

## *The Field Hospital*

*March 27, 2021*

Here at the monastery, physical seclusion is not that big a problem. Even though there's work we have to do, sometimes as a group, still there's plenty of time to get off by yourself, to get away from other people. The problem is finding *mental* seclusion. As the Buddha said, we tend to go through life with craving as our companion. Even when we're sitting by ourselves, we can have *long* conversations with craving. We never really get the mind by itself, quiet, until we can fend off the craving. That's what the concentration is for—it's to get some quiet time, but it serves several other purposes as well.

There are three big kinds of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. The first one you have to deal with is craving for sensuality. We're attached to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. And we're attached especially to our thoughts *about* those things, our plans for those things—we crave the craving. This is where craving gets tricky: We have to deal with many layers all at once, even with just this one kind of craving.

As the Buddha said, you can't get past it unless you have a pleasure that's *not* sensual: in other words, the pleasure of form, which we gain from getting the mind in concentration, as you feel the body from within. Or formless pleasures, when everything in the body gets so still that you can have a perception of infinite space, infinite consciousness, and the body doesn't interfere. It's so quiet that you can ignore it. It's only then, when you have this kind of pleasure, that you can really step back from sensual craving.

Otherwise, even though you may know the drawbacks and think about them many, many times—and contemplate the body inside and out, get all thirty-two parts out on the floor in front of you, trying to poison your sensual fantasies—still, if you don't have this higher pleasure, you're going to go back to sensual pleasures and sensual thinking of one kind or another.

The problem is, to get this higher pleasure you have to seclude the mind from sensuality. That's not quite the Catch-22 it sounds like, because all you have to do is create a little space in the mind, a little space of *time*, the ability to inhabit the body, at least for a little while—to get the mind to settle down. That means you don't have to uproot craving in order to get the mind into concentration, simply learn how to put it aside. Give it a few karate chop, so that it will back off and give you some time. Then make the most of that time, because it will come back.

Some people get really frustrated: They say, “I thought I took care of that issue, and yet it keeps coming back.” Well, of course it’s going to come back—until you’ve reached non-return. Up until that point, realize that you’re still in the battlefield, and your concentration is like having a field hospital: The battle goes on, but you’ve got a space where you can treat your illnesses. Even though it may not be totally antiseptic, it’s good enough to do operations, so that the soldiers can recover and get back into battle. The battle, of course, is using discernment to look into why the mind is so fascinated by sensuality. If you get wounded again, well, come back in. The concentration will treat you again.

Which means that even though there can be turmoil in the mind, you have to learn how to create a space for yourself. Let the turmoil be on the fringes. You’ve got your quiet spot inside, in the center. Learn how to nurture that.

You read about concentration, with rapture and pleasure filling the whole body. Well, maybe you can’t get the whole body, but at least get part of the body, enough so that you can have a space to lie down.

In Ajaan Lee’s image, you go into a house. Some of the floor boards are rotten, so you don’t lie down there. You lie down in the spots where the boards are good, where you can get some quiet. At the very least, you have something to compare, so that when the mind goes out and gets involved in its defilements again, you can see that the pleasure of concentration really is better: It’s more solid, more peaceful, more refined. Then you can really look into why you keep going back to sensuality: What are the misunderstandings you have?

I received a letter from a prisoner the other day, talking about how since he’s been in prison he’s been hounded by thoughts of sensual desire. There’s a strong part of his mind that doesn’t want to give them up—because he misses affection. I said, “Your problem is that you’ve got lust and affection confused. They’re not the same thing.”

That’s one more way in which the mind dresses things up. But if you look at them separately, this is where you can come in to poison the fantasy. You start fantasizing about how this would be really nice, or that would be really nice. Then you say, well, suppose the person you were enjoying, turned on you, betrayed you. That can happen. So it wasn’t so much that the lust was what was good, it was the affection that was good. But then the affection spreads over and gets confused with the lust.

So you’ve got to learn how to take these things apart. And you’re more willing to take them apart because you have something to compare—the safe spot inside, the quiet spot inside. It may come and go, but at least you know it’s there. You’ve

got your nose up above the surface of the water, so you know you're not going to drown.

Just learn how not to get upset or discouraged when the mind has been quiet and then stops being quiet. You're still cleaning out that space, you've still got a temporary space that you're working with, and it's going to be normal for more dirt to come blowing in. The trick is learning how to be more and more effective at clearing out the space quickly and seeing when the disturbances start creeping in, and what disguises they take on. That way, you start protecting your concentration with discernment, and you strengthen your discernment with your concentration.

Of the factors of the noble path, these two are the ones that are the most important: right view and right concentration. So see if you can get them working together—so that you can maintain your field hospital. That way, when you get wounded, you have a place to go to heal—and then you can come back out again, strong and ready to fight.