

To Be Trustworthy

May 2, 2020

You know the story of the quail. It leaves its ancestral territory, which is a field newly plowed, and wanders outside. It's caught by a hawk. As it's being carried off, it laments, "Oh my lack of merit. If only I'd stayed in my ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me." You can imagine what the hawk thinks about this little tiny quail saying something like that. So the hawk says, "Okay, go ahead. Go back to your territory. But even there you won't be safe from me." So the quail goes back to a newly plowed field, stands on a stone that's been turned up by a plow, and taunts the hawk, "Come and get me, you hawk! Come and get me, you hawk!" The hawk dives down again, and as he's coming full speed, the quail hides behind a stone. The hawk can't stop in time, and so it crashes his breast on the stone.

As the Buddha said to the monks, "If you wander outside your territory—in beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—you're going to get caught by Mara." And Mara here, of course, is not something outside. It's your own defilements: Your own greed, aversion, and delusion will get you. And when they get you, they make you do unskillful things. That's our big fear: that we can't trust ourselves not to do unskillful things. You think about what's going to happen in society if this quarantine lasts for a long time. There's going to be a lot of hardship. When there's a lot of hardship, people do a lot of unskillful things. And for your own safety, you want to make sure you're not one of those people.

So you've got to stay in your territory. What is your territory? The establishings of mindfulness. Now, these establishings are not just body, feelings, mind, mental qualities, because those things can turn on you if you have the wrong attitude toward them. The attitude you take toward them is what makes them your territory, your safe territory. You focus on them in and of themselves—for example, the body in and of itself.

If you think about the body in terms of the world, as your tool for getting things out of the world, and then all of a sudden the tool's being taken away from you—it grows ill, it ages, it dies—you can start doing some very unskillful things to hold onto it. So right now you're ardent to develop only skillful qualities, skillful thoughts around the body, and to abandon unskillful ones. You're alert to what's actually going on in the mind with regard to the body. And you keep in mind the determination you want to get the best things out of the body before you have to let it go. The same with your feelings, the same with your mind states:

You look at these things just in reference to themselves, and not in reference to the world, and you regard them as tools to do good.

Any time the mind wanders out into the world, thinking about the body in the world, your feelings in the world, or your mind in the world, you say, “That’s outside my territory. I’m going to look after what I’ve got here.” It’s a field newly plowed, which means it’s a place where you can plant things. You can plant concentration. You can plant discernment. For instance, with concentration, you can give rise to a sense of well-being inside the body that doesn’t have to depend on the world outside. The mind gets to settle down.

In the beginning, it’s taken with the breath. Try to savor your breath, enjoy it. Get as sensitive as you can to the breath, because that’s going to help the mind settle down even more. Make yourself a connoisseur of the breath. But ultimately, even breathing gets laborious. As the mind gets very, very subtle, the breath gets more subtle until it stops. But you’ve still got the body. You’ve got the breath energy filling the body. If you’ve been working with it properly, there’s a sense of everything in the body being all connected, which is why you don’t need to breathe. And even though this is described as a state of equanimity, there’s a strong sense of well-being. This is an innocent pleasure. Ajaan Fuang used to say it’s the grass at the gate: the image being of a herd of cows being kept inside a corral. The owner opens up the gate, and the cows go running out to find grass out in the meadow, and they don’t notice the grass that’s right next to the gate.

But the fact that you’ve got this safe territory right here, right near you: You want to make the most of that. Because the more you spread yourself out in the world, the more you leave yourself exposed. It’s like those old strategy games you used to play as a child. You had to realize that the more territory you owned, the more you were open to attack. The more things you lay claim to outside, the more your attachments are going to get you to do whatever is possible to hold onto those attachments. And again, that’s a source of your not being able to trust yourself. So try to focus your search for happiness inside.

And as for the thoughts that go out involved in greed and distress with reference to the world, learn to cut them off, because that’s where your attachments are going to be. Wherever there’s an attachment, there’s a possibility of being threatened. Wherever there’s a sense of being threatened, there’s a part of you that you can’t trust. You don’t know what you might do to hold onto that. But if you learn how to let go, you become more trustworthy—because ultimately, that’s the big fear in life, or it should be the big fear in life: that you can’t trust yourself to behave in a skillful way. If everyone lived with that as their major fear, the world would be a much better place.

So you need to understand that this is where your fears come from. You're holding onto your body. You're holding onto your feelings. You're holding onto certain mind states with the wrong attitude. It's the right attitude toward these things that makes the body, feelings, and mind states your safe territory. In other words, if anything unskillful comes up with regard to these things, you do your best to let it go. If anything skillful comes up, you do your best to maintain it. That's what ardency is all about. And the ardency there is your protection. So focus your desire for happiness right here.

It's one of the reasons why they have the eight precepts for lay people. On the days when you take the eight precepts, you realize that there are certain things you can't do, certain avenues for finding pleasure that are closed. So you look inside. And if you're wise, you learn to appreciate the potentials for pleasure that you have in here.

You read about all these people who are suffering from the lockdown, suffering from the quarantine. They can't get to do the things they wanted to do. They're shut up with a lot other people in small spaces in some cases. And the reason they're suffering is that they lack skill. They look past the potentials they have inside, without realizing that their safe territory is in here, because this is something nobody can take away from you, even if they quarantine you. Even if they shut you up in solitary confinement, you've still got your body, your feelings, your mind, and you can regard them with mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Make them your safe place to be.

And continuing the image of the field, you can cultivate the field and give rise to a sense of well-being, both the well-being that comes from concentration and the well-being that comes from discernment as you begin to see things you're holding onto that you don't need to. You can let them go, let them go. So cultivate your field. Don't leave it fallow. If you leave it fallow, you start looking for food in other people's fields, and that takes you out into the world again. Then there will be conflicts over whose field is whose field, whose food is whose food. And that's why we suffer.

So look inside. Establish the mind in its territory: the right attitude toward the body, the right attitude toward feelings and the mind. It's here that your true refuge will be found. Because we don't just stay here. We cultivate this. And as we cultivate it, we gain in discernment. The discernment itself is not the goal. It's not that we're here to arrive at insights. We try to get insights and then use the insights in order to free the mind.

So as you let go, even of the concentration, you bring the mind to a point where you can even let go of its discernment and not fall back. At that point, as

the Buddha says, “We have nothing have nothing to fear.” When you find the deathless, it comes from not holding onto anything, from not having anything as a belonging in that state. That’s when you’ve found something that you can really trust. But to get to that, you have to make yourself trustworthy.

Think about the soldiers that they train to be willing to give up all kinds of things. The more the soldiers are willing to give up, the more they can be trusted. Now, the problem with training soldiers like that is that after the battle is over, they let them loose to do whatever they want, because their desires have been suppressed for a while. But if you want to be one of the Buddha’s soldiers, you don’t just suppress your desires. You understand them to the point where you realize that anything pulling you outside of your safe territory is going to make you someone you can’t trust. You learn how to see through the causes for those desires, and you can let them go.

So then, in holding onto nothing, it’s not the case that you’re left with nothing. There’s a huge reward. But to get there, you have to make yourself trustworthy. If you see yourself thinking something unskillful—or about to say something unskillful, about to do something unskillful—you have to ask yourself, “Here I am, living in a very comfortable place like this. Things haven’t gotten really bad yet. And yet already I’m giving in to unskillful desires. What’s going to happen when things get worse?” It’s when you’re true to yourself, even in the littlest things, that the really good and true big things will come your way.