

Radiating Goodness

October 29, 2009

When you think of the word “refuge,” you usually think of a safe quiet place where you’re protected from the onslaughts of the world. And there is that element in the practice. After all, the Buddha encourages you to find a quiet place, a secluded place, out in the wilderness or an empty building, where you can get away from other people and really focus on your own mind, and get a sense of what your issues are, as opposed to what the issues that everybody else shouts at you are. That’s one kind of refuge.

But there’s another kind of refuge as well. That’s made up of the qualities of the mind that enable you to be involved in things and yet not get sucked in by them: qualities like patience, determination, resilience, generosity. As I said this morning, before you’re going to gain anything out of the practice, you have to be willing to give. An attitude of giving is an actual refuge so that when disturbances come, you’re not disturbed by them.

We’re facing a weekend of absolute craziness. They’re going to bus in twelve busloads of people, and who knows if all the people are going to make it into the monastery. They’re letting them out at the intersection of the road. We have to shuttle them in, and then shuttle them out. There’s going to be a lot of activity. But if you look at it as an opportunity to practice the perfection of giving, the perfection of patience and, as we chanted just now, an opportunity to show respect in welcoming guests, it’s all part of the practice. And an important part as well. When we bring the right attitude to the world, that’s really our refuge.

If you look at the world in terms of wanting to get something out of it, you’re going to be disappointed because the things the world has to offer—material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasures and pains—have nothing really lasting, nothing that can give you any real satisfaction. The satisfaction comes from the qualities of the mind you develop. And not all of them are developed in quiet secluded places. Some really important qualities are developed when you’re surrounded by people, surrounded by activity, and yet you’re able to maintain an inner sense of stability.

An important part of that stability is the willingness to give, because you’re not sucking in, sucking in, sucking in, hoping that something good is going to come sucking in—like those fish that simply suck in water and hope some plankton and krill will come in, too. You’re giving. You’re giving your energy. You’re giving your attention. You’re trying to give your calmness. Now, some people may pick

up on it, others may not, but as long as you're generating calmness, you've got your refuge. If anything bad comes your way, it's going to be blocked because you've got generosity flowing out. You've got your patience flowing out so that you're not sucking in all the bad energies and bad attitudes of the people around you. You're trying to radiate something good.

Of course, to radiate something good, you've got to have some good inside to radiate. That's why we work on developing a sense of well-being with the breath, along with the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment that go with staying with the breath; the ease and well-being that come when you get a sense of being at home with the breath, understanding the way the breath energy flows in the body and using the breath to protect yourself.

The Buddha has an analogy of mindfulness filling the body, breath energy filling the body. He says it's like a solid door made out of hardwood. If someone were to throw a ball of string against it, the string wouldn't make a dent in the door. It would just bounce right off—which is different from what would happen with a lump of clay. You throw a stone into the lump of clay, and it'll just go splat into the clay. If your mindfulness fills your body, if your breath energy fills the body, you really can repel a lot of negative energies. Again, there's a sense of radiance inside. It may not be a light, but there's a sense of energy that's filling the body, protecting you from unskillful things, unskillful energies coming from outside.

If part of the body is left open and empty, you're likely to pick up somebody else's energy. Then you have to clean it out. The best thing of course is to try to keep this sense of well-being going, filling the body. Always keep tabs on it as you're dealing with other people, dealing with situations, and seeing this as an opportunity to gain some merit.

"Merit" is a word that you rarely hear of in Western Buddhism. But it's what's kept Buddhism alive over the centuries. Generosity, virtue, and meditation are all forms of merit. Even stream entry is a form of merit, so you can't look down on it. What that means is that you look at the world as an opportunity to gain the happiness that comes from doing good. So if unexpected things happen, look at them as an opportunity to make some merit.

A lot of people don't like the idea of merit. It sounds grabbing or acquisitive, but it's amazing how happy it can make people and how it can give them the strength and resilience to put up with difficult situations. So it's not just acquisitive. It comes from an understanding that if you want to be happy, you have to do something good. And doing something good has to benefit somebody else, not just you. In other words, you see that happiness is not a zero-sum game.

It's not a question of somebody else taking what you want or your taking what somebody else wants. You find a way of generating happiness where it spreads around. You gain, and the other people gain. And it helps develop a sense of resilience, of patience, resourcefulness.

We're going to have lots of people here, more than we've ever had before, so there are bound to be things going wrong. We can expect that the toilets will overflow, and somebody will probably drive off the road and we'll have to pull the car out of the ditch. Who knows what else might happen. But we just learn how to take it in stride. Here's an opportunity to do some good. Here's an opportunity to be helpful. Here's an opportunity to develop some of those virtues that you don't develop when you're sitting here with your eyes closed.

Ajaan Fuang tells of the time when Ajaan Lee was going to have the celebration for 25 centuries of Buddhism at Wat Asokaram. They had very few buildings, mostly just grass shacks, grass sheds. It went on for at least 10 days. As everybody who had been involved in it has said, it always seemed to be ready to spin out of control. Yet the fact that everybody was there to make merit, everybody was there to do good, helped keep it going.

You have to learn to live with other people's limits of how good they can be. You may wonder why is this person doing that, why is this person doing this. Well, that's how far their goodness goes at the moment. So you learn to make allowances. And you learn to look at your own attitude.

Ajaan Fuang once took some people up around the chedi at Wat Dhammasathit, soon after it'd been constructed. They were going to go meditate. But when they got up there, they found that somebody had just left a lot of trash around. So Ajaan Fuang had everybody pick up the trash. One of the women complained: how could anybody do this, put trash around the chedi? And he said, "Don't criticize them. Look at this as an opportunity for you to do some good. If they hadn't left the trash, you wouldn't get the merit of picking it up." That's the attitude that lies behind merit. And it's not something to look down on. It's something to honor, something to try to develop yourself.

When you develop this attitude of giving as an essential part of the practice, you find that your meditation goes better as well because you're here to give to the breath. You're here to give to the present moment. When you give importance to something like this, you're going to see what importance it has. It's only when you give in this way that you can see things that you wouldn't see if you just stepped back and tried to be the dispassionate observer. This is called the discernment that comes from conviction. This is an important part of the practice. Because after all,

we are stuck here in suffering, and the only way we're going to get out is if we're convinced that there is a way out.

It's like being lost in the woods. If you think that you just can't get out, there's no way you can do it. You're going to stay lost. You'll give up easily at any obstacle. But if you're convinced there's a way out, then you don't take the obstacles as permanent. You see them as challenges and try to figure a way around them because if you're convinced that there must be a way around them, and you are going to find it.

But you have to put energy into it. The attitude of being an agnostic Buddhist who says, "Well, I'm just going to hold back and not really believe anything": That's not what the Buddha encouraged. He says, the way out of suffering comes from conviction.

There's a description of what's called transcendent dependent co-arising. It's the list of the factors in the mind that leads you to release. They begin with ignorance leading to suffering, and from suffering they go to conviction. There is stress, dis-ease in life. But the way out is to realize there must be something better than this. There must be a way out. That conviction comes with a sense of confidence and it's through the confidence that you get resourceful. You take up leads you otherwise just might leave hanging. You want to see where they go. And fortunately, we're not blindly following leads through the forest. There are path markers all over the place. If you look for them, you'll find them.

There's that image the Buddha gives of the elephant hunter looking for the elephant in the forest. He comes across some elephant footprints. He's looking for a bull elephant because he needs a bull elephant to do some work that's got to be done. He sees some big footprints but he doesn't automatically come to the conclusion this must be a bull elephant, because there are dwarf females with big feet and there are tall female elephants with big feet. But just because he's not sure doesn't mean that he'll say, "Well, I'll just give up. I'm going to leave it at being not sure." He says, "Here's something that looks promising," so he follows the footprints. He sees some scratch marks high up in a tree. Again, he's not sure that they're the marks of a bull elephant's tusks, because those tall females might have tusks as well. But he keeps on going. This is the important part: He keeps on going. He finally gets to a clearing and there it is: a big bull elephant. He's got the elephant he needs. He's confirmed in his conviction.

The same in the practice. We see the footprints. We see the scratch marks. The pleasure that comes from doing good, the pleasure that comes from concentration: These are all footprints and scratch marks. They're no guarantee that the Buddha really knew what he was talking about when he was talking about

unbinding, talking about the deathless, a happiness that doesn't depend on conditions, because it is possible to develop the pleasure in virtue, and the pleasure in concentration without having any sense of these things at all. But when we see for ourselves that this practice really does lead to an experience of the deathless: That's when our conviction is confirmed. That's when we know for sure that the Buddha did know what he was talking about.

But notice, we're not going to see it simply by sitting back and refusing to commit ourselves. An element of commitment is needed to keep following the footprints. Otherwise, you're not going to know what kind of footprints they are.

In practical terms, this translates into a willingness to give—to give of your time, give of your energy, give of your patience, using your knowledge of meditation to keep the mind in a good mood as it's developing these things so that you have some goodwill to give to people. You have compassion to give to them. And you don't start running dry. The breath is always coming in, going out, the ease that can come from being with the breath coming in, going out keeps getting replenished if you look after it. As you develop a sense of radiating goodness through the breath, through the body, radiating outwards, that means you're not going to be sucking in any negative things from other people. Whatever comes up, you just radiate goodness at it. That's your refuge. And it's a refuge where everybody benefits.

So as we face the events of the coming weekend, keep this in mind. Whatever comes up, just radiate goodness at it. See what happens.