

Protection, Inside & Out

October 31, 2018

There's a teaching that the Buddha repeated several times toward the end of his life, telling his students that they had to make themselves a refuge. He wasn't going to be around much longer, so it was up to them to provide themselves with protection. He said that you make yourself your refuge by making the Dhamma your refuge, and you make the Dhamma your refuge by practicing the establishings of mindfulness, starting out, say, with the breath. You focus on the breath and you do what you can to remember to stay with the breath. Then you watch yourself: Watch the breath to see how the breath is going. Watch the mind to see how the mind is going. And then you're ardent, trying to get rid of unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones.

That ardency is based on a quality called appropriate attention. That, too, is one of your inner refuges. It's what lies at the beginning of right view. That's something you have to remember as well. Appropriate attention focuses attention on questions of: What is skillful? What is not skillful? If something unskillful comes up, how do you get rid of it in an effective way?

This you learn from listening to others and also from observing yourself. In fact, as the Buddha said, right view—appropriate attention—can come from two things. One is from outside influences. Someone else points you in the right direction. And the other is from your own contemplation. You begin to see, yes, it is true that these qualities are skillful and unskillful.

But in the same way, there are dangers that come both from outside and from within. There are people outside who would be all too happy to teach you wrong view. In some cases, they're pretty insistent that their views are right, but they're really, really wrong. Then there are cases where you, of your own accord, can begin to engage in what the Buddha calls inappropriate attention, which is a matter of forgetting about the questions of what you're doing and whether it's skillful or not, and getting tied up in other issues.

So you need protection on both sides, both from outside and from inside dangers, because if people get you to adopt wrong view, they can also convince you that, say, the precepts aren't important, that it's perfectly okay and maybe even praiseworthy to break precepts now and then. That's going to be for your long-term harm.

This is something special about the Buddha's understanding of dangers: They're both outside and inside. Nowadays, we have politicians who tell us that all the dangers are out there and they're going to protect us from the dangers out there. Then we've got the New Age people. They say that all the dangers are inside. When you don't realize that you're One with all beings or interconnected with all beings, you're going to do unskillful things, but if you realize Oneness, you'll automatically be okay. The Oneness is something you can trust. That's what they say.

But both of those teachings are teaching you to be heedless. In other words, you look at the dangers in the wrong places or have a one-sided view of where the dangers are.

So as we live in this land of wrong view, it's important to keep in mind that, yes, there are dangers outside. There are people who could be teaching us things or simply taking for granted certain views and hoping that we'll be taking those views for granted as well—views that ultimately are for our long-term harm. So as you go out into the world, remind yourself that right view is something you've really got to hold on to. Your precepts are something you've really got to hold on to. There are politicians who say, "Watch out. Someone's going to come and take your wealth. They're going to take this, take that. They're going to harm your relatives." The Buddha said loss in those cases is very minor. You don't go to hell for losing those things. But you can go to hell for losing your virtue and losing your right view, so those are the things you've got to protect.

Then, of course, there are voices inside the mind that are all too happy to tell you to develop wrong view, too. So it's important to realize which things are the things you have to hold on to, which things you may have to let go. The Buddha doesn't tell you just to let go of everything all at once. This is a constantly repeated image among the forest ajaans. There are stages in the path where you really have to hold on. Ajaan Maha Boowa's is the image of a ladder up to the roof of your house. You hold on to one rung and then you hold on to the next rung higher than that, and only when you've gotten a firm grip on the next rung do you let go of the lower rung and then reach out for the next one still higher, and hold onto that. When you keep this up, you ultimately get up to the roof. It's when you're on the roof that you can let go of the ladder entirely.

Ven. Ananda's image was of crossing over a river, going from basically one stepping stone to the next stepping stone. You go from one thing that you hold on to, to another thing you hold on to—or as he said, one clinging to the next clinging.

So don't believe the voices inside or out that say you have to let go of everything or that if you're holding on to some aspect of the practice, you're on a lowly level of practice, and if you want to get to a higher level, you have to let go. There's that famous image of the raft. Everyone focuses on the end of the story when you get to the other side of the river. That's when you let go of the raft. You don't carry it around. But they forget to focus first on the fact that while you're crossing the river, you have to hold on tight to the raft and you have to make an effort. There's actually a Mahayana version of that image that says to get across the river, you have to let go of the raft, but I've never seen that work in any way at all.

So. Hold on to your right view. Hold on to your virtue. Hold on to your appropriate attention. Hold on to your good friends, whether good friends outside or good friends inside—admirable friends, the ones who keep reminding you of what is for your own true well-being. Now, this doesn't mean that you abandon all your other friends. The Buddha does recognize that there are what might be called loyal friends, the ones who would be willing to sacrifice for you, who help you, who stick with you in hard times. But they too, he said, should be the kind of people who, when they notice that you're doing something unskillful, try to steer you away from that.

So recognize that your good friends come in two kinds: the loyal ones and the admirable ones. You should be loyal to your loyal friends, but the ones you really listen to, the ones whose advice you really take to heart, should be the admirable ones. But, of course, knowing who's admirable and who's not depends on your own powers of judgment. Everything keeps coming back to you. You've got to be your own refuge, but to protect you from outside dangers, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are offered as good examples.

When you think about what the world has to offer and the prices you have to pay in order to get what the world has to offer, think about the Buddha's values. Would he make that deal? Sometimes some of the offers are perfectly fine as far as virtue is concerned. There'd be no problem. It's when there's some difficulty in terms of the virtue, difficulty in terms of the precepts: That's when you have to be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of holding to your precepts, but it's a sacrifice of a short-term good for a long-term good.

So these are some of the ways in which you develop mindfulness—the mindfulness to be skillful, rooted in the breath, so that you're rooted in the present moment with a sense of well-being that makes it a lot easier to make the skillful decision. That's how you find true protection and true refuge from dangers both inside and out.