

Obstacles to Vows

July 21, 2016

The rains retreat has begun. I hope that each of us has a special project or a special issue to work on in the course of this rains retreat. Make a vow to yourself that you want to improve yourself in one way or another.

Of course, when you make vows like this, there are bound to be obstacles. This is why the Buddha taught the way to deal with obstacles when you make a vow.

One is that you try to use your discernment. You've got to remain true to your vow and the truth requires that you're going to come up against things. So you use your discernment to see how you can get around them. What issues if you attack them directly are going to get worse so they're best to be avoided or skirted around, dealt with indirectly? And which ones require a more direct approach and, if you're going to be direct, how do you do this skillfully?

There are obstacles inside and obstacles outside. The important ones are the ones inside. Don't let the outside ones distract your attention from what's actually going on in your own mind.

It's all too easy to see other people's defilements. Your own defilements are hard to see because you've been living with them for a long time, so they seem just like a normal part of the landscape. So how can you get around your internal defilements, the ones that keep you from practicing as much as you should—or as much as you even wanted to—to begin with?

So you use your discernment, and you figure out that there are certain things you've just got to give up. The Buddha talks about some people have just almost nothing but they hold on to it really tightly, and those few things they have become a huge obstacle, whereas other people may have a lot of wealth, a lot of advantages in life, and they find they can give them up very easily. Even though they have a lot, it's not a big obstacle. So the issue is not the things you're giving up, it's your mind's attitude toward them.

This goes not only for material things but also for other more immaterial things that you wish for from outside: You've got to give them up. Certain thoughts inside the mind that you like to dwell on, you like to go back over again and again and again: You've got to learn to give those up, too.

Then finally, try to get your mind at peace with all this: knowing that you're working on a big project so you have to have some patience. But patience doesn't mean just letting things slide, it means you have to watch very carefully, continually. Sometimes the little things will show themselves only when they

think you're not looking, so you've got to be looking all the time.

That's the kind of patience you want: the patience of a hunter who goes out and is ready for the animals when they come and has to be very watchful all the time, but very still.

So try to keep these points in mind. You need your discernment, you need to learn how to give things up, you need to keep the mind very quiet and watchful so you can remain true to your vow. That way, the goodness you want will come about because you've created the causes. So focus your attention on the causes, and the results will have to come.