you to work with your perceptions and to see exactly what is the perception that’s getting in the way. What is the perception that’s causing you to suffer? What is the internal conversation? What are the voices in your head? What are the thoughts in your mind that are making you suffer? If you get the mind still, you can see these things clearly, and you learn that you don’t have to identify with them. These are some of the tools that we gain from learning about the Buddha’s awakening and taking it seriously, realizing that it does provide us with a refuge. It protects us from wrong views we might pick up from outside. The wrong views that we’re carrying inside ourselves. And it gives us some guidance so that we can actually turn this body and mind that we have from a whole swarm of causes of suffering into a path. Because that’s what we’re doing. We get the mind into concentration. We take these aggregates that we’ve been clinging to wholly onto as ourselves. And we turn them into a path. Four. You’re focused on the breath, focused on some aspect of the body. Feeling. You’re trying to focus in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease and well-being as you stay here. Perception. Whatever label or image you hold in your mind about how your awareness is related to the body, how your awareness is related to the breath, how the breath is related to the body. Fabrication. The way you talk to yourself about these issues. And consciousness, your basic awareness of what’s going on here. These are all aggregates. And if we cling to them in an unskillful way, we’re going to suffer. But if we learn how to shape them into a path like this, then they become part of the path to the end of suffering. And this way, too, we gain guidance from the Buddha’s awakening. One of the possibilities that this can happen is how you do it. And ultimately, it leads to that third level of refuge as you peel away all the various misunderstandings in the mind, all the various attachments that you can see are obviously unskillful. You get to some attachments that are skillful. You hold on to those for the time being, but then when finally they’ve completed their duty, they’ve completed their task, you can let them go, too. Because up to that point, in terms of the Four Noble Truths, you’ve tried to comprehend suffering, which means basically developing dispassion for the things that are really suffering but you have mistakenly latched onto as being you or yours. Dispassion for the cause. This actually becomes also the third Noble Truth, is seeing yourself develop dispassion and noticing that, yes, suffering does fall away. So dispassion is the big theme in terms of the first three Noble Truths. For the fourth Noble Truth, you have to have some passion for developing it until it’s fully developed. And then once it’s developed, then you can develop dispassion for it, too. That’s when the mind is freed. That’s when you can confirm for yourself that this conviction you had in the Buddha’s awakening is verified. It was a conviction that was well-taken. That’s what he was talking about, that experience of the deathless, that it can be done through human effort. And you realize, yes, there it is. And that is everything the Buddha said it was. There is a consciousness there, but it’s not the consciousness in the aggregates. It’s a consciousness that’s boundless, unlimited. It’s true in the sense of not changing into anything else, because it doesn’t depend on any fabrication at all. It’s blissful, totally peaceful, total freedom. And it’s the best thing imaginable. In fact, it’s more than you can imagine. As the Buddha said, it’s the amazing, the astounding, the beyond. And that dimension is something you can contact in your mind. Once you confirm its existence for yourself like that, then you’re truly safe from all three kinds of dangers—the dangers of wrong views that you pick up from other people, the dangers from your own delusion, and the dangers from the simple fact of aging, illness, and death. That’s when you’re truly safe. So the Buddha does offer this safety. And if you take him seriously, you protect yourself from all the people out there who say that it’s impossible. And you protect yourself from your own mind, from the thoughts that you might have. You say, “Well, not for me,” or “I can’t do this,” or “It’s beyond me.” The Buddha doesn’t ask for anything superhuman. He says you’ve got these potentials within you, these potentials that can give you safety and that can lead you to a safety that lies beyond them. So of course, it’s up to us to decide whether we want to take this seriously. Not seriously in a grim way, but simply see it as a reality that can shape our views of everything else that we approach in life in the direction of greater freedom, greater happiness, and a truth that doesn’t disappoint.

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