Refuge & Strength

October 31, 2024

In Thailand, when people come to Buddhism, they come with a very strong sense that they’re coming for protection. People ask for amulets, people ask for katha, which are phrases to repeat over and over again. Other people come for training in how to train their minds, realizing that the big dangers from which we need protection are not only out side, but they’re also inside. We do live in a dangerous world, but we’re also dangerous people. We have to keep that in mind. Our question today is, how can we maintain our goodness when there’s so much evil in the world? The answer is, this is how you maintain your goodness in spite of the evil of the world. The Buddha didn’t live in a perfect time. There was warfare, there were famines, all kinds of outside dangers. But as he said, these are not the really serious ones. The serious ones are things that we can do inside that are unskillful. We can often make the outside world our excuse for doing unskillful things. But that just keeps us coming back again and again. We want to lift our minds above that. That’s why the Buddha recommends that we develop strength inside. The strength that we develop here will be our refuge. And they start with conviction that what we do is the most important possession we have. We often have that chant, “We’re subject to aging, illness and death, subject to separation,” which, if we stop there, would be very depressing. But the way out is suggested by the fifth reflection, which is that we’re the owners of our karma. We take this on conviction. When the Buddha taught karma and rebirth, he didn’t say that he could prove it to anybody. But it could be found through the practice that this was true. So we have to have conviction in the practice first. Conviction that what you do makes a difference, and that you are responsible for your actions. That’s placing something of a burden on you. As I mentioned this morning, I was talking with someone last weekend, thinking that your actions have consequences that make you feel very stressed out. And you wonder, what kind of world that person would want to live in, where actions didn’t have consequences? The fact that our actions have consequences means that there’s hope, that we can learn how to develop our actions in a way, perfect our actions in a way, so that we’re not causing danger to anybody. And then it will provide protection. We protect others, and our actions then protect us. So we should take joy in the fact that we do have this agency. Think of the Buddha’s instructions to Arjuna when Arjuna was seven years old. Before you do something, ask yourself, “This action that I want to do, will it cause any harm?” And if the answer is yes, you think that it’s going to cause harm, you just don’t do it. If you don’t see any harm, go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, you ask yourself, “This action that I’m doing, is it causing any harm?” You see any harm, you stop. Don’t see any harm, continue. When the action is done, you ask yourself, “This action that I’ve done, did it cause any harm?” And if it did, go talk it over with someone who’s more advanced on the path. Make up your mind you’re not going to repeat that mistake again. If you don’t see any harm, then the Buddha says, “Take joy in the fact that your training is progressing, and then keep on training.” Notice the agency in there, this action I want to do, that I am doing, that I have done. The Buddha’s teaching responsibility from the very beginning. Some people ask, “Well, what about the teaching on not-self?” Well, the Buddha never taught that there is no self. In fact, there was a time when one monk tried to create a no-self teaching out of what the Buddha taught. The actions done by what is not-self would not affect anybody. So nobody’s responsible, nobody’s harmed, you can do what you want. The Buddha called the guy a fool. When the Buddha talked about self and not-self, he talked about them as actions, strategies. You claim certain things to be yourself because you feel that it’s worth it, and you’re happy. And other things are not-self, they’re not worth it. We do this all the time. The Buddha’s basically saying, “Learn how to do it skillfully, what things really are worth holding on to, what things really are worth laying claim to.” And you find that as you progress in the practice, that value of judgment will change, until you reach a point where you don’t need a sense of self anymore because you’ve found happiness. You don’t need to label things as not-self because you’ve found happiness. That’s a strategy. And as you’re getting started on the path, you have to take a sense of responsibility, develop that. Because as you look into your sense of responsibility, that’s how you learn. This is how you purify your mind, the Buddha said. So this is our strength. We have our actions, we have our thoughts, our words, our deeds. And we can make them skillful, partly by depending on the teachings that have been handed down, and partly through our own investigation of what we observe as we try to put those teachings into practice. That relates to another strength, which is the strength of discernment. The Buddha puts that at the very end of the list of strengths. But they all work together, as you discern what your actions really do, what they really accomplish. You begin to notice which ones are skillful in which situations, and which ones are not. That becomes your own knowledge, your own strength. So take advantage of that. The principles of causality are right here, showing themselves. It’s one of the reasons why when the Buddha gave his shortest explanation of what he gained, what knowledge he gained in his awakening, it was a principle of causality. Some things happen because of results from the past. Other things come from choices you’re making, right now. And those choices right now do not have to be influenced by the past. You can always make a fresh beginning. Then you can use that knowledge to develop the other strengths. Strength, the persistence, in which when you put an effort in, you realize that your habits are unskillful. It’s going to take an effort to overcome them, to change them. But you realize it’s worth it. Strength of mindfulness, realizing that you have to keep this principle in mind, that your actions really do make a difference for your happiness. And you have to depend on yourself. The Buddha points the way, but you have to do the walking. We find this especially as we develop concentration. You can start, say, with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for those around you, realizing that you’re doing this because you need that goodwill as your protection. Because if you can have ill will for anybody, then it’s going to be very easy to act unskillfully around that person. And then that becomes your karma. So you have goodwill for people not because they’re good, not because they deserve it, but because you need it. It’s your protection. We tend to think of goodwill as being sort of soft and fluffy. But you read the teachings of the Ajahns, and they were living in the jungle. There were dangers all around. And they often had to depend on their goodwill. Dealing with the bandits who lived in the forest, dealing with the wild animals. Again and again and again they found that their protection was in their goodwill. I think I’ve told the story of one of Ajahn Fung’s students. We had a visitor to the monastery one time, and her friend who lived in the monastery told us ahead of time that this woman had a strange problem. Every time she tried to meditate, she would start shaking. So she came, was meditating in front of Ajahn Fung, and sure enough, she was shaking. Ajahn Fung had another student who was quite psychic, and he said, “Well, check her out. See what’s happening.” So the other student, Pen Sze, got into meditation, and she saw two beings behind this woman shaking her violently. So she tried to stop them, but they turned on her. Scared her so much that she ran out of the room and vomited. She came back in and told Ajahn Fung what had happened, and Ajahn Fung said, “You fool, you have to protect yourself.” His recommendation was that she fill her body with light, or lacking any sense of light inside, with full breath energy, and then spread lots of goodwill. Then talk to the beings. And the beings were loving, a little more cooperative then. She asked them, “Why are you shaking this woman?” They said, “Because in a previous lifetime she had been our daughter, and she had killed us. We don’t want her to get away.” “Is there anything that she could do to please you so you could stop this?” And they said, “Well, have her build a Buddha image.” Well, we were building a Buddha image at the monastery at the time. So when Pen Sze told this to Ajahn Fung, he said, “You can’t say that to her. It’s not like we’re trying to use our powers to gain money. So we’ll have to let her go.” But the lesson there, of course, was you protect yourself with your goodwill. People are a lot less likely to harm you if you have goodwill for them. And even if they do harm you, you protect yourself. Remember the Buddha’s image of the bandits that are sawing you into little pieces. He said, “Even in a case like that, you need to have goodwill for them as your protection.” Not protection from being sawn into pieces, but protection from going to a bad place after you die. If you have ill will for them, that becomes a motivating force for your rebirth, which becomes revenge, which is not a good force to have determine your rebirth. So for the well-being of your mind, you need to have goodwill all around. The image the Buddha gives is of a conch player, and in those days the trumpets were made out of conch shells, blowing a horn. And the sound goes in all directions. It doesn’t go only to the people you want to have here, it doesn’t go only to the people you like. It goes to everybody, all around. That’s the shape of goodwill, and the way you protect it all around. And it is a form of strength. So you want to work on your strengths. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. Doing whatever needs to be done to strengthen these qualities in the mind. If you have trouble getting the mind to settle down, sometimes you have to think your way to settling down. Ask yourself, “What’s the problem? Is it the breath?” Well, work with the breath. “Is it attitudes that you’ve picked up from the day?” We’ll try to counteract them. There are different ways of contemplating that can counteract, say, lust or anger. Doubt. The best way to counteract doubt, the Buddha said, is to investigate what in your mind is skillful right now, what in your mind is unskillful. See what happens when you follow the skillful things, see what happens when you follow the unskillful ones. See for yourself. The Buddha doesn’t recommend that you try breaking the precepts. He gives you some directions ahead of time. Those are things you avoid entirely, breaking the precepts. By just looking at the qualities of the mind, you’ll find that the mind seems to be out of control. Remind yourself the mind is like a committee. There are lots of different voices in there, but you don’t have to listen to all of them. You don’t have to identify with them. Let them be other members of the committee. You identify with a member that wants to settle down with the breath. And then you just hold on to the breath. Even as the voices are chattering away, you don’t have to get involved. It’s in this way that you strengthen your concentration through strengthening your discernment. So even though there’s a list–conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment–and it’s explained in ways that make it sound like you go from the first to the second and the third to fourth, fifth. But there are other ways where it’s explained. The discernment comes back and then strengthens your conviction. And each of the different strengths fortifies the rest. This way you provide yourself with the protection that comes from within. Strengths of the mind provide you with that protection. So you focus here to keep yourself safe everywhere. Because what does it mean to be safe? It means you have something of value inside. You protect it. Unfortunately, it’s something that no one else can take. But you can throw it away. So you have to be careful. This is why these strengths, the Buddha said, are supported by heedfulness. Realizing that what you do really makes a big difference. So you have to be careful in what you do. There are dangers there, but there’s also the possibility of avoiding those dangers. That’s where our true safety lies.

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