

Virtue

July 30, 2017

Let your thoughts settle down on the breath. They've been wandering around all morning. Give them a chance to rest. And put up a fence. If they leave the body, they'll run into the fence, and it'll send them right back in.

This fence is an important part of our practice. We're practicing for the sake of freedom and yet paradoxically we need to fence some things in if we're going to be free. We have to fence in our greed, aversion, and delusion. Our lack of mindfulness, our lack of alertness: These things have to be fenced in. When we meditate, we're putting up a fence around the mind.

It's the same way when we practice the precepts. Certain things we simply will not do. They're out of the question. As the Buddha said, when you have that kind of restraint over your actions, it's actually a treasure, because you're not leaving any wounds on your heart. Every time you break a precept, you're harming yourself, you're harming other people. It's like a wound. And he says if your hand has a wound in it then if you touch poison, you're going to die. If it doesn't have a wound, then you can carry poison around and it won't get into the skin.

In other words, we can live in a world where there's a lot of suffering, but the suffering doesn't have to touch us if we don't leave an opening. But if we've been harming ourselves, harming other people, we're creating an opening. It's like a fence with a big hole in it. Anybody can come in and go out through the hole, so the fence doesn't provide much protection at all. Make sure that your fence is solid and that it doesn't have any holes.

Like the precepts we took just now: We do that every week to remind you that virtue is a real treasure. The fact that you make up your mind you're not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex; you're not going to lie; you're not going to take intoxicants: That's a real treasure, because it's really yours.

As the Buddha said, other things that you can lose in life, which emotionally may be a problem, but he says in terms of your karma, in terms of the state of your mind, those losses are not all that big. You can lose money, you can lose your health, you can lose your relatives: That's normal, it's not that serious. What's serious is if you lose your right view or if you lose your precepts. Then you're really lost.

So think of it as a treasure when you're able to hold yourself back from the little white lies that you might otherwise say, or the times when you see a bug and you just don't like bugs or see pests and you don't like pests and you're going to get rid of them by killing them. You can tell yourself, "Nope. I'm not going to do that. I'm going to find something that's less harmful." In other words, you still get rid of them but not by killing them. As for the things where you're tempted to say a little white lie, try to find some way that you don't misrepresent the truth and

at the same time don't divulge information you think might be harmful. That way, when you keep your precepts, you develop your wisdom as well.

When you take more care around your actions, take more care around your speech, other people will notice that and they'll be more inclined to listen. If you're careless with your words, people don't want to pay much attention. If you're careful with your words, people will realize you're expending something of value right now, so they'll want to pay attention to what you've got to say. So think of this as raising the value of your actions, raising the value of your speech, not only for yourself but in the eyes of the people around you. This is one of the way in which the practice of following the precepts is a real treasure.

All too many times people will break a precept and then they regret it for the rest of their lives, saying, "I wish I had a million dollars and could go back and undo that." But a million dollars can't do that. You, though, have a precept that can prevent you from doing that kind of thing, so it's worth more than a million dollars. Think about that every time you feel tempted to do something that's against the precepts. Your precepts are your real treasures. By holding the mind fenced in this way, you free yourself from all kinds of regret. This is how a fence can lead to freedom.

The same principle applies to the mind as we're sitting right here. If you keep your mind fenced in from greed, aversion, and delusion, you're safe from the ravages of those things. Even though it may feel good to follow them for a while, the payback is not worth it. So by fencing yourself in with the right kind of fence, you find freedom. Always keep that principle in mind.