Fence Me In

December, 2001

One of the Thayajans has spoken of virtue as a fence for your actions, and concentration practice as a fence for the mind, something that keeps you within bounds. Of course, here in America, we don’t like fences. The old song, “Don’t Fence Me In,” seems to typify most of our attitudes. But the purpose of having that fence is to look at what you’ve got within the fence. There are little things in there that you tend not to appreciate. At the same time, it forces you to use your ingenuity. In other words, if you have restrictions placed on you, how are you going to find happiness? Actually, there are plenty of restrictions already placed on us simply by the fact that once you’re born, there’s going to be aging, there’s going to be illness, there’s going to be death. But we tend to forget about those things. So we tend to think that we have all this space all around us, all these options, all these choices, all this time. One of the basic purposes of the practice is to make you realize you don’t have all that much time. In fact, you don’t know how little time you have. It varies. From person to person, what our opportunity to really work with the mind is going to be, how long it’s going to last, and what problems this body is going to throw at us, we don’t know. Then there’s the fence that’s formed by the precepts, or the fence that’s formed by concentration. It’s actually fencing us off from ways of acting that are going to bring more restrictions on us. In other words, if you create bad karma for yourself, it’s going to make it that much more difficult to practice. If you allow the mind to wander around as it likes, it’s going to be that much more difficult to gain insight into the mind. So the fence is for our own protection. It’s for our own good. On the one hand, it blocks us off from doing things that in the long term are going to be harmful for us, no matter how much we may like to do them. And as I said, the second function of these fences is to really make you ingenious. If you can’t do those things that you felt like doing, if you can’t think about those things you wanted to think about, how are you going to find happiness? It gives you that much more incentive to turn around and look in at your own inner resources right here. Because we’ve got mindfulness, alertness, basic qualities of everything. Every mind has, but we tend not to develop them because they seem so ordinary. Just keeping something in mind, just watching what’s happening in the present moment, for most of us that doesn’t seem to have much potential. But as we fence the mind in, say, “Okay, you’re going to stay with the breath and you’re going to sit here for an hour or however long it’s going to be, and you’re going to try to gain a state of comfort and bliss, rapture.” How are you going to do that? Most people think it’s impossible, but the Buddha said that’s where the truest happiness lies, in your ability to find your happiness in this little area, just the body as it’s sitting right here, right now. So try to pay careful attention to what’s going on. Don’t overlook the little things. I was talking to someone earlier this morning who said that probably the problem with her meditation was that she was sitting there waiting for the big dramatic events to happen. As a result, she was missing all the little things. And it’s the little things that make the difference. Those little lapses in mindfulness, or those little times when you don’t lapse in mindfulness, when you’re just about to, but you pull yourself back and keep with the breath. It’s those little things that make a big difference. So by restricting our range here, the little things take on more importance. They become proportionally larger in our awareness. That’s the whole point. If your awareness covers the whole American Southwest, you’re going to miss a lot of the little pebbles, the little details that go into making up the American Southwest. But if you restrict your attention just a little areas at a time, you’ll begin to notice, “Oh, there’s this, there’s that.” And it’s the ability to notice which details are important and which details you can set aside. That takes time. It takes experience and the practice. So for the next hour, you’ve got this fence around you. Think of the skin as far as you want your thoughts to go. If you’re going to think, think about things that are going on in the body right now. If you’re going to be aware, try to be as aware as you can be of the body. Either one part of the body or the body as a whole. Make that the fullness of your awareness. Beyond that, you’re not going to pay any attention to anything. Just stay right here. And you’re not going to move unless you really have to. You put these restrictions on yourself, and that forces you to be ingenious in finding out ways. You’re still allowed to change the way you breathe. Try to discover how much difference that will make. You’re allowed to focus on different spots in the body. How much difference will that make? You’re allowed to stay in one spot as long as you like. How much difference will that make? Things you otherwise wouldn’t notice all of a sudden become really enlarged because you restrict the range of your awareness. It’s the same with the precepts. Once you promise yourself that you’re not going to kill any living being in any way, under any circumstances, you’re going to have to become a lot more ingenious in how you deal, say, with pests in the house. If our nation as a whole were dedicated to not killing, we would have become a lot more ingenious in how to respond to events that have happened. It’s when you put a fence around the mind, as poets used to say, when you play with the net up, you’re forced to be more ingenious, to think out things that otherwise you’d be too lazy to think out. But when you place these restrictions on yourself, it forces you to think outside of your ordinary box by exploring potentials and by exploring courses of action you otherwise wouldn’t even consider. There are a lot of things in life that don’t look promising from the beginning, but when you actually follow them, they really do make a difference, really do take you someplace where you want to go. It’s like this business of sitting here focusing on your breath. If someone totally unacquainted with Buddhism were to walk in right now, what would they say? “What are these people doing sitting here, stocked still?” The faithful who are practiced in the meditation are sitting here, and they’re getting a strong sense of stability inside, a strong sense of ease. Many of them have a strong sense of rapture. Of course, there are other people sitting here, their minds are all over the place, but at least they’re trying in the right direction. They’re trying to find a happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. This is the only place you can find it, inside, right here at the details. So pay very careful attention. Because all the issues in the mind come out of these little tiny movements of the mind that you barely notice. And the only way to resolve those issues is to learn how to notice them. It requires that you be as sensitive as possible. So meditation is not just a matter of following somebody’s rules mechanically. The rules are there to sort of get you started. The basic steps are there to get you started. But then you’ve got to learn to use your own sensitivity in terms of noticing cause and effect. Use your own intelligence. I think it was Aristotle’s definition of intelligence is the ability to see connections that other people hadn’t noticed or hadn’t pointed out to you. You’ve got to learn how to see these connections yourself. Develop your intelligence in this way. And it’s that kind of intelligence that will take you beyond suffering, that will bring release. So by allowing yourself to be fenced in this way, you’re suddenly releasing yourself to reach a point where there’s no fences, no limitations on the mind at all. It all opens wide. But it’s willingness to be fenced in to begin with that will take you to that freedom.

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