Protecting Your Practice

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The Buddha once listed five qualities or five activities that a new monk should follow in order to maintain his practice and develop it in his practice. And they’re good not only for monks, they’re also good for laypeople as you go about your daily life trying to maintain a Dhamma practice so that when you have your one foot in the Dhamma and one foot in the daily world, they don’t start spreading far, far, far apart. They stay close together. And it’s through these activities that you create an environment for your practice. This is an important point to keep in mind. Because all too often we think of the environment around us as a given, and we’re trying to fit into that environment. And we neglect the extent to which our actions right here, right now, stretch the environment in a direction we want or don’t want, depending on what we’re doing. So what are the actions? The first one is to follow the precepts. For the monks, of course, this is to follow the padimukha. For laypeople, it’s following the five precepts. This is a protection for you. For example, if you follow the precept against lying in all circumstances, you find that you become more careful about your speech. And when you’re more careful about your speech, people will pick up on that. They’ll be more careful in listening to you. And when you’re truthful, people are more inclined to want to be truthful with you. So the principle follows with the other precepts. Now, you find that you have some friends who don’t follow the precepts, and that kind of friendship can become awkward. And you have to ask yourself, to what extent do you want to pursue that friendship? You don’t want to become unfriendly, of course. But the extent to which you spend extra time, go through extra effort to maintain that friendship, you might ask yourself if it’s worth it. Because when you hang out with people who are not observing the precepts, it’s very easy to get careless, just the way they are careless. So, as the Buddha said, we can lose our relatives, lose our wealth, lose our health. And those are minor losses. Our major losses are a loss in the precepts and a loss in right view. And notice, of those five different kinds of loss, the first three are things that are going to happen willy-nilly, one way or another. If they happen, you can’t prevent them. But if you’re going to lose your precepts and lose your right view, you’re the one who decides to lose them. So that’s something that’s totally within your power. And as it turns out, maintaining right view is another one of the activities that the Buddha recommends. This is something you actively have to do in this world. Because the culture around us is a land of wrong view. Everywhere we look, we hear analysis of why people are suffering. It’s always about things outside. Whereas right view reminds you that if there’s suffering in your mind, it’s from something you’re doing. That just doesn’t mean that the world is a wonderful place and you’re the one at fault. It’s simply that the world has its ups and downs and its limitations. But you don’t have to suffer from them. If you develop skill, you can be in negative circumstances, but as long as you keep your views right, you look at what you’re doing that’s contributing to the suffering. You look at what you’re clinging to, what you’re craving, and ask yourself, “Do I really want to continue that?” It keeps the focus inside. And this carries over into another one of the activities the Buddha recommends, which is restraint of the senses. We tend to use our senses as conduits of finding pleasure. And we’re pretty. What’s the word? Casual. And what pleasures do we go for? Anything that looks good. Anything that sounds good. The mind will go there. Your attention will go there. Or if you just walk down a city street, you’ll notice that your eyes and ears seem to be tuned in to picking up whatever might be pleasurable or whatever might present a danger to your pleasures. But pleasure seems to be the overriding issue with the senses. And you hear the Buddha saying, “You’ve got to look at your senses in a different way.” When he talks about restraint of the senses, it doesn’t mean that you don’t look or don’t listen. It means instead that you look at how you’re looking, look at how you’re listening. And to see what extent you’re actually stoking the fire of defilement. Or as John Lee would say, “Who’s doing the looking? Are you doing the looking? Or is greed doing the looking? Is anger doing the looking? Is delusion doing the looking?” In other words, what’s your motivation? When you look at something, why? And what happens as a result? What qualities get developed in the mind? And you’ll notice that some pleasures are perfectly innocent. Other pleasures excite desire, excite lust. Other disagreeable things can incite anger. But the fact that they incite these things is not only their fault. Oftentimes our lust is looking, our greed is looking, our anger is looking. You’re sitting around with nothing to do and the mind gets bored. And it wants something to desire, and it wants something to be angry about. And if you look with that kind of motivation or listen with that kind of motivation, then it just stokes the fires all the more. So when you restrain senses, you’re looking at your sensory involvement as a process of cause and effect. You’re stepping back from it. You’re just watching how anger plays out, how desire plays out, and what the details are that you focus on that aggravate the anger, aggravate the desire. And learn how to look at those details in another way. This is why we have that contemplation of the body, the end of the thirty-two parts. When you look at another human body, you don’t usually think about their liver or their stomach or their blood or the contents of their intestines. But the Buddha says if you look at it in that way, it cuts across a lot of the details that you would look to make that person attractive. Now some people say, “I have a relationship. How can I do this?” Well, you do it with everybody else who you’re not in a relationship to. You come to understand the way you look, the way you listen. You come to understand how your mind reacts to the senses, what it’s looking for in sensory experience, and what it pulls out as a result. You have to look at your senses in that way, to step back from the quick desire for a quick pleasure. The Buddha recommends that you develop mindfulness of the person in the body. And that could be with the breath. In other words, provide yourself with some pleasure by the way you breathe as you go through the day. So you’re not so hungry for sights and sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. You’re providing yourself with the food that the mind is craving, but you’re providing it in a form that’s more skillful, less aggravating. The Buddha’s image is of having six animals. He said ordinarily the way we look and listen, etc., is like having six animals that we’ve put on leashes. You’ve got a bird, you’ve got a snake, a crocodile, a hyena, a monkey, a dog, each one on a leash. You tie the ends of the leashes together, and then the animals are going to pull in their various directions. The dogs want to go in the village, the crocodile’s going to want to go into the river, the bird’s going to want to fly up. Whichever animal is strongest pulls the others in its direction. In this case, the crocodile pulls everybody else down into the river, and you all drown. But if you have mindfulness immersed in the body, it’s like a post. It gives you something solid here in the present moment. You tie all those animals’ leashes to the post and push and pull as they may like. They’re not going to go anywhere. They end up lying down next to the post. So the more you can cultivate this sense of comfortable breath awareness, allow it to spread through the body, and you make that part of your fuel as you go through the day, your food as you go through the day, then you’re not so hungry to nibble on pleasures that come through the senses, and you’re in a better position to look at the whole process of sensory involvement, to see the steps by which one of your defilements tries to take over and directs your attention, and what happens as a result. As that post gets developed and stronger and stronger, it moves into another one of the qualities that the Buddha recommends. If you find some seclusion, and this can be both physical and mental, physical seclusion is when you find time off by yourself, make that a regular part of your day, that you set aside some time where you simply sit with your own mind and get in touch with how the body feels from within, how the mind feels from within, without the interference of other people. Because, after all, you are trying to create your own environment here. You’re not simply accepting the environment of the world, the values of the world. With Right View, you’ve got to maintain values that go against a lot of the ordinary values of the world. So it’s good to have some time off to reestablish those values and develop some mental seclusion that you can then carry back into the world. This is where learning how to develop full body awareness, with the breath flowing throughout the entire body, is a really useful skill. Because you find as you go into the world energetically, if you have gaps in your awareness, other people can invade your body. Their energy can invade your body. And you pick up all kinds of things from other people. And there are a lot of people out there whose energies you don’t want to pick up. But if you fill the body with your own good energy, there are no gaps where they can come in. So if you know you’re going to go into a negative environment or deal with negative people, make sure that you first establish your full body awareness, full body breath, and maintain goodwill. That’s your protection. The final activity the Buddha recommends is moderation in your conversation. Before you say anything, you might want to think about the Buddha’s own criteria for what he would say. One, it had to be true. Two, it had to be beneficial. And three, it had to be the right time and right place for that kind of speech. Because sometimes he would have to say things that were pleasing, and other times he’d have to say things that were not pleasing. You’d have to know when would be the right time. There’s a story of a prince who was put up to ask the Buddha a trick question. The jain said, “We have it on good report that the Buddha said some very displeasing things to his cousin, Devadatta.” So go and ask the Buddha, “Would you ever say things that are displeasing?” And if he says yes, then you can ask him, “Well, what’s the difference between you and just ordinary people on the street?” If he says no, well, you’ve got evidence that he said displeasing things about Devadatta. So the prince asks the question, and the Buddha says, “There’s no categorical answer to that question.” And the prince realizes, of course, that the Buddha sidestepped the trick question. And then the Buddha sets out this table, true, beneficial, and knowing the right time and right place. One of the things that’s interesting about the table is that the Buddha never entertains the idea that something that was not true could be beneficial. In other words, no white lies, no useful fictions. Everything he said had to represent the truth as he knew it, as he saw it. And it had to be beneficial both for himself and for the listener to say those things. So if you apply this standard to your own speech, oftentimes you’ll find that you’re saying a lot less, which is all to the good. Because after all, as John Fruin once said, “If you can’t control your mouth, there’s no way you’re going to control your mind.” When you’re sitting down to meditate, you’re trying to get your directed thought and evaluation, in other words, your internal conversation on topic. And if during the day it’s been going all over the place, it’s very hard for it to get lassoed in. But if you’re careful about your speech in the same way that you’re careful about your engagement with the senses, then you’re going to be right here. Sit down, close your eyes, ready to go. Because you’ve made your environment and your activities that shape your environment in line with what you’re doing as you meditate. These five activities are virtue, right view, restraint of the senses, seclusion, moderation in your speech. Of course, when the Buddha gave this list of five, he was assuming a certain context, which is that you have admirable friends. So you should try to seek out admirable friends as a way of strengthening your resolve to keep up with the practice. The Buddha defines the four qualities of an admirable friendship. One, the friend has to be someone who has conviction, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. Two, has to be virtuous. Three, generous. And four, discerning. Of course, when you’re discerning, that’s right view. Virtuous. So you’ve got those two qualities again. Virtue together with right view. The more you associate with people of that sort, the more you strengthen those qualities. In fact, that’s part of the friendship. You don’t just hang around with somebody like that. You try to emulate that person’s good qualities. As for generosity, again, emulate that person’s generosity. When the Buddha talks about the qualities that make for a harmonious group, generosity is one of the most important ones. It’s what cements fellowship, a sense of community. And it doesn’t have to be just being generous with things. You’re generous with your time, with your energy. This is part of your protection. So try to create, through your own activities, a good environment, a good cocoon around you. Because we do live in a land of wrong view, and you need some protection. Draw on the strength of your admirable friends to help you in this direction, and you’ll find that the environment around you does become more and more conducive to the practice. Even when it’s pretty negative, outside, you’ll have the strength to withstand negative energies, negative thoughts, negative ideas. The Buddha’s teaching has a very strong sense of protection. As he said, that’s one of the teacher’s first duties, to provide protection to the student. Of course, that doesn’t mean getting a gun and shooting off the enemies. What it does mean is it gives you a good, solid basis for deciding what you should and shouldn’t do. And I have a very strong sense that the word “should” does have meaning. There are teachers in the Buddhist time who rejected that idea and said, “Nothing you do has any consequences.” In fact, there are some teachers who said, “The action is actually unreal, or it’s determined by outside forces beyond your control.” And as the Buddha said, “If you believe that, you’re unprotected from your own defilements, from your own urges. That would lead you in an unskillful direction.” There are people who said that everything you experience right now is determined by past karma. The Buddha rejected that as well. Your best protection is having a strong sense of what should and shouldn’t be done, and the ability to stick with what should be done and abandon what shouldn’t. That’s how you’re safe. Those principles would get carried out in these five activities within the context of admirable friendship. They give you the environment in which your practice can grow.

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