The Frontier Fortress

February 6, 2015

One of the most peculiar teachings you sometimes hear associated with meditation is the idea that you should learn how to make yourself vulnerable. Open yourself up to life, they say. Don’t close yourself away. Of course, that’s opening yourself up to a lot of pain, aging, illness, death, separation. There are a lot of people out there you can’t trust. Why would you open yourself up to them? There are a lot of things inside your own mind that you can’t trust. The little bit of insight that’s contained in this is that for a lot of us, we just close ourselves off in a very tight and restricted way. We try to run away from everything. We try to run away from ourselves and things. We just can’t do that. That’s not the solution. But that’s just a little bit of wisdom in there. The real wisdom is how to learn how to make yourself genuinely invulnerable so that things go up and down in the world, but you don’t have to go up and down with them. People can aim arrows at you and they go right past. That means living in the world, but living in the world skillfully. One of the Buddha’s images for a practitioner is a fortress at the edge of a frontier. In other words, you’re way out on your own and there are enemies right over the border. So you have to be very careful. You have to have good defenses. But you also need good nourishment inside. So what are the qualities we develop to have the defense? First, there’s the protection. The Buddha lists three kinds of protection. There’s a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, and your discernment. The sense of shame and compunction, he said, are like an encircling road around the fortress and an encircling moat. Anybody who’s going to get into the fortress has to get past the road, has to get past the moat. Now, shame here doesn’t mean just going around being ashamed of yourself. It means having a sense of self-esteem that tells you, “This action is beneath me. I would be ashamed to do that.” That’s healthy shame. It protects you from a lot of things you would later regret. In other words, the protection is not just in your meditation. It’s also in how you live your life, your attitude towards your actions. Similarly with compunction. You think of doing something and you realize that doing that would lead to bad results. It would lead to harm, either for yourself or to other people. So you don’t do it. These two qualities are what protect your virtue and your protection. Your virtue is your protection, it’s your safety. Then we get more to inner qualities of the mind. The wall there, the discernment, the Buddha makes the point that it’s covered with plaster so nobody can get a foothold on it. In other words, you learn how to separate yourself from things skillfully. This means first getting the mind really quiet. Then having a good foundation inside. Because you’re going to face things in the world, you want to be able to have a sense that you’re not really threatened by them, that you do have a safe spot. When emotions take over, it seems like they’ve got every square inch of your body. You have to correct that perception. Remember, there’s some spot in the body that’s not affected by these things. There’s some spot in the mind that’s not affected. Discernment is what sees this. Then, even in the midst of all these other things, there’s a still spot. So you try to rest there. You use the breath to nourish that spot. So that’s where you go when things get difficult. It’s not running away and curling up and being miserable. It’s going to your safe spot where you’re strong. Then you can use the breath energy there to spread out and work through whatever ravages the emotion that’s bound to your body. Or if it’s just physical pain, again, you spread the breath out from there to minimize the amount of added pain you’re causing yourself simply because of the way you’re breathing or you relate to the breath energy in the body. All of these are functions of discernment because they help separate you from the source of the problem, allow you to step back. But to step back, seeing clearly, not stepping back and covering up your eyes and covering up your ears and running away. You step back a bit so you can have a safe place to look at things for what they are. That’s discernment. It goes beyond that in learning how to ask questions about things. Once you’ve used the breath to work through the body, then you notice that the emotion is still there or the pain is still there. Then you can start asking questions. This is a good strategy. When you’re going on the offensive like this, you’re not just sitting there as a target for these things to come and hit you. You’re out there probing. What is this about this pain? Where is the pain really centered right now? What’s the shape of the pain? How do I imagine the pain to myself? Can I learn how to drop that perception? Or the emotion? What is the perception that underlies this emotion? Why do I feel attacked by it? Why do I try to feed on it? Unless your discernment is aided by other things. You’ve got to have soldiers in the fortress. That’s your right effort. And as Ajahn Lee points out, right effort has a lot of discernment in it. So the discernment is not just in the wall. Where you separate yourself from whatever it is you’re looking at, it’s also in the desire to understand, to get to the root of things. In other words, to practice skillfully and not let the unskillful things take over. These soldiers are armed with learning. In other words, what you’ve learned of the Dhamma, either from the suttas or from the ajahns, or from your own practice. You can read Ajahn Mahaprabhu’s instructions on how to probe into pain. And then you remember that. What you’ve learned about dealing with afflictive emotions. You have to be very selective here. There’s a lot of stuff out there that’s very strange about emotions, but there are some good things as well. You try things out and see what works for you, what helps get you into understanding the perceptions and the way you talk to yourself about a particular emotion that brings it on. It also helps to remember that when an emotion comes and hits, it’s going to have some effect on the hormones in your body. And that’s all too easy to see. Say the anger has taken over. It’s got your heart racing and the blood going. And the fact that the heart is still racing means you think, “Well, that must mean that I’m still angry.” No, it simply means that the hormones have gotten into your body. The mind can drop the anger, and even though there are the physical effects of anger, you can begin to see that the anger actually comes and goes. And if you don’t feed it off of that misunderstanding, i.e., that the physical symptoms are showing that the anger is still there, you’ve got a handle on it. In addition to the soldiers, you need a gatekeeper, someone at the gate of the fortress who knows who to let in. This can refer to teachings that you’ve noticed or attitudes. What kind of attitudes are you going to let into your mind? This is, again, where it’s useful to have that sense of the discernment that divides what’s in your mind—the skillful part of the mind from the unskillful. You don’t want the unskillful part to come and invade the skillful part. You don’t want it to invade your safe space inside. And discernment has to remember who you trust and who you don’t trust, and has to know when to shut the door. That idea that discernment is just an all-welcoming, all-accepting, broad state of mind has no basis at all in the Buddhist teachings. Discernment remembers that there are problems in the world, you have to be heedful, and this is what you do in order to prevent the problems from arising. This is what you do in order to develop good qualities. That’s what it remembers. That’s the function of mindfulness. So you’ve got your mindfulness working together with your discernment and your learning and your right effort. These are the things that protect the fortress. All this needs nourishment. That’s what concentration is for. One of the reasons we leave our fortress and put ourselves in danger is because we’re hungry. But if you have food inside the fortress, you don’t have to worry. Like Ayutthaya, when the Burmese troops came to attack, it had lots of farms inside the city, lots of gardens inside the city. So the people were kept fed. And the siege lasted for a long time, much longer than the Burmese liked. But you can keep that image in mind that if you’ve got food inside, then you can live in a world where things are not perfect. We don’t have to waste our time hoping for an ideal world where everybody lives in peace and harmony and everybody’s wise. Our happiness can’t depend on that, because it’s not going to happen. We have to create our own space and defend it well, feed it well. That’s how we can live in this world without being scarred. That’s how we can live with our minds without being scarred. So keep this image in mind. And if you find that you’re feeling threatened either by physical pain or emotional pain, what fortress are you missing? And then look into your inner resources to see what you can do to make up the lack.

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