

How the Dhamma Protects

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There's a story they tell about when there was a fire in the market in Surin in Thailand, and a lot of people lost all their possessions. Some of them went to Luang Puu Dune and complained that after all those years they'd been making merit, they didn't see how the merit had protected them from the fire. They were going to give up, to stop coming to the monastery, because they didn't see that the Dhamma had protected them. Luang Puu's response was: That's not how the Dhamma protects. When you practice the Dhamma, it strengthens your mind.

As for the affairs of the world, those have to go along their ordinary way. Where there's gain, there's going to be loss; status, there's going to be loss of status. Where there's praise, there's criticism. Where there's pleasure, there's pain. Even arahants have to put up with these things. But the difference is that their minds are not shaken by them. That's how the Dhamma protects: We develop the mind, develop our powers of concentration, develop our powers of discernment. That puts us in a position where these things don't touch us.

After all, look at the human world. Look at your own body. Once you're born, there's going to be aging, there's going to be illnesses, there's going to be death. Even inside your own body. Then you look at the world around you. The people you love, if you don't leave them first, are going to leave you first. The image the Buddha gives is of a person being swept down the river, and there's grass alongside the river. You grab on to the grass in hopes that you won't get swept along, and what happens instead? Either you cut your hands on the grass or the grass gets pulled out of the bank. So if all you can think of is clutching at things around you, that's what happens. They cut your hands and then they pull away from the bank and go along with you, where they're totally useless in your hands. They don't protect you at all. The mind's best protection is the qualities it develops inside. When you've developed good powers of concentration, your mind doesn't get pulled after this or that. That in and of itself is a lot of protection.

And you develop goodwill. Try to develop goodwill for everyone. Think of yourself sitting right here and sending thoughts of goodwill off to the east, off to the west, the north, and the south, including everybody in all those directions; thoughts of goodwill above and below, all around. That helps in two ways. One is that the more you develop a sense of goodwill, the harder you find it to do harmful things to other people. At the same time, the Buddha said that limitless goodwill actually helps protect you from bad karma for the past. He says it

weakens the karma. That doesn't mean it doesn't happen. But the power of goodwill weakens the bad karma from the past so that it doesn't have so much of an impact on the mind.

But still, that's still not the best protection. The best protection is once the mind is solid and secure in concentration, that you start looking at where the mind still attached to things, where it hankers after sensual desires, where it gets caught up in anger, or attached to things, attached to your body. You have to examine these attachments. The reason the mind is attached is because it feels that its happiness has to depend on these things, and that if it were forced to leave them, it would be miserable. Well, as long as you think that, you're going to force yourself to be miserable, because you have to leave these things. Sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly.

But if you can begin to train the mind to be perfectly fine without having to depend on these things, then you can begin to let go. You see how much of that attachment is, on the one hand, based on ignorance, but on the other hand, based on your own actions. As Ajaan Lee once said, we're attached to food, but the food isn't attached to us. If we don't eat the rice, the rice isn't going to cry. We're attached to the body, but the body isn't attached to us. It's made up of physical elements. If they come together to form a body, it doesn't mean anything to the elements. When this body starts falling apart, it doesn't mean anything to them, either. All the dramas and narratives and fears are on our side.

So we're creating a lot of unnecessary suffering for ourselves, putting the mind in a position where it can be attacked from all sides. You have to learn how to let go. Then there will be no bridges by which dangers come in. We're the ones who build bridges so that anything can come in and out. As a result, a lot of suffering, a lot of insecurity comes into the mind, because we know that the things that we've built our bridges to are going to change. Whether we like to think about it or not, we know that fact deep down inside.

So to protect yourself, you have to learn how to let go and realize that the mind is actually a lot better off when it does let go. All those ideas we had that we had to depend on this thing or that person in order to be happy, we come to see that they come from a misunderstanding. The mind is a lot happier without leaning on these things.

This doesn't mean that you have to leave them, but you learn how to live in the world without having to depend on the world for your happiness. That puts you in a much stronger position. When things go well, you can function well. When they go poorly, you can function well. All too many of us are in a position where when things go well, we're good, and then when they turn bad, we turn bad as

well. If that's the case, we can't depend on ourselves, much less depend on the world outside.

So you want to develop this sense of independent well-being inside the mind. To do that, you have to look at the world in a very objective way, realizing that all of us in the human realm have a mixture of good and bad karma. Even arahants have bad karma from their past. Ven. Moggallana, many lifetimes in the past, killed his parents, and that karma still dogged his heels all the way up to his last life. But he put his mind in a position where it wasn't shaken, it wasn't harmed by it.

The image they give in the Canon is of a stone pillar, 16 spans tall, 8 spans buried down in the ground on a mountain. It's so well planted that no matter which direction the wind comes from, no matter how strong it blows, the pillar doesn't shake. That's the kind of mind you want to develop, one that's ready to face whenever the consequences of its past actions are.

As the Buddha pointed out, our experience of each moment is dependent on two things: the results of past actions and our present actions. As far as your past actions are concerned, you don't really know what they are. But you can know what your present karma is, because you can develop the powers of the mind, making it more and more clear about what your intentions are. And you can focus on making sure that regardless of what you've got in terms of karma from the past, you know that you've got skillful intentions here in the future, intentions that don't aim at harm, don't aim at attachment, don't have anything unskillful. That's your protection.

So work on developing the powers of mind: the mindfulness, concentration, and discernment that help you be clear about your present intentions and also help you shape those intentions so that you can will the skillful thing at all times.

The trick here is looking at things that you might want to do in the present moment, and there may be things that you like to do but they give bad results, or you don't like to do but they give good results: That's where you have to exercise as much discernment, as much wisdom as possible. We tend to think of the Buddha's teachings on wisdom is being very abstract, but they're not. They're very down-to-earth: What are you doing, what are the consequences of what you're doing? If you know that there's something you like to do but it's going to give bad results, how can you talk yourself out of doing it? That's a lot of wisdom right there. Or there's something you don't like to do, but you know it's going to give good results, how can you talk yourself into wanting to do it?

How can you focus on this question and not let other issues get in the way? That, when you come down to it, is what wisdom really means. It's pretty basic,

but we don't like to look at this question. We want to do what we want to do, and we want to make sure that we're promised good results no matter what. The world doesn't work that way. The Buddha's teachings on how to be happy are very realistic.

Someone once said that the events of 9/11 burst his complacent Buddhist bubble. Well, "complacent Buddhist" is an oxymoron. Buddhists aren't complacent. They're heedful. They look at the world for what it is, but they also know where the true protection is, so that they don't waste their time on false protection. They don't sit around hoping that bad things won't happen to them. They prepare because they know bad things do happen to everybody. The difference lies in how you react to them. If you develop your mind so that it's really strong, then it doesn't matter what comes. You're ready for it. You aren't shaken. You can keep on doing the skillful thing. You can trust yourself.

That's how the Dhamma protects. It teaches you how to protect yourself, how to protect yourself from your own ignorance and craving, from your own your attachments. Once you've taken care of those dangers, then there's really nothing to pose any danger for the mind at all.