Peace & Protection

November 21, 2017

There’s a line of verse in the Canon, “Dhammo ho’i rakkate tamajjaning.” It means, “The Dhamma protects those who practice the Dhamma.” This doesn’t mean that it’s going to build a wall around you or that it’s going to clean up after your messes. What it means is, when you practice the Dhamma, you protect yourself from doing the things that will make you suffer. That applies to present karma and also to past karma. When the results of past karma come in, there are some things that your Dhamma practice can’t prevent right now. Aging, illness, and death will have to come, and they’ll be the normal ups and downs of life. But if you practice the Dhamma, it will protect you from suffering from those things. That’s for your decisions in the present moment that will carry on in the future. As long as you’re practicing the Dhamma, you’ve got yourself protected. It protects the most important part of you, i.e., your mind. Because there will come times when the mind and the body have to go their separate ways. It’s going to age. It’s going to have illness. You have to lose things in life. But it’s important to have a sense of what’s worth losing and what’s worth maintaining. When I was living in Thailand, occasionally I’d take the bus into Bangkok. And every time I passed a military base, they had a big sign over the military base, “Be willing to lose a limb to save your life.” “Be willing to lose your life to save your honor.” There’s a similar principle in the Buddhist teachings. When you see that there’s a lesser happiness that stands in the way of a greater happiness, you’re willing to let go of that lesser happiness. So it’s important to have a sense of what you really want to hold on to and what you should be willing to let go of. Our problem is that we tend to hold on to our defilements. We like our greed. We like our anger. We like our various kinds of delusion. And as a result, the mind suffers. We have our ways of saying, “I can’t practice the Dhamma because of x, x, x.” But you have to ask yourself, “What is that x?” And how valuable it really is. There’s a passage where the Buddha says, “Even loss of relatives, loss of your wealth, loss of your health, are nothing compared to loss of your views and loss of your virtue.” Those other things get in the way sometimes. Your fear of losing out some wealth. Say, if you’re going to practice the precepts, you can’t lie, you can’t misrepresent stuff. We had a discussion a couple weeks back about how it’s the people who lie who get all the contracts in American business. But it’s the people who tell the truth that maintain long-term customers. So you have to be willing to lose some of the contracts in order to maintain your virtue. When you have to, say, tell the truth in a court of law, it may have an effect on somebody who’s dear to you. But you can’t lie. Because the short-term benefits that come from breaking the precepts don’t balance out the long-term harm that’s done. Notice those two things that the Buddha said. You should protect your virtue and your views. Those are also the things that are needed for mindfulness practice and through mindfulness, the development of concentration. Because you don’t hold up by your virtue. There are going to be ways in which you harm yourself and harm other people. If you sit down and try to be mindful, the mind is going to put up walls. It doesn’t want to think about those things. Or if it does, it’s like a big open wound. You encounter the open wound and you start going into denial. It’s like hardened scar tissue over the wound. But either way, you’re setting up walls in the mind. The whole purpose of mindfulness is to be able to keep something in mind. But with all these walls in the mind, you keep running into things where you just don’t remember. So there are lessons from the past that you could learn, but you can’t. It’s because you put up that wall. So virtue is an important thing you want to maintain, regardless of what happens outside, what the rest of the world is doing. Your virtue and your right view, i.e., your right view about the results of actions, your right view about what’s really going to cause suffering, what real suffering is, you want to hold on to those. And you find that as you hold on to them, your mind can be a lot more at peace. Otherwise, you have lots of things you’re just not willing to let go of, and they’re running all over the place, like little chicks in a barnyard. And the mother hen has to run around to gather up the chicks. And it’s got these two or three chicks under its wing, and whoop, that other chick goes running out. The more attachments you have, the more frazzled you’re going to be. What you have to do is have a sense of priority. What are the things you’re willing to sacrifice? What are the things you’re not willing to sacrifice? What things are worth holding on to? And which things are not? So when things start falling apart, you don’t fall apart with them. You will hold on to the things of real value, i.e., the state of your mind. After all, there will come times when aging comes, illness comes, death comes to the body. None of us has a magic charm that can keep these things away. We can keep them at bay for a bit. But as I noticed when I was in Thailand, they hand out books and funerals as a way of making merit for the person who’s passed away. And often they’ll have a little bit of a history of the person at the beginning of the book. And some really interesting Dharma books are handed out that way. So when I was staying at Wat Makut, I’d read through some of them. Then it was interesting reading the biographies. They talk about how the person was born, had an education, had this occupation, got married, had these kids. And then there was a little bit of this disease that began to show up. And at first the doctors were able to take care of it, but then as things got worse, then despite the best efforts of the doctor, it came to the point where the doctors couldn’t do anything anymore. And we’re all going to be at that point, at some day, when the doctors can’t do anything anymore. It’s just up to us, the state of our minds at that point. As long as you’re holding on to your relationships and your wealth and your status, and holding on to this lifetime, holding on to the body, you’re going to be torn apart. But if you realize the state of your mind is the important thing, you hold on to that. Learn how to maintain that. This is why we’re developing concentration. This is why the Buddha says to protect our virtue and our views, because they enable you to get into concentration through mindfulness. You can look after the state of your mind. And as you develop these skills, you get to the point where you don’t need the strength of the body in order to maintain strength of mind. That’s when you’re independent like that. That’s when the mind can really be at peace. As long as things are still there to you as you use them. But when they start falling away or get taken away, you say, “Okay, that’s the end of that.” And if you’ve made good use of them, there’s no regret. It’s when you haven’t made good use of your things that you regret them at parting. So make good use of your body, make good use of your speech, make good use of your mind. So when the time comes for the body to go, there’s no regret. You stay with the mind. The mind will have its independence. And because it’s not trying to grab onto things, that’s when it can be at peace. This is how the Dhamma protects. It protects the things that are really important. It reminds you that there are things you’re going to have to let go of. No matter how much generosity you have, the wealth of the world comes and goes. No matter how much you love other people, relationships come and go. But the quality of the mind that you build into it through concentration, through the discernment, that’s something that will not go once it’s reached a certain level. So make sure you attain that level where you’ve got something really solid inside. Being willing to sacrifice what needs to be sacrificed and protecting what needs to be protected. That’s how the mind can find peace.

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