

Safety All Around

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A lot of the suttas end with the listeners saying that they take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It seems to have been a custom in the time of the Buddha. You found a teacher you respected and you asked for protection. I was reading a book a while back in which the author, a scholar of Buddhism, was saying that the Buddha just barely tolerated this idea. He didn't encourage it.

But that ignores a lot of what he had to say about the role of a teacher. He said that one of the duties of a teacher is to provide protection for the student in all directions. This doesn't mean the teacher goes around with a sword and a shield, fighting off your enemies. But the duty of the teacher is to provide you with the kind of knowledge where you can protect yourself.

What do you need to be protected from? Your own unskillful habits. In fact, one of the biggest dangers is thinking that there is no such thing as an unskillful habit, that right and wrong are simply social conventions, and that you don't have to pay attention to them. Or that your actions don't really make a difference—that you don't have freedom of choice, that because causes and conditions make you do what you have to do, you're not really responsible. Nowadays you actually hear some Buddhist teachers saying that—that if you think that you're responsible for your actions, for following the path, that's self-view, wrong view. But that's not what the Buddha taught.

There was one time when he went out and actually argued with teachers who said that you're not responsible for your choices in the present moment. It was either on the basis of saying that what you're doing was determined by past actions or determined by a creator god or that it was totally random. The Buddha argued, in each case, that people who teach those doctrines give you no basis for deciding that there's something skillful to be done, something unskillful not to be done. When you can't make that distinction, he said, you're left defenseless, without a protector.

So your first protection is simply that: the right view that there is such a thing as skillful action, unskillful action, that you have the choice, and that you're free to choose. You're not compelled by other forces to act in ways that you don't want to. That's the first level of protection.

Then, of course, the Buddha's teaching on the Triple Training teaches you other forms of protection as well. With the training in heightened virtue, where you observe the five precepts, you observe them strictly. If you're consistent in holding to the precepts, you're providing safety to everybody. They don't have to fear anything from you. They don't have to fear that they're going to be killed or that their things will be stolen by you or that you'll engage in illicit

sex with them or with the people they love. You're not going to lie to them; you're not going to take intoxicants and behave in ways that are going to be harmful to them. You're providing safety for them and, as he said, when you're providing safety in a universal way like this, you're going to have a portion of that safety yourself. If you can avoid unskillful actions, it's like a hand that has no wound. You can pick up poison, and the poison doesn't seep into the blood. If there is a wound, you're not safe.

So as you hold by the five precepts, you can rejoice in the fact that you're behaving in a safe way, and this is part of the protection that the Buddha provides: not only telling you that there is such a thing as skillful and unskillful action, but also telling you which actions are skillful, which actions are not.

Then there's training in the heightened mind, which basically is training in concentration. You're finding an escape from pain other than in sensuality. The problem with sensuality is that it sets you up for all kinds of dangers. Wherever you find your sensual pleasure, there'll be other people who may want to find sensual pleasure in the same place, with the same person, with the same things. Some people are unscrupulous about how they go about it. They'll just take what they want and even kill to get it. As long as your well-being depends on that kind of pleasure, you're in a position of danger,

The Buddha gives lots of images about the dangers of sensuality. There's the image of the hawk flying off with a piece of meat in its talons, and other hawks and crows and kites are going to attack it to get that piece of meat. If it doesn't let go, they may kill it. Sensuality is like a bead of honey on a blade of a knife. It's like walking against the wind, carrying a torch. It's like being up in a tree, eating fruits, and someone comes along with an axe and he wants the fruits, too. He can't climb the tree so he's going to cut the tree down. All these are images to remind you that there are dangers in sensuality.

You don't have to look very far. Back in Wat Dhammssathit, we had thirty- some dogs, and all the female dogs went into heat at the same time. All the male dogs in the neighborhood came into the monastery, and the fights that went on: A lot of the male dogs in the monastery ended up maimed for good, all because everybody was running after sensual pleasures. And human beings are not that much different from dogs in this regard.

So as you practice concentration, you have a source of pleasure, an escape from pain, that's safe from that kind of danger. As you're watching your breath, there's nobody going to come in and try to take your breath away from you or push you out of the way so that they can watch your breath instead. This is a pleasure that's totally inward and totally in your territory. And it doesn't have the dangers of the intoxication that goes with sensuality. So it's a pleasure that allows you to see the mind clearly and puts you in a position where you can move on to the next training, which is the training in heightened discernment: basically, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

What's noble about the truths? They force you to question your clinging and your craving. Otherwise, you're going to suffer from these things. The Buddha puts a little question mark into your likes and dislikes: The things that you hold on to, the things that you're feeding on: Do you realize that those are where your suffering is? Your thirst for those things, that's what's causing the suffering. The suffering isn't caused by what people do outside. It's caused by your own actions. As the Buddha said, the end of suffering is when you learn how to develop dispassion for your craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. And even though suffering in and of itself isn't noble, craving isn't noble, his truths about these things *are* noble, because they force you to question your attachments, question your thirst. You step back. That's the beginning of dispassion. Dispassion comes from noticing that the things you're doing are causing suffering. And you start to wonder: Are those things really worth it?

The third noble truth is there to remind you that there is a possibility for something better. You actually end your suffering by ending your craving, ending your clinging. It's all through dispassion.

Now, dispassion is not a gray, lifeless state. It's actually maturity. It comes from questioning the things you've been doing, the places where you thought that what you were doing was leading to happiness. You can suddenly realize that, No, it's not. You're growing up. In one of Ajaan Chah's images, he said it's like getting sober after having been drunk. The mind clears. Or it's like that cow in the Far Side cartoon: Sine cows are eating grass and all of a sudden one cow lifts up her head and says incredulously, "Hey, wait a minute, this is grass! We've been eating grass!"

One of the Buddha's image of the blind man who's been given a soiled, dirty rag and is told that it's a nice white, clean piece of cloth. So he's very protective of it. Finally, his relatives take him to a doctor who actually gives him his eyesight back. He looks at the rag. He realizes he's been fooled.

That's what the Buddha is telling us to do: basically to grow up. Look at things that you haven't been looking at. You realize that what you've been doing has been causing you suffering. The things you thought were causing you happiness are actually the very things causing you suffering. This is one of the best forms of safety the Buddha gives us. It saves us from our delusion. Saves us from our ignorance.

So this is how the Buddha gives protection: by teaching us how to protect ourselves from our unskillful habits. Ultimately, we even get protected from our skillful habits. As long as we hold on to our skillful habits, after having abandoned the unskillful ones, we're still subject to inconstancy, stress, not-self. He teaches us how to let go even of those, without reverting to unskillful habits. This is why the protection goes beyond all directions.

So that response of the listeners in the Buddha's times, going for refuge, was totally in line with what the Buddha was teaching. He taught a path of safety. A path in which we could take

refuge. Look at his names for nibbāna: Nibbāna wasn't the only name for the goal. The goal was also Harbor. Refuge. Safety. Security. The Secure. The path there starts with his teaching us how to provide safety for ourselves. When we follow the teachings, that's how we take refuge—and how we find refuge. We're protected in all directions, and the protection goes on even beyond all directions. It's the safest thing there is.