Protection (fragment)

July 24, 2018

Start with thoughts of goodwill for everyone around you. The people sitting right here, and then beyond that, all the animals out in the grove, the other people here in the monastery, and then beyond that, all the animals and people spreading out in all directions. When you sit outside like this, you feel a bit more connected. There’s one less set of walls between you and the people around you, which, of course, means that you’re also exposed. As we live in our houses, live in our buildings, live surrounded by a big military, there are times when we get careless. We think we’ve got a protection around us and we can be less sensitive to what’s going on around us, less alert, less heedful. And even then, we can still get ourselves in trouble. In fact, we get ourselves into more trouble the more we try to depend on those walls and those protections. There’s a reading somewhere that in Alaska, when they find people who’ve been killed by bears, in almost every case, the person who’s killed had a gun. Because he had a gun, he got careless. He got himself into a situation where he thought his gun could get him out, but the gun couldn’t. That’s the way it is with a lot of our protections. There’s a passage in the canon where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha. Here’s someone who’s spent all of his life building up an army, defending his kingdom. But as he got older, he began to realize that even if he was building an army, he wasn’t really defending it. If you act in ways that are unskillful, or speak in ways that are unskillful, or think in ways that are unskillful, you open yourself up to danger. Your real protection is in your actions. And what is it that protects your actions? It’s your goodwill. The Forest of Johns talk about this quite a lot, how they go out in the forest and hear us surrounded by all kinds of wild animals. We don’t have much here at the monastery, just some rattlesnakes, and some bobcats, coyotes. And most of them are afraid of us. But still, they pose their dangers. But over in Thailand, they had tigers, they had elephants, they had bears. And the Johns would go out unarmed with their only defense, their goodwill, both in the sense that when you have goodwill for others, there’s a subliminal sense that they can pick it up if they’re sensitive. But also, when you have goodwill, you’re a lot more careful in what you do. Remember, the Buddha called goodwill a form of restraint. We don’t think of goodwill that way. We think of it as a breaking down of boundaries and an overflowing of our innate goodwill, letting out something good that all too often is kept buckled up, hidden. But actually, goodwill is basically a way of keeping check on your actions so that you aren’t careless, so that when you do or say or do something, or think something, you think about it. What impact is it going to have on yourself? What impact is it going to have on others? And you act only in cases where it actually will be helpful and not harmful. That’s your protection. Because if you don’t do unskillful things, then the results of unskillful things are not going to come to you. So we start the meditation always with goodwill, and then we focus on the breath as a way of giving ourselves an anchor in the present moment so we can be alert to what’s going on. Stay with the breath, make it comfortable. Comfortable coming in, comfortable going out. Comfortable in the way it flows in the different parts of the body so that we can have a good place to stand and watch yourself. In the beginning, all the emphasis is on learning how to stay with the breath, not wander off. But once you find that it becomes more and more second nature, you stay there and then you keep watch on what else may be coming up. In the beginning, whatever comes up, you don’t go with it. In fact, you learn how to recognize the signs when a distraction is going to come. So if you feel the mind is beginning to get a little loose, a little wobbly in the breath, you tell yourself, give yourself one really, really nice breath. Something that feels really good inside. Ask yourself which parts of the body feel starved of breath energy. Supply them with that energy. That way you can avoid getting involved in distraction. But as your basis in the breath gets stronger, you can see what’s coming up and ask yourself, where is this going? Where is this coming from? Because you want to be able to act on only the intentions that are skillful, not the ones that are unskillful. And if you’re not here in the present moment, you’re not going to see your intentions. How can you judge them? All too often we know about what’s going on in the mind only when it gets full-blown, when it comes out in our actions or comes out in an explicit thought. And the little hints of thoughts and little hints of ideas and hints of decisions go right past us because we’re not really here. And when we’re not here, how can we defend ourselves? How can we protect ourselves?

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