

A Safe Harbor

March 13, 2007

Nibbana or nirvana is not the only name the Buddha gave to the goal of his teaching. He also called it shelter, harbor, refuge, because that's something we sorely need. As in the chant just now: The world offers no refuge, it offers no shelter, there is no one in charge. We come into life and have some sense of protection that comes from our parents, but as we grow up, we begin to realize that our parents are not as all-powerful as we thought. We have to depend more and more on ourselves. And we look at ourselves: How reliable are we? We're slaves to craving. We do so many things that cause suffering not only for ourselves but also for other people. So who can you depend on? Where can you find true safety? It's in response to that need for safety that the Buddha offered his teachings.

On a relative level, there's the safety of following the path, the safety it provides for you and for people around you when you're generous, when you follow the precepts, and when you meditate. Then there's the ultimate level of safety that comes from attaining the goal. They talk about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as refuge, refuge both in the sense of giving us examples of how to find refuge for ourselves, and in becoming qualities in our mind. There's the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha on the internal level, the qualities they stand for. Like the ones we're developing right now: mindfulness, alertness, ardency. If you're not mindful, you forget all the lessons you've learned. If you're not alert, you don't really see what you're doing, and you're exposing yourself to all kinds of problems, all kinds of dangers.

So it's important that we learn how to develop those qualities, taking the Buddha as our example, taking the Dhamma and the Sangha as our example, taking that external refuge and bringing it in. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In this case, we're keeping the breath in mind, keeping in the body in and of itself in mind—"in and of itself" in the sense that we're not concerned about how the body looks to other people or how strong it is, whether we like our bodies or not. Just the body as it simply is experienced right here and now: That's our frame of reference. Try to keep following it on those terms. That requires mindfulness—keeping it in mind—and then alertness: watching what you're doing.

Sometimes alertness is translated as clear comprehension, and the commentaries slough it over into discernment—understanding the not-self

nature of things—and it becomes quite intricate. But in the Canon, it means something pretty simple: just being alert to what you’re doing. This is something we tend to miss. We pay too much attention to other things. But if you want to see cause and effect, the first things you’ve got to see are the causes, and particularly the causes you’re making. What are you actually doing? If you know the effects but you can’t remember what you’ve done, and you weren’t watching what you’re doing when you did it, there’s no way you’re going to learn anything.

So you want to be mindful, you want to be alert, so that you can start seeing cause and effect. As this is a knowledge that eats through your ignorance, it also chastises your craving. Craving basically wants things that can’t happen. When you start seeing cause and effect clearly, and your desires get more in line with what’s actually possible, that’s how you learn how to rely on yourself more, so that you’re not just a slave to craving. You become freed from your craving.

This is then combined with ardency, which is essentially the effort to do all of this as skillfully as you can.

If you look at the last three factors of the noble path—right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—the latter ones actually contain the earlier ones inside them. Right effort starts off with the desire and the intent, and the energy you put into sensing what’s skillful and unskillful, then trying to abandon what’s unskillful, prevent it from arising again, giving rise to what’s skillful in the mind and once it’s there, trying to maintain it, letting it develop to its full extent. As you move on to right mindfulness, right effort gets included under the term ardency. So right mindfulness includes right effort, adds more onto it, giving you a place to focus, giving you a foundation, giving you a frame of reference. Then right mindfulness, in the establishing of mindfulness, becomes the theme for your concentration as you’re focused on the breath, focused on the body in and of itself, developing these qualities of ardency, alertness, mindfulness: That becomes a theme of your concentration.

The Pali word for “theme” here is *nimitta*. Sometimes people talk about the nimitta of concentration as being a light or a vision, but the Canons defines the word nimitta of concentration as the four establishings of mindfulness: the body or the breath in and of itself, or the feelings that are related to the breath, mind states related to the breath, mental qualities related to the breath. That’s the theme of your concentration.

So the practice of right concentration includes right effort and right mindfulness in its definition. It’s an organic whole, which means you’ve got a lot of things to balance out here. This is why it’s a skill. This is why we have to

practice. It takes time. You have to be as observant as possible to master all the elements of this skill.

But essentially what you're doing is making yourself someone you can rely on. In other words, when you tell the mind to focus on something, it stays focused. When you tell it to let go of something, it learns how to let go. In this way, you begin to develop a sense of refuge, a sense of safety inside. At the same time, you're offering safety to other people. This makes it doubly safe.

The Buddha talks about virtue, for example, as universal gift. When you decide that you're going to stick by a particular precept no matter what, you're offering safety, say, from killing, safety from stealing, illicit sex, lying, the taking of intoxicants. You offer that safety to everybody at all times. And because that safety is universal, you have a part in that universal safety as well.

The same with meditation: You're here trying to overcome your ignorance, your greed, anger, and delusion. When you're less prone to greed, anger, and delusion, other people are less subject to your defilements as well. Because you're not inflicting these things on other people, you don't have to worry about adding lots of extra dangers to your life.

This path is a safe path. When you augment it with what they called brahmaviharas—the sublime attitudes—that offers more safety as well. You learn how to develop the ability to extend goodwill to everybody, no matter what, extending compassion, and empathetic joy when it's appropriate, learning to develop equanimity when it's appropriate. You're developing the heart along with the mind. That offers more safety, too, in several ways. For one, when you can develop these attitudes and call them up whenever you need them, you're less likely to act on unskillful impulses.

This, of course, requires work as well. It's not the case that our true nature is to be kind and generous, just as it's not our nature to be nasty and cruel. We simply have these habits. When we develop them as a skill in some areas but are not so skillful in others. What we're trying to develop here is the ability to apply them whenever we can, in all situations. That requires learning how to train your heart as well as your mind.

This is why we're focused on the breath, because the breath is one of the elements in our emotions. We fabricate our emotions just the same way we fabricate our thoughts. We tend to think of our emotions as being more real, being more true and prior to thinking, but they're fabricated as well. They have their physical side, which is influenced by the way you breathe. The mental side is the way you talk to yourself, the things you focus on, the things you say about them, along with the feelings and perceptions that go along with them. As we

practice with the breath, we learn how to shape these elements more consciously so that we can begin to rely not only on our thoughts, but also on our emotions.

These sublime attitudes also provide safety in the sense that they expand our attitudes. The mind gets expanded. The barriers we used to place on our goodwill, around certain people we just could never imagine wishing goodwill for: Now we break down the barriers. When we break down the barriers, what we find is that we're overcoming limitations we've placed on ourselves. As the mind expands in that way, the Buddha says the results of your past bad actions gets swallowed up in a more expansive mind state.

It's like the difference between being a poor person suddenly meeting up with a debt, and a wealthy person meeting up with the same amount of debt. Say that you have only five cents to your name and you're faced with a \$30 debt. The \$30 debt is huge, it swallows up everything you have, more than everything you have. But you've got \$1 million and you come up with a \$30 debt, it's no problem at all. It's the same with a more expansive mind state. The past bad actions you've done, as the Buddha said, are hardly felt at all, because the mind is so much more expansive now. This is a form of safety that can come from training the heart.

Even more so when your concentration develops and you develop even further insight into the ways the mind can create suffering for itself: You develop the qualities of mind that can see through those habits, let them go. Your mindfulness is continuous, your alertness is really sharp, concentration and discernment grow as a result. These offer protection on all sides. One of the images in the Canon is of having a fortress on a frontier. Concentration, the Buddha said, is like having good stores of food, so that if you're attacked, if somebody lay siege to you for days on end, you've got enough food to see you through the siege. Discernment, he said, like a fortress wall covered with plaster, so slick and slippery that the enemy can't climb up it. In other words, your discernment leaves nothing for your defilements to catch hold of.

So you're creating safety for yourself with every aspect of the path. This is why it's wise not to pick and choose and say, "I like this part of the path, but not that part of the path." If you leave out parts the path, it's like having a huge gaping hole in your fortress wall, or letting mice into your stores of food. You want your practice to be all around, so that your safety is all around.

Ultimately, of course, what you really want to get is to the deathless, something outside of space and time that nothing within space and time can touch. No change, no aging, no illness can touch this. That's where you find your true refuge and harbor.

So whatever effort is required in the path, think of it as learning to make yourself a more reliable person. If you can't rely on yourself, what do you have? As I said, there's no shelter in the world. There's no one in charge. Your only safety lies in learning how to make yourself reliable, and that comes from developing these qualities in the mind. Fortunately, not all the safety is saved for the very end. The ultimate safety, totally unconditioned, is saved for the end, but in the meantime you find yourself protecting yourself from all kinds of dangers that before you kept on creating. You also protect yourself against some of your past mistakes. The more effort you put into the practice, the safer you are. And you offer safety to others as well.

So it's a practice that's safe all around. Once you've got those internal refuges, then you're safe wherever you go.