Protection in All Directions

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The Buddha once said that one of the main duties of a good teacher is to provide protection for the student in all directions. This doesn’t mean that the teacher follows the student and fends off any enemies. It means that the teacher provides knowledge, the kind of knowledge that the student can use to protect him or herself. That’s what the Buddha provides in his instructions on what actions are skillful and what actions are not. What states of mind are skillful and what states are not. Because the protection he gives is primarily for the mind. One of the things we’re supposed to reflect on is the fact that once we have a body, we’re open to attacks from sticks and stones and weapons. That’s simply the nature of having a body, living in the human world. Given the karma that we have being human beings, which is a mixed-bag karma, there are bound to be injuries coming. There are bound to be attacks. It’s a normal part of the world. We protect our bodies by not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex. But we have to realize that simply for the fact that you’ve got a body leaves you open to aging, illness, and death, the possibility of injury. What you’ve really got to protect is your mind. This is one of the reasons why we have that contemplation of the parts of the body, to remind ourselves that there’s really not much inherent worth in the body. The body is useful as a tool for the mind. But that’s the hierarchy. The mind should be in charge. And if you have to sacrifice the well-being of the mind for the sake of the body, that’s a wrong choice. A wise choice is the other way around, when you sacrifice the body for the sake of the mind. So it’s good that we keep that set of priorities in mind. It’s the protection of the mind that’s important. This is why the Buddha’s teachings on refuge are aimed at the qualities of the mind. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, again, not thinking that they’re going to follow us around and fend off our enemies. Rather, magically, by invoking them, they’re going to keep our enemies at bay. What it does mean is that if we look to them as examples for how reliable happiness can be found, and follow those examples, we’re going to be safe. The mind will do things that will cause harm to itself. This is the big problem in life. We all want happiness, and yet our actions often lead to stress, pain, suffering. Why is that? Because we’re ignorant about the connection between cause and effect. We do the things that would lead to pain, not knowing that they’re going to lead to pain. And then when the pain comes back at us, we blame other people, things outside. So it’s good we have the guidance of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to point out to us that the real cause comes from within. If you take care of qualities in the mind that’s where your protection is going to be. That’s a good place to put it, because the danger is in the mind as well. Your greed, aversion, and delusion can get you to do all kinds of things that are not in your best interest. These qualities of mind are like the kind of friend who gets you to break the law. And then when the police come to catch you, those friends go running off. You’re the one left facing the punishment. So we develop qualities of mind inside, following the example of the Buddha, and the Dhamma, and the Sangha, to protect ourselves from these false friends. We look at the Buddha and his actions exemplify three qualities—wisdom, compassion, and purity. And all of these qualities are developed inside. Wisdom is developed by being wise in our search for happiness. Wisdom starts with the question, “What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That’s a wise question, because it sees that long-term is possible and that it’s better than short-term. And it’s going to depend on your actions. Then you think further about, “What will I do that will lead to my long-term happiness?” And you realize it can’t depend on the suffering of others. There’s a story where King Vasanada is one-on-one with his queen, Mallika. In a tender moment, he turns to her and asks her, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Of course, he’s expecting her to say, “Yes, your majesty, you.” That’s the Pali Canon. Mallika’s no fool. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. How about you? Anybody you love more than yourself?” The king has to admit that no, there’s no one he loves more than himself. That’s the end of that scene. The king goes down from the palace, goes out to see the Buddha, who’s outside of the city. He tells him about their conversation, and the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You would go the whole world over and not find anyone that you love more than yourself.” In the same way, other people love themselves just as much. The conclusion he draws from that is that you shouldn’t do anything to harm others or get them to harm others. There are different ways you can look at that. One is that if your search for happiness is going to harm other people, they’re not going to stand for it. So you’ve got to develop goodwill for everybody, compassion for everyone who’s suffering. And this is a major protection. There’s a lot in the tradition, both in the canon and in the commentaries, about how goodwill protects you, compassion protects you. Think of the case of the Buddha. Devadatta had sent ruffians to kill him. The first one was going to kill him, and then the first ruffian didn’t know, but Devadatta had sent two others to kill him, and they didn’t know that he had sent four others to kill them, and they didn’t know that he had sent eight others to kill the four. But the first one comes to see the Buddha, and the Buddha just spreads lots of goodwill in his direction, and he’s frozen stiff with fear. The Buddha says, “No, there’s nothing to be afraid of.” He comes to see the Buddha and bows down. The Buddha teaches him and actually gets him to become a stream-enterer. I would have loved to hear that Dharma talk. Then the Buddha says, “Don’t go the way you were told. Go another way.” Because the way he was told was where the two others were waiting for him. The two others see that nobody’s coming, so they follow the trail and see the Buddha. He teaches them. They become stream-enterers. Then he sends them off in another direction from the way they were told. The four who were waiting for them, the eight who were waiting for the four, they all end up coming to see the Buddha, taken with his goodwill. Nobody’s going to harm him, and he doesn’t harm them. As the Buddha taught, your goodwill is more valuable than your life. Think of that image of the mother of the only child. The Buddha says you protect your goodwill with your life, the same way that the mother would protect her child with her life. That means your goodwill is more important than staying alive. He gives an example. Bandits have pinned you down. They’ve got a two-handled saw, and they’re going to cut you up into pieces. He says, “If you have any ill will for them, you’re not following my teaching.” He recommends you have goodwill starting with them. If you’re going to die, you don’t want to be in line with ill will for these people, because that’s just going to be a life looking for revenge, which is a miserable life. Instead, you want to make sure that, at the very least, the state of your mind is in good shape. So you start with them, and then you spread goodwill to everybody, to the entire cosmos, so that your mind is not fixated on what’s happening. So it doesn’t have to carry that narrative around. This is your way of having genuine goodwill for yourself, of providing protection for yourself. Then you apply this principle in your actions. The Buddha’s instructions on purity are his instructions to Rahula about taking time before you act or say something. Think something. Ask yourself, what consequences do you anticipate? If you anticipate any harm—in other words, if you have ill will for somebody, you want to cause harm to yourself or harm to others—you don’t do it. Your goodwill keeps you from acting in ways that would be harmful. Then while you’re acting, you check to see the results that are coming out while you’re acting. And again, if there’s any harm, either for yourself or others, you stop. If there’s no harm, you can keep on going until the action is done. And then you look at the long-term results. And if it turned out that you did harm somebody, you’re going to talk it over with someone who’s more advanced on the path than you are to get some ideas about how to avoid making that mistake again. And then you resolve not to repeat it. If you see that no harm was done, then you take joy in the fact that you’re advancing on the path. In other words, your thoughts of goodwill are not just idle thoughts. They inform your plans for action and your ways of judging the results of your actions. That’s what purity means—that you don’t act in any way that causes any harm. And you carry through with your wisdom and your compassion and goodwill. This is how you keep yourself protected. There may be karma coming in from the past, but you want to make sure that it affects only your body and not your mind. That’s the protection that the Buddha provides, showing that you should take the mind as having ultimate worth in your life. The state of your mind is the number one thing to be concerned about—not only telling you that it should be of primary concern, but also showing you that this is how you take care of it, this is how you protect it. This is the kind of refuge that he provides, and the kind of refuge you can provide for yourself as you take his instructions to heart. So we live in this world with our sticks and stones, and they can hurt you. But try to make sure that they hurt only the body and that the mind stays beyond their reach.

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