

## *Protest Your Virtue & Right View*

*June 1, 2020*

King Pasenadi is an interesting character. He spends his life living by the sword, and then a Buddha moves in south of town. He develops some conviction in the Buddha and occasionally comes to see him. He'll come to report his insights as he reflects on the life of a king, and one of his insights is that people who protect themselves only with arms, with armies, but don't protect themselves by engaging in skillful behavior, really leave themselves unprotected. Whereas those who do engage in skillful behavior, even though they don't have arms and armies, are protected. And the Buddha, of course, affirms that yes, that's right.

It's a good principle to keep in mind that when times are difficult, this is when you really have to hold on to the skillful qualities of the mind. The Buddha tends to emphasize two in particular: right view and virtue. He says of the different kinds of loss that you can suffer, there are those like loss of health, loss of wealth, even loss of relatives that aren't serious because you can get them back—even your relatives. Over the course of rebirth, you can get them back again. But if you lose your right view or lose your virtue, it's hard to get them back. In the meantime, you're going to suffer a lot, because loss of health, loss of wealth, or loss of relatives doesn't necessarily send you down to a bad destination, but loss of virtue and loss of right view will, so you've got to protect them at all times.

Virtue, of course, is abstaining from harming others. You've got the five precepts, the eight, the ten, the 227. These are different ways of describing what it means to be harmless. And, of course, you don't try to get anybody else to break the precepts either. That's an important part of virtue.

As for right view, that's more complex. Part of right view, the Buddha says, is goodwill. You start with the principle that you don't want to behave in an unskillful way, and you want to behave in ways that are skillful, to develop skillful behavior. Then you realize that if you have ill will for anybody, it's going to be easy to mistreat them, so you've got to develop goodwill, even in really difficult circumstances. One of the images he gives is of bandits who have pinned you down and they're sawing off your limbs with a two-handled saw. He says even in a case like that, if you had ill will for the bandits you would not be following his teachings. You've got to protect your goodwill for them, even at the risk of losing your life.

That's the meaning of that image in the sutta we just chanted just now, of the mother protecting her only child. You protect your goodwill. Just as a mother

would protect her only child with her life, you protect your goodwill with your life. This is an important part of right view, because when there's conflict, the only way conflict is going to be resolved is if you have goodwill for everybody involved. You've got to protect that even when it's difficult, because there are a lot of people out there who are really difficult, but if they can sense any ill will in you, they're not going to trust you. That'll make life harder for everyone, because any resolution of conflict has to be based on trust.

As the Buddha pointed out in dealing with the monks, if there's been a split in the Sangha and one side is operating under corrupt motives, then even attempts to create harmony again that depend on pretending that their motives were not corrupt, is not going to be harmony. You have to dig down as to what was the problem. That kind of digging down can be done only when there's a strong sense of goodwill, which is hard, but it's the only resolution there is.

And goodwill, of course, can lead to suffering. This is where you fall back again on right view, the realization that the suffering that really matters is the suffering you add on to what's happening outside. It's all too easy to say, "I'm suffering because of so-and-so." And there's a lot of talk nowadays about how we should expand the Buddha's teachings on the causes of suffering to include social issues outside, but he was very specific. The suffering he was going to cure was the suffering that starts at the real source, craving, because even if society is perfectly peaceful, people are still going to suffer, and the reason society is not peaceful is because of their craving. So either way, the source is inside. But the good news here is that if you can take care of the source inside, then no matter how bad things get outside, you don't have to suffer.

Now, this is not just a matter of saving your own skin, because if you're not suffering, you're much less likely to thrash around and make other people suffer along with you. And think: What kind of world would we have to live in if we wanted to put an end to suffering, and yet suffering was totally caused by things outside? You'd have to be all-powerful. You'd need to change the world to be precisely the way you wanted it. That would be impossible. But the realization that suffering is caused from within means that the end of suffering is something available to everybody, no matter what their social status, no matter what their power or lack of power within the world.

In fact, as the Buddha said, the people who go out and try to gain power basically shut themselves off from the way, because they're going to have to harm others and they're not going to want to be open about the harm. They're going to cover it up, and then they start covering other things up, too. They don't want to look into what's skillful and what's not. They don't want to hear the Dhamma.

They don't want to hear the Vinaya. In that way, the pursuit of power can actually close off the path.

So the Buddha's basically saying you have power within you to put an end to suffering if you understand the workings of your own mind. This is why we meditate. You could sit here and follow your thoughts for the hour. That wouldn't accomplish much. But you can also watch the mind as it creates a thought and see the processes, and that's where it gets interesting because that's where you understand how you process things—and it's how you process things that is causing the suffering. It's like those DVDs of movies where they tack on at the very end a little documentary of how the movie was made, and in many cases, the documentary is more interesting than the actual movie, especially the big blockbusters. You can understand how these things are made and all the technique and all the skill that goes into it.

Well, here you're trying to find out the skill—or the “skill”—with which the mind fools itself. Here we are, creating all these images inside, and then we give them reality. We ignore all the work that goes into creating a thought. We hide it behind curtains. That means there's a huge part of the mind that's a stranger to itself. What we're trying to do when we meditate is to step back and take a stance with the breath, and then look at the mind to see: How do you process things? How do you fabricate things?

This is why, when the Buddha gave breath meditation instructions, he talked about bodily fabrication and mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. Mental fabrication has to do with the feelings and perceptions, the images you hold in mind. He uses these technical terms like fabrication, *sankhara*, even when he's talking about something simple like breath or feelings and perceptions, because he wants you to see how these go into creating the illusions in the mind. The gears and wheels behind the illusion are the things causing the suffering.

So whether you're dealing with distractions or actually dealing with the concentration object itself, either way you can start looking at how the mind fabricates around things. You're getting behind the scenes, and it's behind the scenes that the ignorance and craving and the clinging and all those other troublemakers are operating. And it's here that you can clean up the process. You can learn how to fabricate thoughts with knowledge, without craving, without clinging, and that way it becomes a path. You're turning the present moment into a path that leads to something beyond the present moment.

So this is the message of right view: that everything you need to know is within your power. Even when things get bad outside and a lot of changes happen that

you don't want to have happen, you have to realize that the suffering—at least the suffering you feel and the suffering for which you're responsible—is something you have the power to change. And again, this is not a selfish pursuit. You're not the only one who benefits. The more cool heads there are in the world, the more people with right view and the goodwill that goes with right view, then the more possible it is for there to be reconciliation, a change for the good.

So all the important work starts inside. We spend a lot of time looking at the news outside. We tend to forget that the really important news for each of us is the news inside. Where are you giving in to your craving? Where are you giving in to your clinging? Where are you giving in to your anger? Where are you giving in to your pride and conceit? This is the news you should be following, because it's the knowledge you can then take and do something with. There are so many areas that you read about in the news outside where you can't make any change at all, so focus on the areas where you *do* have the power to make a change for the better.

And protect your valuables: these two qualities of virtue and right view. You see them in many lists. There's the list of the teachings that the Buddha gives to new monks, which is a list that applies to everybody who practices. The list describes how you create a good environment for your practice, and observing the precepts and having right view are two of the five factors in the list. Then there are the seven treasures, and again you've got right view both in conviction and in discernment. Virtue comes in together with a sense of shame and a sense of compunction.

The Buddha also says that these are the bases for getting the mind into right mindfulness, and of course from right mindfulness we go to right concentration. So in various ways he keeps saying these are the two things that are really important. You're creating the circumstances, you're creating the environment in which you really can get to look into the mind and develop the qualities that you're going to need in order to keep yourself fully protected deep down inside.