

A Refuge from the Winds of the World

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The Thai translation for concentration is “to have the mind firmly established.” Right concentration, of course, means have it established firmly in the right way. When you think of concentration in that way, then it’s obvious that it’s a quality you want to have all the time. As Ajaan Suwat once noted, when you define concentration that way, it covers all aspects of the path. You want the mind to be firmly established in right view, firmly established in right resolve, firmly established in all the factors of the path. And so how do you keep the mind rightly established?

Well, right now you’re focused on the breath—that’s part of right mindfulness, remembering to stay with the breath in and of itself—and you’re putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts of the world that come up right now, you’ve got to put them aside. If you’re going to be rightly concentrated as you go through the world, you have to focus specifically on resisting those qualities of greed and distress. How do you maintain your focus? How do you maintain your balance, without your greed and distress pulling you out of balance?

One useful way to think is to take the Canon’s image of the world as being like winds, winds that blow from eight directions. There’s gain and there’s loss. There’s status, loss of status. Praise and criticism. Sensual pleasures and pain. These are like the winds blowing from the north, south, east, west, northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest. If they’re gentle, they’re fine. They don’t blow you over. But sometimes they’re strong and sometimes they can change directions very quickly, and you have to be prepared.

Ideally, the Buddha said, the mind should be like a stone column, sixteen spans tall, eight spans buried down in the rock, smoothly polished, so that its wind resistance is zero. Whatever directions the winds come from, the column doesn’t shake.

But for the most part, our minds are not like that at all. They’re like the big sailboats. Every desire we have for the world is like stretching up a big sail. Our desires for the world make our ears, for example, like huge sails, catching every little thing that comes by. And it blows us around. The more greed we have for the world, the more we get distressed. And the more we’re distressed, the less we’re

able to think straight about what we can actually offer to the world. So in putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, it's not that we become uncaring. It's just that we make our minds more stable. And then when we're stable, we're able to provide a lot more for other people.

Of course, we're born into the world with a lot of needs. This is why we have that reflection on the requisites every day, every day. We need food. We need clothing. We need shelter. We need medicine. These are the things we have to get from the world. We're born into the world with lots of needs, big gaping holes that need to be filled all the time. So one of the first place we look is to make sure that our needs are moderate. We don't need too much food. We don't need too much clothing, shelter, medicine. We learn how to look after our health, we learn how to look after ourselves in ways that don't take that much from the world.

Then we have to look at all the extraneous needs we've developed: the need for entertainment, the need for companionship. If the mind is really strong inside, it becomes more and more self-sufficient. And the more self-sufficient you are, the less you're going to be putting up sails and the less you'll be blown around. You won't have that much to put up that offers resistance to the winds.

The Buddha gives a list of ten qualities for how you become your own protection. As he says, *Attā hi attano nātho*, the self is its own mainstay. Well, you have to *make* yourself your own mainstay in order to depend on yourself. If you don't have the qualities that are dependable inside, then you're going to go leaning on the world regardless.

The list starts out with being virtuous. You don't act in a way that harms anybody, which means that less harm will come to you.

You've heard a lot of the Dhamma. In other words, you try to study the Dhamma so that when things come up in life, the answer to the issues, the answer to the questions will be there in your mind because you've furnished your mind well. You haven't filled it just with commercial jingles or pop songs. You've furnished it with wise sayings, wise ways of looking at things that'll give you direction.

After Ajaan Fuang passed away, the first year after his passing was a very difficult one at the monastery. I was confronted with a lot of issues, and his words would keep coming to my mind. By listening to those words, following those words, I was able to navigate my way through all the issues. That was the beginning of a book, *Awareness Itself*. I realized that if I forgot these things, I'd be without a protection, so I started jotting them down. Listening to wise things helps you have wise things in your mind when you need them.

Another way of protecting yourself is by having admirable friends—people who set good examples—and you follow their examples. They're people of conviction; you try to develop conviction, too. They're people of generosity, virtue, discernment; you try to develop those qualities as well, because you pick up the qualities of the people that you're near. There's an image in the Canon of a leaf. If you use the leaf to wrap up fine-smelling spices, the leaf will smell fine as well. If you use it to wrap rotten fish, it'll smell like rotten fish. You pick up the qualities of the people you surround yourself with. This, of course, has to do not only with physical surroundings, but also the people you deal with on the Internet, the people you listen to across all the media. Be very careful about who you choose as your companions.

Once you've got admirable friends, try to be the kind of person that's easy to teach: That's the next quality. Don't be too stubborn to learn. Among the Buddha's students, the Buddha praised his own son, Rahula, for being the most willing to learn. And there are examples of his taking instructions from everybody. Of course, he would listen and then think things over. But if something was good, then no matter who it came from, he was happy to follow it, and that's how he learned how to depend on himself.

Another quality that makes you your own protection is that you're adept at skills that are useful for the people around you. Here in the monastery this means, of course, learning how to sew, how to make brooms; for the laypeople, learning how to cook, learning how to help in the orchard. For the monks, it means learning how to repair your dwellings. In other words, be equipped with skills. You don't have to keep depending on other people. And the fact that you're able to help the group means that when you fall on hard times, the group will be willing to help you, happy to help you. This applies to the society at large, as well.

As for your conversation, the Buddha says, in his next quality, try to be the kind of person who desires the Dhamma. In other words, you want to hear things that are imbued with the Dhamma. Make that your desire for the things you listen to, the conversations you engage in, because otherwise conversations can pull you away, your mind gets someplace else, and it loses its stability; it loses its center. That quality of being firmly established gets established in the wrong things.

The remaining qualities are ones we've heard many times in the Dhamma talks: persistence, contentment, mindfulness—the ability to keep things in mind—and then discernment: the discernment that penetrates into what is skillful and what is not skillful in all the things around you, what's worth following, what's

not worth following. It also covers knowing how to talk yourself into following the things that should be followed, and to let go of the things that should not.

All of these qualities make you more dependable inside. You don't need to stretch out sails in all directions into the world and then suddenly find that those sails are pulling you away, or getting you caught in whirlwinds. You want the kind of mind that's like that polished column, putting up very little resistance to the wind, and so when the wind changes directions and becomes very strong, the column is not shaken.

And ultimately, of course, even with these qualities you need one thing more, and that's release. That's the part of the column that's buried down in the rock, that's not affected by even the touch of the winds, because after all, we can't live in the world without being dependent on the world to some extent. This is what it means to be a being. You take on an identity based on a desire, and then that being you become is going to depend on a world. As long as the mind thinks in those terms, it's going to be blown around to some extent for food, clothing, shelter, medicine. These things are our weak points. So this is why we dig deeper. Instead of having concentration just being firmly established in good qualities, we're firmly established inside in concentration, developing the discernment where we can see through this need to take on the identity of being a being, and find that dimension where we don't have to be a being at all. That's the part of the column buried in the rock, which makes the rest of the column safe as well.

That's the work of the meditation, but it's supported by these other qualities. The fact that you're virtuous, that you've heard a lot of the Dhamma, you have admirable friends, and you're easy to teach, you're adept at the skills needed by the people around you, to help the people around you, you desire the Dhamma, you're persistent, you're content, you're mindful, and you're discerning: These are the supports that get you to that total release. This is how you polish that column, how you take down all the masts and the sails. You can live in the world with as little greed and as little distress as possible. That's when the mind can find a peace that's not just peaceful, but also blameless, reliable—something on which you really *can* depend.