

## *Good Fences*

*June 19, 2020*

Last night, I talked about goodwill as a fence—a fence around your mind, a fence around your actions. This is in line with the Buddha's teaching that goodwill is a form of restraint.

That's not how we usually think of it. We think of it as a freeing of the mind's innate nature, but that's assuming that its innate nature is basically good. The Buddha, though, never said it's basically good; he said it's basically changeable. We have all kinds of possibilities inside, and we have to be very careful about which possibilities we're developing with our thoughts.

This applies not only as we're meditating but also as we go through life. Remember the Buddha's image. He said he got on the path when he realized that his thoughts were of two types: skillful and unskillful. In other words, he looked at them not in terms of what he liked to think or didn't like to think, what he believed or didn't believe. He looked at them in terms of the mind state from which they came and the actions to which they led.

If they came from sensuality, ill will, or thoughts of harmfulness, they were going to put bad ruts in the mind. Or in his image, they would bend the mind in a particular direction. The more you allow yourself to think those thoughts, the more the mind gets bent. If they were thoughts that came from renunciation, lack of ill will, or lack of harmfulness, then they would bend the mind in a good direction.

So the Buddha realized he had to keep close watch over his thoughts and hold them in check. The image he gave was of a cowherd, having to look after his cows during the rainy season when the rice is growing. He had to keep the cows out of the rice fields, so he would beat and check and hold them back. Otherwise, if the cows got in the rice fields, they'd cause a lot of trouble, and of course, the cowherd would be put to trouble, too.

But cows are too gentle an image for some of the thoughts in our minds. We have tigers and wild dogs. If we let them out in the neighborhood, there's going to be a lot of trouble for us, to say nothing of the trouble for the neighbors. So we have to build good fences. As they say, good fences make good neighbors.

Having goodwill is a fence, and it's a motivation for restraint. The Buddha talked about two kinds of restraint. There's restraint in terms of the things you look at and listen to: in other words, what's coming into the mind through the senses, what you're focusing on, or why you're focusing on those things. Then

there's restraint in terms of what you do and say and think: what's coming out. In both cases, the primary restraint is on the mind itself.

In other words, you can look at anything as long as the mind is in a skillful state. Even though what you're looking at may be a beautiful object that would give rise to desire in other people, or something upsetting that would give rise to anger, if you look at it with a skillful mind, there will be no desire, no anger. It's the same with all the other senses. Why you're looking and the kind of mind state that's fostered by the way you look: That's what matters in the restraint. So it all comes down to a restraint of the mind.

As for what's coming out, there are times, of course, when something unskillful is in the mind, and we have to exercise restraint in terms of our bodies in how we act and restraint in our speech in terms of what we say. But that means there has to be *some* part of the mind, at least, that realizes restraint is necessary.

So the mind is the crucial factor in both cases. You have to look at what you're thinking, why you're thinking it, and what's going to happen if you continue to think in that way.

Now, part of the mind may say, "Well, it's true, true, true what I'm thinking. This is the way things really are." But if you're thinking about something in a way that gives rise to anger, you're looking at it wrong. If it gives rise to greed, if it gives rise to fear, you're looking at it wrong. After all, if arahants were looking at it, they wouldn't feel these things. And they're the ones who are looking at things in the right way. So you have to realize that there's something wrong.

You also realize that you can hold yourself in. In other words, you can have unskillful thoughts and not act on them. But it's like being fenced in with your own wild dogs and tigers. After a while, they turn on you. When I was teaching in Brazil a couple of months back, one of the questions was: "The silence is driving me crazy." As I pointed out to the person asking the question, "It's not the silence that driving you crazy. It's the way you're talking to yourself: That's what's driving you crazy." You have to turn around and look at the way you're thinking.

Some people will say, "Simply be okay with whatever is coming up in the mind, but don't act on it." But as we go through the world, we have to act on our thoughts. We have to choose the ones we're going to act on. And if we're not careful—if we're not mindful, alert, ardent—all kinds of unskillful things can slip into our actions. So we actually have to counter the way we're thinking if it's unskillful. That means taking it apart.

This is when it's useful to think about the three kinds of fabrication. How are you breathing around the issue? When there's anger, you're breathing in a certain way. It gets into the body. It affects your digestion. It affects your health. Well,

learn how to breathe a different way. Breathe in a way that's more calm. And look at the way you're talking to yourself. What are you saying to yourself about the situation? Can you step back and think of other ways of talking about the situation—ways that are just as true? Look at different facts, focusing on different story lines.

Think of that monk who was going to the far, distant place in India where people were regarded as uncivilized. He went to see the Buddha to say goodbye. The Buddha said, "The people there are very uncivilized. What are you going to do if they start yelling at you?" He said, "I'm going to think they're really good in that they're not hitting me."

"What if they hit you?" "I'll think they're really good in that they're not throwing stones at me."

"What if they throw stones at you?" "I'll think they're really good in that they're not stabbing me with a knife."

"What if they stab you with a knife?" "I'll think they're really good in that they're not killing me."

"What if they kill you?" "I'll think: At least my death wasn't a suicide."

All of those things are true. Most people, though, as soon as they get yelled at, all they can think about is how upset they are that they're being yelled at and how unfair it is. "Why does that person yell at me?"

You can think in a different way, and it's much easier to take. And you're less likely to respond in an unskillful way. You're avoiding some unskillful ruts that are in your mind. Your mind has been bent in one direction; you've got to bend it in another direction. Once it's bent, of course it's going to see everything in line with the direction in which it's bent. A large part of our practice is learning how to unbend the unskillful mind and bend it in a more skillful direction.

That's bodily fabrication, the breath; verbal fabrication, how you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication, the feelings in the body that you're focusing on. You can make a situation really bad by focusing on how miserable you feel. But you can look for the other parts of the body that are not so miserable. And, of course, you can breathe in ways that will make them not miserable—make them actually comfortable.

Then, when unpleasant words come your way or unpleasant actions are around you, you're not going to feed on the unpleasant sensation you're already creating in yourself. This is one of *the* big reasons why we have to work inside first before we're ever going to change the world. We're ordinarily adding so many burdens on the mind as it is, and someone else comes along and places a feather on top of our load. And it's unsupportable, unbearable.

So look at the feelings you're focusing on, and then look at the perceptions you're holding in mind: the perception that you're being offended, the perception that you're being mistreated. That then ties in with the narrative of how many times you've been mistreated before. All that can create a real knot, a real tiger inside. Then who's going to get bitten by the tiger first? You are.

Learn to hold other perceptions in mind. Again, it's not that you're replacing true perceptions with false ones. You're replacing one perception that's unskillful with another perception that should be equally true, but is more skillful. There are more skillful ways of looking at things. In this way, you defang and declaw your tigers so there's no danger to the people around you, and there's no danger inside your home.

It's in this way that having a good fence not only makes good neighbors but also makes a good home where you exercise restraint by holding yourself back from saying things you'd like to say or doing things you'd like to do, and you turn around and look at your likes. Why would you like to do that? Take them apart.

Mindfulness, as the Buddha said, holds things in check. Mindfulness acts as restraint. It's the discernment, though, that's going to end the problem. It cuts things off at the source. So have this combination of mindfulness and discernment, remembering that in Thai, the words for mindfulness and discernment, *sati* and *pañña*, when put together mean "intelligence": the practical intelligence of someone who knows how to take the knowledge they've been getting from the Dhamma and actually put it to use, keeping it in mind and using it at all times—not only when they're meditating.

In this way, your fence is in place all the time. Your protection is there all the time. There's nothing inside the fence that's going to cause you any trouble or cause any trouble for people outside. That's why it's a genuine expression of goodwill.