

## *The Power of Focus*

*August 5, 2018*

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Keep your thoughts with the breath, keep your awareness with the breath, all the way in, all the way out.

If the mind starts wandering off, just bring it right back. It's as if you have a fence around the mind. Your awareness and your mindfulness remind you that this is where you want to be. You don't want to be wandering off with your thoughts like the birds flying all over the place. You want to be right here, focused right here.

It's when the mind is focused that it develops strength; it develops power. It's like focusing the light of the sun. You can put a piece of paper out in the sunlight and it doesn't burn, but if you focus the rays on one spot using a magnifying glass, the paper will burn. So here we're trying to develop some focused power in the mind. That requires that we have some restraint. We have to protect the mind from itself, otherwise it can just destroy its power very easily.

As the Buddha said, protection is not so much what you do from the outside, it's what you develop from the inside. King Pasenadi came to see him one time, saying that he had come to the realization that if you have a full army – back in those days they had what they called it a fourfold army: elephants, horses, infantry, archer – even then you're not really protected as long as you're not looking after yourself in the right way, you're not acting in skillful ways. It's the power of your unskillful actions that leave you open to harm, whereas the power of your skillful actions acts as a protection.

So how do you protect yourself? You begin with virtue, like those precepts we took just now. You remind yourself, "Okay, there are certain forms of harm I'm not going to engage in." When you don't do those forms of harm, the harm won't come to you. The Buddha's image is of a hand carrying poison. He says if there's a wound in the hand, the poison can go into the hand easily, but if there's no wound then the poison can't penetrate. In the same way, if you don't have any bad actions in your present or your past, then unfortunate things are not going to happen to you. They can happen around but they don't come to you.

So you have to look after your actions to make sure that you exercise some restraint. In addition to the precepts we took just now, there are three other aspects of virtue the Buddha talked about. The first one is restraint of the senses. In other words, when you look at something, you ask yourself, "Why am I looking? Am I looking in a way that's going to give rise to greed, aversion, and

delusion? Or are greed, aversion and delusion actually doing the looking right now?" In other words, there are things you look at because you want to give rise to more lust, give rise to more greed, give rise to anger. And, of course, that stokes the fires in the mind. Simply going through the day carelessly, you can put all kinds of things into the mind and also be encouraging all kinds of unskillful qualities in the mind itself: allowing greed, allowing lust, allowing anger to do your looking and listening and everything else for you. Then when the time comes to meditate, you've got a mind where you've been developing greed, developing anger. Your mindfulness and alertness just get weaker and weaker.

So you protect yourself by looking at the way you look at things, looking at the way you listen to things. Try to look with discernment, try to look with restraint. If you're looking at something that tends to give rise to greed, look at it in a way that gets rid of the greed. If you're looking at something that gives rise to lust, look at it in a way that gets rid of the lust. If you're looking at something that gives rise to anger – and there's a lot of that right now – try to look at it in another way so you're not stoking the fires of anger in the mind. Restraint of the senses doesn't mean you don't look. It means that you look selectively and you're very careful about how you look. The same with listening and all the other senses. So that's an aspect of virtue, too.

Then there's the way you lead your life: You want to make sure that your occupation is in line with right livelihood. It's honest and aboveboard.

And then your use of the requisites. As the Buddha said, you should try to consider every day when you use something: Why are you using it? Why are you using food? Why are you using clothing? Shelter? Why are you using your medicine? Try to use these things in a way that's conducive to the practice. When you think about the real reasons why we have food, clothing, shelter and medicine, you begin to realize that you can do with just a little. You don't need an awful lot. You don't need to keep buying a lot more clothing or fixing up your house so that it's extra special. The money that goes into that requires you to work harder, and it also means that the money that could go to something better than that, a cause that would be better than that, just gets wasted away.

So you want to look at how you use your requisites, and in that way you protect yourself. If your house is full of all kinds of enticing things, well, it's going to entice people in. They don't come just to admire sometimes, they come to take. Whereas if there's nothing much that's enticing, it's a safe home.

The same with your clothing, the same with all your consumption of things. Don't call attention to yourself by the way you consume things. That way you're safe. If you combine this with the other aspects of virtue, you're safe all-around.

You're not creating any bad karma, you're not creating states of the mind that will tempt you to look past or override your precepts. And in that way, you're safe in all ways, safe all-around.