

THE SHIELD

Rev. Master Seikai

A Dream

Some years ago I had a dream, one of those rare ones which have something significant to say about one's Buddhist training, in which I was walking along with a small shield attached to a cord which was bound to one of my ankles. In the dream I understood that the shield was a remnant of a previously larger shield, which would have been used in the way a shield normally would, as a protective plate in front of my body. I decided to bend down and undo the knot which held the shield onto my ankle, and then declared to no one in particular, "I'm free!"

My understanding of what was meant by the shield is that it was symbolic of the ego, which can be defined as our efforts to defend what we imagine to be our "self". Everyone carries what can be described as a critical mass of inherited karma into this life, and then as children we experience life's inevitable hard knocks, cuts and bruises, and learn to defend ourselves against the hardness of the world. We learn how to survive. Somewhere in the middle of that learning process, we also create a self-identity, an ego, out of a soupy mixture of our inherited karma and our current circumstances in this lifetime, and then we further learn how to cultivate, nurture and defend that self. That is the creation of the shield.

Like anyone else growing up, I created a good, honest shield. I remember conversations with adults in which information I offered about myself pretty quickly became the subject for a scolding about some aspect of my behavior; so I decided, 'the heck with adults, see if I'll give them anything to beat me up with.' I went so far as to withdraw into being a complete introvert and had quite a bit of fear and difficulty relating to most people as a young adult. In the midst of my desperation to find an answer, I was shown a religious path that included meditation practice, and after a short time I started to realize that it was safe to open up and start to at least let down that shield a little bit. It might actually be possible to enjoy life somewhat, and meditation was my door into an expanding world full of possibilities and a freedom that I longed for and was willing to work hard to uncover for myself.

So then, after quite a few years of carefully constructing my shield, I needed to spend quite a few more years learning how to live without it and let go of it. This is not an easy thing to do in life; we need help with this project because it requires someone in possession of real wisdom who can point out to us the areas in which we still have a self—act selfishly or defensively—and we tend not to see ourselves very clearly in such areas. By meditating on a regular basis, however, we set the stage for disassembly of the shield. Meditating regularly softens the tenacity with which we hold on to our shields, and allows us to begin to study what sorts of situations in life cause us to reflexively reach for the shield to protect ourselves.

The ego and the layers of defensiveness that we build around it come into being as a result of survival tactics that we learn in life; the down side of these tactics is that they screen out much of the freedom and enjoyment of life that we might otherwise be able to experience as human beings. Hence, the Buddhist Path is often referred to as the Path of Liberation—Liberation from the ego? Well, yes, actually. "Egolessness" is one word people sometimes use to describe the warmth, generosity of spirit, and openness that people who train very deeply exhibit in their everyday actions. Is it possible to live in an ill-natured world and survive its hardness without a good solid shield at the ready?

The answer is yes, but instead of a shield we need to cultivate skilful wisdom. It is almost impossible to explain or describe exactly what skilful wisdom is, but it comes about as a result of giving up fear—being afraid of all the bad things that can happen to a self. This does not mean, for example, that you would cross a busy street without looking both ways because you are not afraid of being hit by a truck; it does not mean that you do not take care of yourself in all kinds of

situations. On the other hand, all the countless situations in dealing with people in which we find ourselves, and so often feel compelled to argue a point, be right about something, defend ourselves, defend our honor or integrity—all those situations can be looked at afresh with different eyes, eyes which question whether it is actually worth it to valiantly defend the self. Skilful wisdom often begins with a resolve to shut up and let things slide right by at the critical moment. Openness is a quality of being that comes from the heart; rather than always trying to be better than other people, we can learn to accept them just as they are, refrain from trying to make them instantly better, and learn to live in harmony.

Washing the Mind

This turn of phrase was used by Rev. Master Jiyu. One of her disciples asked what she was doing while sitting in her chair, often for hours at a time, in the evening, usually with the television on. Her reply was: "Washing my mind". Was she brainwashing herself? No, brainwashing is an aggressive tactic used by people to force others into viewing the world in the same contorted way that they do. Does the mind have dirt that needs to be washed out of it, and until that happy day comes we have, in essence, dirty minds? No, that's not quite it, either. What we have are tendencies, or habits of mind, to view things, people and events from an egoistic point of view. We easily assume the role of the defense attorney in arguing our case before an imaginary court of law, pointing out all the mistakes of other people, how deluded they are, and how our righteousness in all of it was simply ignored. Those tendencies are what need washing. The longer one trains seriously in Buddhism, the more subtle they become, and the more acute the mindfulness required being aware of them.

We steal our own potential peace of mind by being defensive. Mentally arguing point after point, or mentally bemoaning how difficult life is because of all the many cases in which people have been unfair to us, or deliberately made our lives difficult, or cheated us.....the list is endless....that is to live in a world of mental suffering, life behind a shield. People also tend to think that if all those defensive tendencies were let go of, and if one were to be completely open to the people in our lives, then one would run a big risk of being continuously taken advantage of and sucked dry by the needy people of the world. There is truth in this thinking insofar as it is necessary to draw a line with respect to how much of yourself you can give to others in the course of a day or week, but again, where to draw that particular line must be arrived at via skilful wisdom: learning to be open whilst simultaneously not allowing oneself to be taken advantage of.

Clearly, there is a balancing act involved here. I have mentioned the metaphor of washing the mind because it is so important in order to find and maintain this balance of being open and giving of oneself in an appropriate way. It is a deeply intuitive practice, one that cannot really be adequately described in words. Because my own experience of meditation generally is that of flowing water, Rev. Master Jiyu's metaphor is easy for me to understand and also to practice myself, and so I do it often, both in the meditation hall sitting on my meditation bench, and sitting in the chair in my room, like she did in her life. But someone else's experience of meditation may be enough different that another metaphor might be more helpful; and yet, having said that, I can still describe washing the mind as a practice of letting go. Thoughts and feelings arise. We look at them and choose not to get involved in them. We let them go. More thoughts and feelings arise, and they pass away. We go back to letting the mind relax, over and over—there is nothing to hold on to, literally nothing. Eventually the sheer, continuous flow of things becomes far more relevant than the content of one's mind or the quality of feelings. Sometimes it is necessary to closely examine the content of certain thoughts: why am I so disturbed by this particular thought? Why does that person get to me and make me so angry? Within meditation, the answers to these kinds of questions will arise naturally, without being part of a discriminative thought process.

Over time, this process allows one to wash one's tendencies of mind such that self-oriented and defensive tendencies are eradicated in favor of open-hearted tendencies of thought, which are generous in spirit. That was what Rev. Master Jiyu exemplified for me—someone with

tremendous generosity of spirit. She would often suggest to monks that they “offer up difficult or disgusting things to the Eternal”. It was a way of suggesting that most of our mental problems lie in the fact that we tend to hold on to, play with, punch, and drag around our problems. The alternative is to simply look at them and do nothing. To stop trying to come up with an intellectual answer to our problems is a difficult step for most people to take, as it requires faith that this completely different approach will actually work. It requires that we take a step back from being in control of everything, including our own minds, and let a deeper force go to work within us. It is actually very effective, far more than any psychologist can possibly be, and it is free. The cost is letting go of being in control, of thinking that we have an ego that is real and can make wise decisions—those are false assumptions. That which is truly real can come into any human being willing to make room for it, and in so doing, that person can put down the shield they have carried and be free.
