Protecting the Mind from Itself

March 20, 2022

We live in a world with a lot of dangers. But the big dangers are inside. The dangers that come from our own greed, aversion, and delusion. The things that can get us to behave in ways that are going to cause trouble for ourselves, trouble for other people. When the Buddha said that the duty of a teacher is to protect the student in his direction in every direction, what he meant was that he gives us instructions on how to behave in a safe way, and particularly how to behave in a way that we don’t fall into the dangers presented by the mind itself. And he gives two kinds of instructions. One, he sets out the precepts, he sets out what are called the gamapada, or the principles for skillful action, or guidelines for skillful action. And there are general principles, like no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex. Those are the principles for bodily action. The principles for speech are no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. And then there are the principles for the mind, no excessive greed, no ill will, no holding to wrong views. In other words, views that your actions don’t matter or that your action is not real. If you avoid these unskillful things, that covers a lot of territory and prevents you from falling into a lot of dangers. But at the same time, they don’t cover everything, which is why the Buddha also taught us the principles for how to figure out what is skillful and what’s not. Through our own powers of observation. As he once said, what he looked for in a student were two things. One, that the student be honest. And two, that the student use his or her powers of observation, be an observant person. And he gave an example in how he taught his own son. First, he taught the son how important it is to be truthful. That you have to hold on to the principle of truthfulness no matter what. Then he went on to talk about how you use your actions as a mirror for observing the mind and for learning about what’s skillful and what’s not. You start out by, before you act, looking at your intentions. And if you see that the act that you intend to do would cause harm or suffering to anybody, you don’t do it. You don’t expect to harm yourself or harm others. If you don’t foresee any harm, then you go ahead and do the action. But while you’re doing it, you have to keep an eye out to see what results are coming right away. Because that’s the way causality works sometimes. It’s not the case that you do something now and have to wait for your next lifetime for the results to come. Sometimes the results are coming while you’re acting. You stick your finger in a fire, you don’t have to wait until the next lifetime for it to hurt. It’s immediate. So look for that kind of result. You don’t expect things to come immediately from what you’re doing. And if you see that any harm is being caused, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you keep on acting until you’re done. And then when you’re done, you’re still not done. You have to look back at the long-term consequences. And if you see that you actually did cause harm, then you go talk it over with someone else who’s on the path. So you can learn how not to repeat that mistake. And then you make up your mind you’re not going to repeat it. You develop a sense of shame around it, a healthy sense of shame, the shame that people really care about how you look in the eyes of the wise. And if you keep looking at your thoughts, your words, and your deeds in this way, then you become more and more observant about what’s skillful and what’s not. You can fill in the blank spaces that are not covered by the Buddha’s broad principles. And you get very attentive to your intentions. Because as the Buddha said, that’s where the karma is, in the intention. You see this in the precepts. You take the precepts against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. You can break these precepts only intentionally, if you step on a bug not even knowing that you did it or inadvertently. It doesn’t break the precept. It’s only when there’s the intention that the precept is broken. So taking training in the precepts means that you’re not only going to show restraint in your actions, but you’re going to pay special careful attention to your mind. If you really want to see the mind well, if you really want your precepts to be good, then you also have to practice concentration and develop discernment. Sometimes we hear that you have to first perfect your virtues and then you can work on your concentration. And when your concentration is perfect, then you work on discernment. But the Buddha himself never taught that way. And it’s a very basic principle in the forest tradition that you use your concentration to develop your precepts. You use your concentration and your discernment. You use your discernment to develop your concentration. So all three factors, all three trainings, help one another along. And all three of them are focused on the mind. In the textbooks that they use in Thailand for the monks and novices, there’s a statement to the effect that virtue is a matter of your words and your deeds. And John Munn, when that book first came out back in the 1910s, took exception to it. He said, “Virtue is primarily a matter of the heart, of the mind, because it is a matter of your intentions.” When you understand it that way, then the precepts don’t just become ceremonial. They become an active part of training your mind. Because you’ve got to keep restraint. Not only what you do and say, but also what you plan, what you want to do and say. And that’s where the discernment comes in. Because it’ll be things that you want to do but you see are going to cause a lot of long-term harm. And you have to use your discernment to figure out how to talk yourself out of doing those things. There are things that you don’t like to do but will give rise to long-term benefit. You have to use your discernment to talk yourself into doing them. Otherwise, your discernment is pragmatic. We’re not just trying to figure out the world outside to say, “Oh yes, it is inconstant, stressful, not-self.” Because the big fact of life is not things outside. The most important facts in life are what you’re doing and how can you act in ways that are going to be skillful. And this is why you have to think strategically. The Buddha is like a doctor. He’s going to give you medicine. Sometimes he has to think ahead of time. You give this medicine up to that point, and then you switch over to another medicine, and then you switch over to another medicine. And it’s the third medicine that’s going to cure you, but it’s the first one that gets you prepared so that the third medicine will work. So even though there are some parts of the path that you abandon after a while, still you have to develop them first so it can take you to the right place for the other parts to work. So when you’re observant in this way, and when you’re honest with yourself in this way, that’s when you can provide your own protection. As the Buddha said, he points out the way. But it’s up to us to develop our own powers of observation, and our own honesty, and our own commitment to the practice, so we actually get the results. He can’t do the work for us, because after all, we’re suffering from our own lack of skill, and nobody else can give us their skill. But the Buddha does what the Buddha can. In other words, he teaches us the basic principles for how to develop skill. And we follow those principles, and then we find that we become much more observant on our own. When you have the kind of powers of observation that can tell, with or without a precept, or with or without a guideline from the Buddha that something’s going to be skillful or not, that’s when you can rely on yourself. That’s when you’re really safe. So this is why we meditate, to develop our powers of observation. We try to get the mind still. And I notice when the mind is trying to be still but it’s still not still, what’s wrong? What’s getting in the way? What can be done to get rid of those obstacles? When you can approach every problem this way, then there’s no problem that’s going to be beyond your grasp, beyond your ability to solve. And that’s how the Buddha teaches us to protect ourselves.

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