

Good Fences All Around You

September 10, 2014

Many of the ajaans—Ajaan Mun, Ajaan MahaBoowa, Ajaan Chah—talk of the practice as being an act of setting up a fence around yourself. A lot of us don't like to hear that. We'd like to think that as we practice, we're opening things wide up around us so that we're not hemmed in. But there's an important way in which this image of a fence is very central to the path because, on the one hand, you're keeping yourself in so you don't go around creating trouble for others or getting into trouble yourself. On the other hand, you protect yourself. If the fence goes all around, then you're protected on all sides.

Having the fence also helps you become aware of ways in which your mind is unruly, creating a lot of trouble that you might not have noticed otherwise—as when we're practicing concentration here. We establish ourselves in one of the frames of reference – the body in and of itself, or feelings, mind states in and of themselves – primarily through the body. Focus on the breath. And any thought that doesn't relate to the breath, just drop it. Realize that it's a thought that's run up against the fence, and you don't want to help it bore a hole through the fence so it can get out. You want to stay here, right inside.

This way, you get to see which of your thoughts are actually skillful and which ones are not. Now, the thoughts will give you all kinds of reasons for why they should be let out of the fence. But for the time being, you make up your mind: Anything that's not related to what you're doing right here with the breath is not welcome. You're not going to encourage it. You're not going to open up one of the planks in the fence to let it out into the world. In this way you're safe.

The Buddha's image is of being in your ancestral territory, a place where you're safe. Remember his story of the quail and the hawk. One day the quail wandered out of its ancestral territory and the hawk caught it. As it was being carried off, the quail lamented, "Oh, if only I hadn't wandered out. If I'd stayed in my own ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me." The hawk hears that and he's a little miffed, but doesn't say anything. He says, "What is your ancestral territory?" And the quail says, "A field with clods of earth and stones all

turned up.” So the hawk says, “Okay.” He lets the quail go. “Go back there. But even there you won’t escape.”

So the quail gets down in the field and stands on a stone and says, “Come get me, you hawk. Come get me, you hawk.” And the hawk folds his wings and comes swooping down. And just as the quail knows that the hawk is almost on him, he slips behind the stone—and the hawk shatters his breast.

In this image, the hawk stands for Mara. It can stand for any of your active defilements. If you wander away from the breath right now, your defilements will get you. If you stay right here, you’re safe.

And you want this fence to be all around you—in terms of your virtue, your concentration, your discernment.

The fence of virtue is really important. As Ajaan MahaBoowa says, “Anything in your mind that would have you break any of the precepts, you have to recognize as a defilement. In fact, anything that goes against the Dhamma: Recognize that as a defilement.” And a good place to start is with the precepts. It’s so easy to come up with excuses, saying, “Well, things are complex and I have these other obligations and this precept is a little bit too tight or tense.” Those are all defilements. One of the tricks of the defilements is that they try to make things complex so that you can’t figure out which way is right and which way is wrong.

The precepts are short and clear so as to cut through a lot of that complexity. You might say, “Well, I have obligations to my relatives,” or “I’m going to lose the wealth if I follow the precepts. I have to help my children or somebody else. It might be bad for my health.” But the Buddha says to recognize that losses in those three areas—relatives, wealth, and health—are nothing compared to the loss of your virtue and your loss of right view. So he does recognize that there are complexities, but he also recognizes that the complexities are largely the work of your defilements—the things you want to hold onto—and you can come up with all kinds of excuses for them, as we see everywhere around us.

But if you really want the protection of the precepts, you have to make it all around. As the Buddha said, when you adhere to the precepts without exception, then you’re giving universal safety to the world. Now, the beings of the world may not be safe from other people, but at the very least everybody in the world is safe from you. Once you give that kind of safety, then you have a share in it too. It’s your protection.

Think of the Buddha's image of the hand: If you don't have a wound in your hand, then you can hold poison in your hand and it's not going to seep into your blood. But if there's a wound there, you can't touch poison. Otherwise, it'll kill you. In the same way, if you don't have the bad karma of having broken the precepts, that kind of karma is not going to come back and get you.

So this image of a fence is something that we should learn how to live with and actually come to appreciate it, because with the fences all around, it does protect us.

The same with the Buddha's image of discernment: He says it's like a fortress wall covered with plaster. The defilements are trying to get into your fortress, climbing up the wall, but because the wall is covered with plaster they can't get any footholds, can't get any handholds. That way they can't infiltrate your mind. Now, you do have a gate. You have mindfulness at the gate as the gatekeeper because there are times when your thoughts do have to go out and come back in. You have to bring in things in of the world and send your thoughts and other actions outside. But you want mindfulness right there at the gate all the time to remember to let only the useful thoughts in and out.

Now, mindfulness is not just bare awareness; it's remembering what's skillful and what's not skillful. And as you learn how to live with this fence of virtue and this fence of concentration, you begin to get a sense of which of your thoughts actually are useful and which ones are not. It may sometimes sound like the Buddha forbids you from thinking ever again once you start practicing, but, in fact, he wants you to think very carefully. Still, it takes a while to get to know your thoughts and to see clearly which ones you can trust and which ones you can't.

They have a phrase in Thai, *suam roi*, which literally means "putting on the footsteps." What it actually means is that, if you want to sneak up on somebody and not let them know that you're following, you step right in their footsteps so that when they look on the path, they don't see the footsteps of two people; they see the footsteps of one. A lot of our defilements are like that. They'll sneak out under the guise of a skillful thought. They'll follow in the footsteps of a skillful thought. So you've got to be extra careful, which means that your mindfulness has to be constantly alert and willing to learn new lessons. Things you thought were okay at one point, you begin to realize—okay, that contains something unskillful. It's because the defilements are there all the time.

We talk about them as “they,” but you have to remember that they’re very skillful at making you think that they are you. They want you to think that this is *your* greed, *your* aversion, *your* delusion, *your* way of looking at things. This is what you feel in your bones. They get into your bones this way – through the breath. That’s one of the reasons why we stay with the breath not only while we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, but also as we go through the day: to learn how to recognize these little tiny things that get into your breath energy and can seep deep inside you.

So even if you feel something in your bones, if it goes against the Dhamma, recognize – “Okay, this is not something I want to identify with. My bones have been hijacked,” and so you work with the breath to get them out.

I’ve told you about the treatment that Ajaan Fuang underwent when he had rheumatoid psoriasis. Rheumatoid psoriasis starts in the marrow of the bone. But getting medicine into the marrow of the bone is very difficult. So what did the traditional doctor have him do? He had him inhale mercury vapor, because mercury gets in your bones. And it was like having two gunslingers in your bones. You can’t have two gunslingers in one town. One of them’s got to leave. The idea was that the mercury would drive out the psoriasis. The doctor had a technique for eventually getting the mercury out as well, or so he claimed. I don’t know because Ajaan Fuang died from other causes in the meantime.

But the principle is there: If you’ve got something in your bones, you’ve got to get something that goes deep into the bones too, to get that out. This is where the breath energy helps. So when you have those feelings inside you, whether they’re in your bones or in your muscles or wherever, that you’ve just got to do something—your gut reaction tells you something—you’ve got to realize: If it’s going against the Dhamma, you can’t trust your gut. You get the breath to work in there, because the breath goes deeper.

The breath is actually more immediate than any other part of your body. The energy flow that you’ve got here: Work with that to reclaim your body. And that gives you a better perspective on the various thoughts and feelings and urges that would pull you away from the practice, pull you away from what really is in your own true interest.

Now this may sound very dualistic, and it is. There’s defilement and there’s lack of defilement. There’s Dhamma and non-Dhamma. You’ve

got both inside you and it's important that you learn how to recognize which is which. The fence is there to help you. If you run up against the fence, you realize, okay, something inside is trying to get out, to break a hole. But once you break the hole, then anybody can come in.

So make sure that your fence is in good repair. And if you find any of your thoughts being like the bamboo that goes way deep down to find a way out through the bamboo barrier, well, you've got to go deeper with your breath, deeper with your concentration, so that your protection is not only all around you in the horizontal directions, but above and below you as well.