

Heedfulness for the Holidays

November 24, 2013

As you settle down with the breath and work with the breath energy in the body so that you can inhabit the body fully, think of it as your stronghold. One of the images the Buddha gives is of a fortress on a frontier. For the fortress to survive, it needs its own stores of food inside, and it needs a lot of protection.

This is important to think about as we come into the holidays. These are advertised as times of joy and fellow-feeling, but I've noticed a lot of people coming up to the monastery to get away. It's really a very threatening time for a many people, and very stressful, all this forced companionship and forced good cheer. And the general message we keep getting from a lot of Dhamma teachers – you've got to learn how to trust other people, learn how to be open and vulnerable – is a recipe for disaster.

One of the things I noticed most about Ajaan Fuang that struck me very early on was how wary he was. He didn't open himself up easily to other people. I lived with him for a couple of years before he even allowed me into his room. I eventually became his attendant, but it didn't happen right away. He had to get a sense of me before he could decide that he could trust me. And this was someone who actually could read minds.

So what about the rest of us, who can't read minds? We need to have a sense of being able to protect ourselves as we go into relationships, and this includes the family, people at work, people at home, people in our extended families. There are some people you know are going to be harmful; you have to keep your protection up.

So part of the protection is this energy protection you develop through the body, working with the breath in the body, because a lot of other people's invasiveness is not just their attitudes. It's not just their words that they say to you or the things they do to you. It's just that the energy they

carry around is often very toxic; you need protection against that.

Be particularly wary of people who tell you right up front that they can be trusted. Remember the story of letting 100 flowers bloom, back during the time of Mao Zedong. He opened up a public discourse, and he said, "Let 100 flowers bloom." In other words, it was an appeal for everybody's opinions on how things could be improved in China.

So people were wary at first, and then they noticed that this person criticized the government and didn't get punished. That person criticized the government and didn't get punished. So more and more people came out and criticized the government. Of course, the government was keeping tally. When they figured they'd gotten enough criticism, they picked off the critics.

There are people like that out in the world; don't pretend that they're not. So you need your protection with the breath. Learn how to fully inhabit your body so that other peoples' energies don't come in.

Then think of those other qualities that the Buddha talked about as belonging to that frontier fortress.

First, you want to make sure that your own actions are blameless. There's the quality of shame; there's the quality of compunction. If your actions are harmful, that creates an opening, a karmic opening for other people to want to get back at you. And when people start criticizing you, if you know that you've been behaving in an unskillful way, that's a wound. They can take advantage of that wound; it gives them an opening to dig the knife in and probe around.

But if you know that your actions haven't been harmful, then that sense of shame - it's not so much being ashamed of yourself as being ashamed of the idea of doing something harmful - that's your protection. It protects you from doing things you're later going to regret. We've heard many cases of people saying, "I'd give a million dollars if I could go back and undo the damage I did." Well, there you are. If you have the shame that prevents you from doing that damage to begin with, it's worth more than the million dollars. So keep that in mind.

The same with compunction: realizing that when you do something unskillful, there are going to be bad consequences and so, for that reason, you don't do it. The Buddha compares the pair of shame and compunction to a moat and an encircling road around the fortress as part of the protection.

Then you need a good foundation post around which you can build the fortress. That's conviction - conviction in the principle of your actions, that when you do good, there are going to be good results; when you do something based on unskillful intentions, there are going to be bad results. You keep on doing good so you can be confident in your good.

This is one of the reasons the Buddha would emphasize both generosity and virtue as a source of confidence. You go into groups of people who might be ready to criticize you, but you know if you've been generous and virtuous, whatever they're going to criticize you about doesn't really matter. After all, there are people in the world who will pick fights with you over any issue and criticize you from any angle. If you go off and be by yourself, they'll criticize you for running away from people or being heartless. If you spend a lot of time with them, they say you're getting in their way.

The opinions of the world cannot be taken as any kind of standard. This is a theme that Ajaan Lee would stress a lot. People will praise you for doing harmful things, and they will criticize you for doing perfectly good things. So if you're confident in the quality of your intentions and you have the shame and compunction to maintain good intentions, then that's your protection. People will criticize you, but you know that you've not really done anything that's opening you up to their criticism. So that's a kind of protection.

Then there's mindfulness, which the Buddha compares to a gatekeeper who knows whom to let in and whom to not. In your case, you're mindful to do what's skillful and to avoid what's not skillful. You keep that in mind. Hold that value, hold that standard in mind, so that when people do things that are threatening, you know that the best way to respond is not to threaten back. Maybe you can just put up an internal wall of energy and spread lots of goodwill. That's not

mentioned in the series of qualities in the fortress, but it is a kind of protection. Goodwill here doesn't mean that you're open and vulnerable to other people. It means that you don't wish them ill, and one of the best ways of helping people not do ill things sometimes is getting out of their presence. If you know that your presence is going to bring out some unskillful things in them, one of the kindest things you can do is just stay away.

The soldiers inside the fortress, the Buddha compares to the effort you make in order to stick with what you know is the right path - the right effort - which includes the desire to do what's skillful and to avoid what's unskillful. Keep that desire well-nourished. And the nourishment, of course, is your concentration. He compares the different levels of concentration to different kinds of food, which get better and better and more and more nourishing as you go up the levels.

And finally, there's discernment, which is the wall around the fortress. One of the features of the wall is that it's well-plastered. In other words, it doesn't give any footholds. If it were just made out of wood, it would be very easy to get a foothold in this or that little irregularity in the wood. But if it's all well-plastered, there's no way the enemy can grab hold of it. In other words, you use your discernment not to get involved in unnecessary arguments and unnecessary issues so that people can't grab hold of your attitude, grab hold of your moods, grab of your emotions, and then shake you around.

There again, that sense of the breath as a cocoon: When you think of other people's words going right past, right past, or bouncing off, this field of energy you're developing here gives you a sense of protection. The stronger you can make this sense of protection inside, the less you're going to feel threatened or victimized by other people's actions.

The Buddha has another image for discernment, which is that it's like being on a tower, going up to a high place, and looking down on people below you. In other words, you're up above the range to which they can extend their influence, and you can see what they're doing. You see where it's

coming from. You see what their problems are – where they're suffering – and you have compassion. You have goodwill for them. But at the same time, you don't let yourself be influenced by them. You've got to keep your protection up.

The other quality of being a well-protected warrior, of course, is knowing which battles to pick. Sometimes you're ready to fight; sometimes you're not ready to fight. Other people may be wanting to pick fights, and you have to decide: Is this something that's really worth fighting over? Of course, this is a good lesson inside as well. When issues come up in the mind, which ones can you deal with directly right now? And which ones do you simply have to bounce off for a bit so that you can have some more space, some more time to strengthen yourself?

In some cases, the issue comes up in such a way that you can't avoid it, so you use whatever tools you have, whatever weapons you have. That's another part of that image of the fortress: whatever Dhamma you've learned. It's good to have a good fund of Dhamma that you've read and absorbed. And it's good also to memorize some good principles of Dhamma so that when issues come up and you're tempted to fall back into your old ways, you have a teacher inside. It's like having the Buddha inside: What would he say about a situation like this? That gives you your weapon. So even though the discernment may not come totally from your own concentration, you can borrow other people's. It's just like borrowing the weapons of the wise.

Try dealing with what other people in the family, other people at work may be doing, but if you see that the battle is not worth fighting, then you step out. The other people may call you losers or whatever, but that doesn't matter. Again, what people say: If it's not coming from the Dhamma, you've got to learn how to just brush it off. It may give an indication of where a particular person is suffering; and when you're in a position to help, you may be able to help. But if you're not, the first order of business is to protect yourself.

After all, the Buddha said that heedfulness is the basis for all skillful qualities. He doesn't say trust is the basis, or

vulnerability, or whatever these other terms are. Heedfulness is the basis. And heedfulness is a sense of wariness. There are dangers out there; there are dangers in here, inside your own mind. So you've got to keep up your guard.

It's interesting that in this society of ours, where this is such a push for everybody to be trusting, vulnerable, and whatever, the most common phrase we say when we say goodbye is, "Take care." What does that mean, "Take care"? It means there are dangers out there, so you've got to be careful. Learn how to take care of yourself both in terms of dealing with other people and in dealing with the defilements that come up in your own mind, because it's through care that you come out winning.