

Safety in an Uncertain World

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We live in a dangerous world and we try to forget about that. There're dangers of all kinds, just being in the universe. I was reading the other day about gamma ray bursts. Long ago, the Earth apparently was subjected to a pretty severe one. If it happened today, all our electronics would be fried. If it came from a star that was nearby, the whole Earth would be fried. Then there are asteroids, all kinds of stuff flying around. So just being on Earth, we're in a dangerous place.

Living in human society is even more dangerous. The things that people can do to us to harm us physically, that's one thing. But the things they can do to harm us mentally and emotionally, that's a lot worse. The worst things they can do would be to get us to do unskillful things that will lead to bad consequences for us down the line. Our mind is so susceptible to outside influences that we need protection.

This is one of the ways in which the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha can give us refuge. They give us standards to stand against those of the world. The world says that material wealth is the best thing there is, power is the best thing there is, beauty, fame. The Buddha says, "No, those things will change on you." And to get those things, you can often end up doing some really unskillful things that will have a long impact on you. The Buddha always has you think about the long term.

Remember the questions that lie at the beginning of wisdom and discernment, "What when I do it will lead to my long term harm and suffering? What when I do it will lead to my long term health and happiness?" When the Buddha says long-term, he means really long. Many, many lifetimes. Our unskillful actions can have an impact not only in this lifetime, but also onto future ones. It's good to keep that perspective in mind. It protects us.

The Buddha talks about teachers providing protection for their students. That's one of a teacher's duties. And this is the kind of protection the Buddha gives us: ways of thinking, ways of looking at the world, to help us see that being skillful and being heedful, being harmless, really are activities, standards, values, that are worth pursuing. That's one level of danger that the Buddha has us protect ourselves from.

Then we think about the uncertainties of human life: aging, illness, death. Those things could come at any time. So he goes on to provide protection against them. First he provides protection against going to bad places when we die, or creating bad places for ourselves here on Earth. He does this with his standards in

terms of virtue, concentration, and discernment. He helps to protect us against our doing unskillful things, thinking unskillful things, saying unskillful things, because the uncertainties of the world are nothing compared to a mind that's uncertain, that can't trust itself, so we have to learn how to make ourselves trustworthy.

This is why the precepts are such an important part of the practice. You learn to make a promise to yourself that you won't act in harmful ways, and then you stick with that promise. You'll see there are parts of the mind that are traitors. They don't want long-term. They want short-term. They want happiness right *now*.

If the path were simply one of holding by the precepts, it wouldn't have lasted long. So we add concentration. As the Buddha describes concentration, it's basically feeling tones of pleasure, rapture, and the calm of equanimity after the mind has been nourished with pleasure and rapture. We're feeding the mind so that it's not so hungry for quick fixes. That way, it can learn to trust itself more.

But even then we're still subject to further dangers: the simple facts of aging, illness, and death. Acting in skillful ways on the mundane level can't protect us from those dangers. And who knows when you die and go someplace else: You may forget everything about the Dhamma. There may be an inclination in the mind if you develop in that direction. But sometimes the shock of death and rebirth can be so great that there's a huge blank. It's going to take a long while to get back to the Dhamma. This is why we have to be protective against our own skillful actions—in other words, skillful actions that are not on the noble level.

This is where discernment comes in, building on concentration, so that you can learn to see how the mind shapes its experience. As the Buddha says, insight gets developed when you ask the right questions about fabrications: what fabrications are, how they should be regarded, how they should be seen with insight.

Learn how to look at your emotions as you go through the day. From that perspective, how are they fabricated? The Buddha gives you a list of three types: bodily, verbal, mental. Bodily is the way you breathe. Verbal is directed thought and evaluation, how you talk to yourself. Mental is perceptions and feelings: the labels you put on things and the feeling tones you focus on. Your emotions are composed of these things, and you want to learn how to see them that way. They may be old habits. We may say that something we've done since childhood is really going to be hard to dig out, but it's not just since childhood. A lot of these habits go way back to before we were born.

There's a belief among Ajaan Lee's students that he was King Asoka reborn. When I learned that, I was able to obtain a biography of Asoka that had some of Asoka's edicts translated in an appendix. I translated them into Thai. I read one of them to Ajaan Fuang, where Asoka was talking to his government workers and saying, "If you want to please me by how quickly you know what I want, you should know what I want before I do." Ajaan Fuang's comment was, "2000 years, he didn't change." Sometimes our habits go way back. But that's no reason to think that they're too strong to dig up or too strong to change.

Ajaan Suwat had a nice image. He says, "You go into a cave." Imagine the caves of Lascaux, which for many thousands of years had remained closed. "Somebody goes in with a light. The darkness in the cave can't say, 'Hey, we've been dark all this long, you have no right to chase us away.' Once the light comes in, the darkness has to go." In the same way, you want to bring some light to your emotions. This is how you can undo those habits, even the skillful habits that are composed of these things.

But first you want to get good at undoing your unskillful emotions, because these are the things that make you untrustworthy. Talk about the world being uncertain: If you can't trust yourself to always do the skillful thing, always do the thing right in line with the precepts, you're really in a precarious place—much more precarious than the Earth, subject to gamma ray bursts. Your mind has defilement bursts. They're happening all the time. They fry your goodness.

So you have to learn how to take them apart. To what extent does the way you breathe around them aggravate them? To what extent does the way you talk to yourself aggravate them? One of the primary things you've got to watch out for is the voice in the mind says, "This is old. This is deeply entrenched. I can't deal with it. I can't fight it." That's the defilement's first line of defense. Then, when it comes back, it says, "See? See? I'm coming back." But you have to say, "Okay, you're coming back again, but I can fight you again."

One of the important things in the practice is that you don't count the number of times you've dealt with a defilement. You just keep dealing with it every time it comes out, as best you can. Finally, you'll be able to have an insight, seeing why it has its appeal.

For a lot of us, the really unskillful emotions hide their appeal. We're embarrassed about it, and they'd like to keep it hidden. They know that if it came to light that you liked a particular unskillful emotion for some pretty bad reasons—but they were compelling, they had their allure—you'd be embarrassed, and the defilement would be weakened. So the defilement tries to keep these things hidden.

But we're not here to play along with them. We're here to fight them. That means we have to figure out: Why do they have that power? Why do we play along? How can we learn new ways of talking about them? Ways that change our allegiance. Ways that don't get discouraged.

Then, of course, there are the perceptions we have around them. Say there's anger or ill will. We have to look at the perceptions we have about the object of our anger and ill will. We have to look at the perceptions we have about the anger and ill will itself. "Let me tell you something, I don't have any ill will, I just want to see justice down," you might say. Well, dig around a little bit to see what ill will might be hiding behind your ideas of justice. Or with anger, all too often we say, "My anger is justified." And you can give all kinds of reasons for why the people or the institutions that you're angry about really are bad. But you have to realize, the fact that they're bad may be true, but the fact of your anger is something optional. If you want to deal with a problem, you can't deal with it through anger.

This is another misperception we have. We think that it's because of our anger that we have the motivation to deal with problems. But if you're going to deal with them effectively, you can't do it with anger. So you have to learn how to talk to yourself about the object and about your anger—or whatever the unskillful emotion is—in new ways so that you can start taking these fabrications apart. After all, that's what they are: fabrications that are put together, jerry-rigged, and some of them are really habitual. But again, just because they're a habit doesn't mean that they need to maintain their power.

This is how insight comes about. It's nothing really special, nothing really obscure or esoteric. Virtue, concentration, discernment: These are the things that provide you with refuge. They may be unable to protect you from gamma-ray bursts or asteroids, but they can protect you from doing unskillful actions. And they can protect you even from the dangers of skillful actions if you really follow them well. You get to the karma that brings an end to karma—because the only really safe secure place is nibbana.

That's why the Buddha listed safety, security, the secure, harbor, and refuge as epithets for nibbana. That's when you're going to be safe in all dimensions, in all ways. Up until then, you have to accept the fact that you're living in an uncertain world, but the real danger is the fact that you're uncertain inside. Now, the world will always be uncertain, but inside of you doesn't have to be uncertain.

This is the message of the Buddha's teachings. He was able to find a happiness that was certain and secure. And he points out the way to us. We live in a world where that way is still open. That much is good about the world right now. There will come a day when people forget, and someone will have to find the path all

over again. So take advantage of the fact that the world does offer this opportunity right now, and see how far you can take it.