

Dhamma Survivalism

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One of the ironies of Buddhism coming to the West is that sometimes you hear the Buddha described as extolling interconnectedness and celebrating the Oneness of all being, even though, as he actually pointed out, the extent to which we're interconnected is very unstable and, because it's unstable, it's a cause for suffering. As for Oneness, he said there *are* levels of concentration in which you can get the mind into a state of Oneness, but it's fabricated and it still contains some suffering. The way to insight, he said, is not to see things as One but to see them as separate, because only when you see them as separate can you get an objective perspective on them, to see what they're actually doing. Otherwise, the mind tends to go into the worlds of its thoughts. When you're inside them, you can't see the process by which they're created.

So as we meditate, we're actually trying to gain a sense of the mind as something separate from its thoughts, from its perceptions, from all sensory contact, because it's only when it's separate that it's really secure. Now, this would be selfish if finding happiness for ourselves meant taking things away from other people or pushing them out of a space that we wanted. But actually, we're learning how to inhabit a space we already have, that already is ours and that nobody else can get into. We need to do this because, given the instability of the world, if our happiness depends on things outside, if our goodness depends on things outside, it's very unstable, very unreliable.

So we're trying to find a foundation for our goodness—not only our happiness, but also our goodness—right here inside. And that has to be separate, something that doesn't go up and down with the ups and downs of the world. Because you think about interconnectedness: What are we interconnected to? There are a lot of really stupid people out there making stupid decisions, they have an impact on us, and there's no way we can stop them. If our happiness depends on things that are going to be affected by their decisions, we're setting ourselves up for suffering. If our goodness depends on things being a certain way—in other words, “I'll be good to you if you're good to me”—that kind of goodness is on shaky foundations.

So for the sake of your happiness, for the sake of your goodness, you've got to find this separate spot inside. It's composed both of concentration and discernment. The concentration is what gives you that sense of well-being, simply being here right now, breathing in, breathing out, focused in the body, gaining a

sense of the different energies flowing around, and seeing what you can do with them—learning to take an interest in this dimension of your awareness, because it has a lot of potential.

The way you breathe doesn't have to depend on the moods of the people around you. It doesn't even have to depend on your own moods. It can provide you with a way of getting out of unskillful moods. When you're angry and you notice that you're breathing in a way that aggravates the anger, you can stop and breathe in another way that gives the mind a peaceful place to step outside of the anger, step back from the anger, to see what's causing it, where it's coming from, what appeal it has to you, and to what extent the anger is justified and to what extent it's not. That puts you in a position where you can actually look at what would be an effective way of dealing with the situation. If there are things that have to be changed, what would be the best way to change them?

If you try to make this decision while you're *in* the anger, it's as if you have blinders. There's a lot that you can't see, and the irritation makes you impatient to come up with some answer right away, and the blinders give you a very narrow idea of what your alternatives are. Whereas if you can breathe in a way that's soothing, you can step back and take a larger, more patient view. You begin to realize that some things can be changed right now and other things are going to take time, and that if you really want to be effective and not just simply act on your moods, you'll have to wait until there's a proper opening.

So you've got the breath here as your tool or as your foundation, giving you an independent place, independent source of happiness, well-being, that allows you to step outside of the unskillful things going on in your mind. It's when you can step outside of your mind this way: That's when you can step outside of the affairs of the world as well.

But in addition to having this place, you have to see the value of stepping outside into this place. There are a lot of voices in the mind that say, "This is selfish. This is unfeeling. I'm not getting what I want out of the world outside." They can pull you in all sorts of directions, those voices. This is where discernment comes in, reminding you: What's really valuable inside? It's the survival of your goodness.

You might say that as a Dhamma practitioner, you're a Dhamma survivalist, stocking up on goodness inside, because that's something that can't be taken away. Regular survivalists have stocks of food, weapons, whatnot, not realizing that by having lots of food stocked away, if they're not generous with it when bad times come, then it's going to be something that will attract the attention of the neighbors—and not in a friendly way. So there's a danger even with having a

stockpile of food. But there's no danger in having a stockpile of goodwill, a stockpile of compassion, a stockpile of virtue, concentration, and discernment. And those are the things you really need for the survival of the mind.

That's where insight comes in, reminding you that you're not your body. You're not limited to this life. When this life ends, that's not the end of everything. So you have to ask yourself, "What do I want to take along when I go? What will be good for me to take along?" The good actions you do create good habits in the mind. Those good habits in the mind are things you carry with you. There's an image in the Dhammapada: The good that you've done will be like relatives waiting for you on the other side, glad to see you've come home.

So keep that perspective in mind. Genuine survival means survival of your good qualities.

When you have this combination of concentration as a sense of well-being that you can build on and the discernment that senses the value of your good qualities, then your goodness really is independent, because it's got a separate foundation, a foundation that all those interconnected things can't touch. Only then is it safe—and only then are you safe to be around. As long as your goodness depends on things being a certain way, and then all of the sudden they're not that way, you can't be trusted. So even though you're doing this primarily for yourself, other people are going to benefit, too.

But you've got to work on developing this foundation, especially as you go back into the world of daily life. You'll find that this person pulls at you, that person pulls at you—all the different voices that are out there are going to pull you in. You've got to maintain this sense of being a little bit separate, and be okay with that sense of being separate, realizing that that's where genuine security lies.

We'd like to think that our relationships with other people will give us security, but you look at yourself: You're a very changeable person. As the Buddha said, there's nothing as quick to change as the mind, and it can change into all sorts of things. That applies to your mind—and to everybody else's minds, too. They're just as changeable as you are. When you're in relationship, the changes don't get added. They get multiplied. So ultimate security is not in relationships. It's in having this separate place where you're harming no one: You're not harming yourself; you're not harming the people around you. You're not taking anything away from them. And you're developing a good stockpile of goodness that will radiate out from this separate foundation.

So it's not as if you're running off and forgetting about the whole rest of the world. You are keeping them in mind. You're being responsible about how you look for your happiness—and there are so few people in the world who are

responsible in that way. You realize that your search for happiness also entails a search for goodness, and as you're stockpiling both of them inside the mind, the things whose survival is worthwhile will survive and they'll radiate a happiness and a goodness around them.