A Fence with a Gate

May 27, 2014

They say that Ajahn Chah stayed only a few days with Ajahn Mun, but he picked up a lot in those few days. One of the teachings that most impressed him was a very short comment by Ajahn Mun that the practice should be done in the shape of a circle. Of course, that doesn’t mean you go running around in circles. What it means is that it’s a full-time practice, a consistent practice. And Ajahn Fuang made a similar observation one time. He said that for most of us, we divide up our day into times. There’s time to work, time to eat, time to talk, time to meditate, time to do something else. We end up with lots of little tiny bits of times. Our practice doesn’t become timeless. So we should be on 24/7, even when we’re working. In the kitchen, when we’re working out in the orchard, we’re still here with our time to practice. Those are all times to practice. Staying with the breath while you’re talking with other people, while you’re doing other things, it’s not impossible. It’s that part of the mind that says, “Well, now I can take some time off.” That’s the part that’s going to get you into trouble. So if everyone’s staying with his or her breath, things go a lot more smoothly, both inside and out, and your practice develops a momentum. That’s one of the useful aspects of sticking with the breath, is that you begin to see very subtle movements of the mind reflected in the breath that you otherwise wouldn’t see. A very good time to see this is not when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but when you’re dealing with other people. When you say something, what kind of effect does it have on you? When you’re doing things, what kind of effect does it have? It’s interesting to compare the factors in the path of right speech and right action with right action, all three of the principles. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex. Those are also precepts. In other words, those are things that you hold to absolutely, that you don’t do under any circumstances. That’s a kind of practice in a circle, too, that you’re consistent at all times in all situations. No intentional killing, no intentional stealing, no intentional illicit sex. Sometimes you hear people trying to make excuses. Most recently it’s been in the precept against killing. There are times, they say, when somebody else may deserve to die. Well, you’re in no position to decide that. And if you decide that your times to kill are reasonable, other people are going to say, “Well, their times to kill are reasonable, too. Why should your standard hold any priority over theirs?” It’s a very naive kind of thinking that opens up huge gaps. Like a John Charles image, the fence around the house really gives protection to the house only when it’s all the way around. If you have a fence only in the front of the house, but nothing in the back or the sides, thieves can come in. All kinds of animals can come in. Everybody can come in because there’s nothing to protect you. It’s only when the fence is all around that you have protection. And it’s that way with these precepts. With right speech, it’s different, because with the four types of wrong speech, only one is forbidden by the law. The other precept is the one against lying. That’s an absolute for several reasons. When you lie to someone, you’re giving them false information. You’re giving them the wrong view. That can cause a lot of detriment. And if you’re used to lying to other people, you start getting used to lying to yourself. So we have the precepts against lying under any circumstances. There are rules for the monks dealing with lying. The only exception is when you really don’t intend to lie. You say something that’s false and you didn’t realize it was false. But with the other forms of wrong speech—harsh speech, idle chatter, divisive speech—there are no precepts, because there are times when you have to say things of this sort. If you see that someone’s getting involved, someone who’s going to be really harmful for them, you have to say something. Your intention is a fair intention. The same with harsh speech. Sometimes a gentle reminder is not enough. You have to speak harshly for someone to stop behaving unskillfully. And with idle chatter, a certain amount of social grease is what keeps human society going. So the hard part here is, it’s not like with the precept against lying, which is absolute. Here, there’s no absolute pride. You have to use a lot of your own discernment. Staying with the breath 24/7 helps. If you find that as you’re engaged in a certain kind of speech, you’re losing the breath, you have to ask yourself, “Is this the right kind of speech to be engaging in right now?” Staying with the breath also helps with the most difficult of those issues, which, of course, is idle chatter. As you’re saying something pleasant to somebody else, it begins to turn into another thing and then another thing. And then it really gets carried away. Whereas if you’re staying with your breath, you can be clear about your intention. This is the problem with idle chatter. The intention is vague. You want to say something nice, and then you find that that pleases the person. Then you want to say something else nice. Or if the first comment didn’t please the other person, then you dig around and try to find something that will. This desire to be pleasing and popular all the time, that’s a problem. Jon Fuehrman didn’t trust people who wanted to be popular. I’ve told you the story before about the man he chose to be the treasurer of the monastery. He’d pretty much decided he was going to choose this man, but he wanted to make sure. So he asked him a question. He said, “Which would you rather be, popular or rich?” The man said, “I’d rather be rich, because with money you can buy popularity.” So Jon Fuehrman took him. That’s the kind of person he was. He was always wanting to please other people. Why do you start doing things that have nothing to do with the precepts at all? You forget your precepts out of your desire to please, and you lose sight of your own intentions. There’s a similar problem with harsh speech. Sometimes you think, “Well, maybe I have to say something harsh.” Well, try saying something gentle first. Only if that doesn’t work a couple of times, then you might go to harsh speech. But you have to be very, very careful about these things. This is like a gate in the fence that sometimes you leave open, sometimes you leave closed. For most of us, we just open it up and leave it open. So you have to be very careful about these things. Keep these principles in mind that, yes, there are times when a little bit of idle chatter, a little bit of harsh speech, even something that’s a little bit divisive, might be skillful. But you’ve got to have good reasons. For most of us, if we’re not practicing or if we decide that this is time off from the practice, we forget about looking at our reasons or looking at our intentions. We should be on top of our intentions all the time. This is where the practice becomes a practice in the shape of a circle. This is how it becomes our fence to protect us.

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