A Fence for the Mind

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When you’re meditating, it’s like building a house. In Pali they call it vihara-dhamma. It’s a dwelling for the mind, a home for the mind. And the house needs a fence, otherwise the animals in the forest come in and they make it all dirty and sometimes they chew on things. Sometimes they get into the house and you go into the house and they bite you. So you’ve got to make sure that your fence, all the slats of the fence, are close together and that they’re set up right. In other words, you have to set your mind on what you’re doing. You don’t just go through the motions. If you go through the motions, it’s like getting all the different parts of a fence and just letting them lie there in a pile by the house. They don’t protect the house and they themselves become a hiding place for snakes and mice and other critters. Or you set them up. But the pickets of the fence are far apart. All kinds of animals can still come in, especially if you haven’t protected it on all sides. The animals can come in on that side and it’s as if the fence didn’t exist. This is why the Buddha said when you’re trying to get the mind in a concentration, there are two activities you’ve got to do. One is that you’re trying to stay with the breath in and of itself. And the other is that you try to put aside any interest in the world, any greed or distress, anything having to do with the world outside, you’re going to put aside right now. Those are the things that you’ve got to protect. Those are the things you’ve got to keep out. And you do that by being mindful, keeping something in mind, in other words, keeping the breath in mind, being alert, watching to make sure you actually are with the breath, and then being ardent. Ardency is when you really are setting your mind and doing this. You really want to do it well. In the basis of success, this comes under intent. In the practice of mindfulness, it comes under ardency. This is where you really set your mind up. Set it up straight. And then you try to keep all the pickets very close together. So big animals, little animals just can’t get in. What are the animals you’re trying to keep out? What are the five hindrances? The first one is sensual desire. It’s the mind’s fascination with thinking about and planning about sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations that you’re going to want. And you can plan for long hours. A meal that lasts only, not even half an hour, you can plan it for hours ahead of time. And it’s a real waste of time. The Buddha said it’s like dreaming of a beautiful place with nice groves and lakes, and then you wake up and there’s nothing at all. It’s like a dog chewing on a bone. All the meat has been boiled off the bone. There’s nothing left but the old hard bone, and the dog gets nothing but the taste of its own saliva as it chews on it. In other words, there’s nothing of any substance there, no real nourishment for the mind. We keep chewing and chewing and chewing on these thoughts. You’ve got to see that there’s nothing really attractive about thinking about sensuality. That’s one of the weird things. When people get interested in some sensual pleasure, they think that it makes them attractive. But as the Buddha said, sensual thoughts are like borrowed goods. Whatever attraction there is in it, it really belongs to somebody else, and they can take it away at any time. So you’ve got to learn to see that this is an animal you don’t want in your house. It’s like those wild animals little kids bring home. As long as they’re baby wild animals, they’re perfectly okay. But then as they grow up, they begin to show their wildness. So you have to watch out for them. Another animal you’ve got to keep out is ill will. This is stronger than just irritation or anger. This means that you really want to see somebody suffer, someone who’s wronged you, someone who’s wronged the people you love or people you identify with. And it’s really easy to get worked up about it, how you really want to see that person suffer. That just eats into your meditation, eats into your concentration, because we’re trying to develop qualities in the mind. We’re playing around with these other thoughts. Nothing gets developed except the animals grow, and they take over your house. There’s a lot you’ve got to realize. If you feed on thoughts of ill will, then you’re going to start mistreating people. You’re going to enjoy to see other people suffering. That’s going to be really bad for you in the long run. Then you can’t be able to trust yourself around those people. This is where you have to develop thoughts of compassion, goodwill. Try to think of the person’s good qualities. And if you can’t think of any good qualities, you’ve got to feel sorry for them. If you can think of good qualities, well, focus on those. Realize that you’d like other people to look at your good qualities and not look at your bad qualities. So if you want to be fair, you focus on the good qualities of the people you’re angry at. It makes it a lot easier to deal with them, to deal skillfully with them. It doesn’t mean that you have to approve of everything they do, but it does mean you focus on your common humanity. That makes it a lot easier to communicate. Another animal is sleepiness, drowsiness. You’re sitting here meditating and the breath is comfortable, and your awareness gets smaller and smaller and just kind of wallows in the comfort of the breath. And either you fall asleep or else you just kind of drift off into what Ajahn Lee calls a state of delusion concentration, where you’re quiet but you don’t really know where you are. Nothing gets developed in that kind of concentration. It’s a waste of time. You can’t jump at every opportunity that comes along to rest. You have to realize, as things get comfortable with the breath, you have to learn how to work with that sense of comfort. That’s why Ajahn Lee talks about spreading the sense of ease throughout the different parts of the body, trying to be aware of the whole body. The larger your range of awareness inside the body, the harder it is going to be to drowse off. Or you can try moving your attention from one spot to another. Focus on the breath at the heart for three times, and then basically your throat, three breaths, in the middle of the head, three breaths, and just keep chasing it around the body that way. In other words, give yourself work to do. There is work that needs to be done here. The reason we rest the mind, get it still, is so that it can do the work with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. So don’t just eat up whatever sense of comfort there is. Ajahn Lee’s example is getting a coconut. If you just eat the coconut, that’s the end of that. But if you take the coconut and you plant it, then you get a coconut tree. And that produces more coconuts. And out of those you can eat a couple, but then you plant some of the remainders, and then you get more and more and more coconut trees, until finally you become a millionaire with a coconut plantation. Because you’ve learned to make your sense of comfort work rather than just rest. So sleepiness is another animal you want to keep out by being extra mindful, extra alert. Fully mindful, fully alert. The fourth animal you want to keep out is restlessness and anxiety. When you’re worried about this, worried about that. The part of the mind that tells you, “You’ve got to worry about this because a danger is going to happen in the future. You’ve got to prepare.” You can tell yourself, “You’re not really sure what’s going to happen in the future, but you do know that if unexpected things do happen, you’re going to need as much mindfulness and alertness and discernment as you’re going to need to deal with the unexpected.” Where are you going to get those qualities? By meditating right here. If you really have to think about something, wait until the meditation is done. Your mind has been sharpened. Meditation is like sharpening a knife. You may just keep using the knife and cutting and cutting, and after a while it gets dull. And when it’s dull, it uses a lot of energy and you still don’t get things cut through properly. But if you sharpen the knife, sometimes all you need to do is just cut things once and they cut right through. So when there’s a voice in the mind that says, “You’ve got to worry about X,” you learn how to argue with that voice so that it doesn’t destroy your concentration, doesn’t tear down this home for the mind. The fifth animal is uncertainty. You’re not sure about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. You’re not sure about the breath. You’re not sure about yourself. The only way you’re going to get any surety about these things is actually putting them into practice. You have to be willing to give a little of yourself before you can gain something. You have to be true if you want to see the truth. The Buddha’s not saying that you have to swear on a stack of books saying, “Yes, I believe in karma,” or “I believe that meditation will work.” He’s simply asking you, “Give this a try.” Now, give it a serious try. To become a good judge of the practice, you have to develop a lot of mindfulness and alertness and discernment. But those qualities are good qualities to develop anyway. You can use them in all kinds of other activities, too. So the time spent in developing them is not wasted. But you’ll find that the more you develop these qualities, the more you appreciate the Buddha’s teachings. By truly following them, they bring you to the truth about why there’s suffering in the mind and how you can put an end to it. So these are the five animals you’ve got to keep out of your house by being intent, by being ardent, by really setting your mind on what you’re doing here. And keeping it set close together, like the pickets of a fence are set close together so they can keep even little tiny animals out. That way there’s home for the mind. It becomes a home where you can really rest and ease. Add your ease. Well-protected. Otherwise, if the fence is missing some sections, and one of the animals gets in, it’s going to lead the other animals in, too. Sensual desire is on the side of passion. Ill-will is on the side of aversion. Sleepiness, restlessness, and anxiety are all on the side of delusion. Restlessness is delusion with too much energy. Sleepiness is delusion with too little energy. So you’ve got basically three sides that you’ve got to keep the house protected on. But again, if you let any one side in, for example, you let sensual desire in, it’s going to bring the rest of them in, too. You start getting irritated by people getting in the way of your desires. When you don’t get the pleasure you want, you get sleepy or restless. So you’ve got to keep the house protected on all sides. So there’s a fence for the mind, your ardency, your intentness, the quality of really setting your mind on what you’re doing. That’s your protection. Just make sure that it’s close together and all around. you

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