A Fortress Mentality

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We start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill. Remind yourself that we’re looking for a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody, doesn’t harm us, doesn’t harm the people around us. That kind of happiness has to be found within. So we train our minds. Train your mind to stay with the breath as a way of anchoring it in the present moment. Try to anchor it here with a sense of well-being. When you breathe in, notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Ask yourself—you might start with long breathing—if long breathing feels good. It’s good to start with long breathing first because it helps to energize the body. Because as the meditation goes on, the breath is going to calm down. So give it a good shot of energy first. Then, if long breathing starts to feel oppressive, you can shorten the breath, make it more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Experiment to see what feels best right now. You’re creating a space inside. You can watch your mind. Because in our search for happiness, the big dangers come from within the mind itself. So you want to be able to observe it with a sense of well-being, clearly alert to what’s going on right here, right now. So that unskillful moods don’t come in. And take over the mind. It’s when the mind is feeling malnourished, weak, irritated, that it tends to go for thoughts of greed, aversion, delusion, jealousy, fear. And if you get to know your breath, you begin to realize how much the breath can contribute to giving a sense of nourishment inside, a sense of well-being. The mind is not so inclined to want to go for emotions that you know are unskillful. This is probably one of the Buddhist’s most important lessons, that there are dangers in the world and we have to be heedful about them. But the real danger is the dangers inside, the things that people can do to us. The only thing they can do to us, basically, is to get us to do unskillful things. Because if we do unskillful things, it affects us not only in this lifetime, but also on into the future. If they do us physical harm, it can go only as far as this lifetime. But the harm of convincing us that we should do something unskillful, that can go for a long, long time. I remember when I came back to America after I’d been in Thailand all those years. I was struck by how there was a huge difference in the way Buddhist teachings were taught here as opposed to there. Here there was a strong sense that you had to celebrate interconnectedness. It was a good thing. And you should learn how to make yourself vulnerable, not be mistrustful. You should know that the world is basically good. People were basically good. You or yourself, deep down inside, were basically good. And you have to learn how to trust your innate goodness, other people’s innate goodness. In Thailand, the Dhamma was taught in a very different way. There are dangers all around, and the value of the Dhamma and the Buddhist teachings is that they give protection. This protection starts with the lessons of the Four Noble Truths, that we suffer not because of what other people do, but from our own actions. And we can put an end to suffering through our own actions. We simply have to watch out for our heedlessness, our ignorance, because those things can do us a lot of harm. So the Buddhist teachings are predicated on a very strong sense that there are dangers all around. But we can do something about them. If we couldn’t do anything about them, heedfulness wouldn’t be worth much. If your actions didn’t make a difference, why bother being heedful? But the fact is, they can make a difference. And it’s the most important difference in your life. I point you here and tell you, don’t be so worried about people outside, what they can do to you, what they can do to you physically. Worry about what they might do to influence you to have the wrong kind of views about where true danger lies. But otherwise, focus inside. The Buddha has an image in one of his suttas. He talks about the practice of being like a fortress on a frontier. And the different parts of the practice correspond to different parts of the fortress. He starts out with conviction—in this case, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. And the message of the awakening is just that, that we suffer because of our own actions. But we can put an end to suffering because of our own actions. It’s up to us. If you’re firmly convinced of that, then it helps to have an open mind. You don’t have to erase a lot of your fear of things outside. As long as you maintain your own purity in thought, word, and deed, you’re going to be safe. And people can do physical harm to you, but that’s not nearly as severe as you are doing mental harm to yourself. So the different parts of the practice of the fortress are there to protect you, basically, from yourself. Conviction, as the Buddha says, is like the foundation post for the fortress. It’s an image that comes from the way buildings were built in India back in those days. Instead of pouring a floor, they would start with a foundation post, and then everything else in the building would depend on that initial foundation post. So you want a strong one. One that’s firmly planted in the ground. And the rest of the fortress can depend on that. Then he says there’s an encircling moat and an encircling road. Those stand for a sense of shame and a sense of compunction. Shame here is not the shame that’s the opposite of self-esteem. It’s the opposite of shamelessness. You don’t care what other people think about what you’re going to do. You’re just going to do what you want. Of course, it’s important that you care about the right people. In this case, you want to care about what the awakened people would say about your actions, what the Buddha calls “looking good in the eyes of the noble ones.” When you think about doing, or saying, or even thinking something, ask yourself, “How do I pass judgment on what I’m doing?” They’re there not to pass judgment, just to mark you down. I mean, they’re concerned about you. After all, the Buddha showed what an awakened person is like, someone who has compassion for everybody. So when you’re with someone who is truly compassionate for your well-being, think about your actions. When you think about that, you’d be ashamed to do something that was unskillful, something that could be harmful to yourself or to others. That sense of shame protects you. Similarly with compunction. Compunction is the realization that certain actions lead to suffering, and you would just rather not do them because of their long-term harm. Compunction is the realization that compunction is the object of apathy on the one hand and callousness on the other. In other words, it’s your sense of conscience. This, too, protects you. The Buddha said the fortress also has a high wall covered with plaster. This is discernment that protects you from outside influences. The fact that the wall is covered with plaster means that the soldiers outside can’t get a foothold, can’t get a handhold. It’s just too slippery for them. So you want the discernment that looks at other people’s actions and realizes, “Okay, what they do doesn’t touch you. You’re not going to go to heaven or hell because of what other people do. It’s because of your own actions.” So you can see clearly what influences coming in from outside are unskillful. And you have the wisdom and the strategic ability to figure out how not to get influenced by those things. Then inside the fortress you have soldiers. This is a symbol for right effort. Otherwise you see something unskillful coming up in the mind. You need to learn how to abandon it. And even before it arises, you need to figure out ways to prevent it from arising. We also often think that meditation is simply a matter of being in the present moment and not trying to anticipate anything. But you do have to anticipate how greed, aversion, and delusion might move into your mind. And think about what you might do ahead of time to prevent those things from happening. Or, if they do arise, figure out how you would let go of them. That’s for skillful things—right effort tries to give rise to them, and when they’re there, it tries to maintain them. You don’t just want to watch good states of mind come and go, come and go, and think that that’s insight. When something good comes, you’re going to have to depend on this to do what you can to maintain it. The Buddha says these soldiers are armed with good weapons. The weapons here are what you’ve learned about the Dhamma. You’ve learned about what the Buddha had to say, what the great teachers of the past and the present have had to say, about how to understand your mind, how to understand when it’s skillful and when it’s unskillful, and what techniques you can use to deal, say, with when pain comes in so that pain doesn’t overcome the mind, and also pleasure so that pleasure doesn’t overcome the mind. Those are both things you have to watch out for, because sometimes when pleasure overcomes the mind, you get heedless. When pain overcomes the mind, you just grasp at anything. So you remember what you’ve learned about dealing with pleasure and dealing with pain so that the mind is not overcome by these things. And it’s good to have a good foundation of Dhamma knowledge, because our minds have been bombarded by so many bizarre messages of the media. A lot of people go through life, and that’s what their knowledge is composed of. Things they heard on TV, things they learned over the internet, and who knows where these things come from, or what the intentions of the people who put them on the media to begin with were. So try to fill your mind instead with good knowledge, useful knowledge, knowledge that helps you understand your mind. Then the fortress also has a gatekeeper. This is mindfulness. The duty of the gatekeeper is to recognize who’s coming in, which people are friends, which people are foes. Keep out the foes. Allow the friends in. This stands for the function of mindfulness to remember exactly what is an unskillful mindstate like, how many unskillful mindstates have you encountered, how many skillful ones do you remember, and how do you recognize them when they come. Then when they come, if it’s skillful, what do you do to encourage it? If it’s unskillful, what do you do to make sure it doesn’t take over the mind? Don’t just let anything arise and pass away. This is one of the big misunderstandings about mindfulness. The way the Buddha taught it, it definitely has an agenda. We’re trying to develop skillful qualities in the mind because you’re going to be able to depend on them and not give in to unskillful qualities because they can pull you down. So you want to remember what lessons you’ve learned from the past. That’s what mindfulness is. It’s a function of your active memory, applied to the present moment, together with alertness and a quality that the Buddha calls ardency, which is basically the same thing as right effort. In other words, if the gatekeeper sees that something really big is coming in, big and dangerous, he calls on the soldiers of right effort to defend the fortress. So mindfulness and right effort work together. Of course, they need support. This is where you have the food, stores of food, stores of water in the fortress. This is concentration practice. Because the mind wants pleasure, it wants strength. And you want to provide it with a skillful pleasure, a pleasure that doesn’t encourage unskillful states. So getting the mind to settle down like this, like we’re doing right now, is food for the mind. Settle down with a sense of pleasure, a sense of refreshment. As the mind settles in and gets really solid, the pleasure goes away, the rapture and refreshment goes away, and there’s a sense of equanimity, very solid, secure, a mind that’s not easily shaken by anything. That’s your strength, that’s your strength. That’s your nourishment. Because it’s a sense of well-being that has very few drawbacks. It’s not like the pleasure that comes from good sounds, sights, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Because a lot of times when we go after those things, they aggravate unskillful qualities in the mind. And the mind gets very weak. It’s a hothouse mind. It has to have this pleasure or that convenience in order to live. It gets very fearful because it always knows that this pleasure or that convenience can be taken away very easily. When your mind is totally dependent on nothing but just being able to breathe comfortably and able to find pleasure there, able to find nourishment there, then you’re less likely to be shaken by changes in the world outside. You’re more resilient. It’s like that event back in the 18th century when the Burmese came in and attacked Thailand. They surrounded the capital city and laid siege. They thought that the capital city would have to give in because nobody could come in, nobody could go out. Well, it turned out that they had water in the city and they had food in the city. There were farms in the city. So they were able to last for a long time. So as you work on your concentration here, it’s not just to have a pleasant abiding right now. It’s to nourish the mind, nourish the skillful qualities in the mind, give strength to your effort, give strength to your mindfulness, so that this fortress of the mind is well protected. Then you can withstand greed, aversion, and delusion without being shaken by them. So we develop a fortress mentality by realizing it’s not the dangers of other people that we have to watch out for, aside, as I said, from the fact that sometimes they can convince you to do something unskillful. They’ll do something hurtful. In part of your mind you’ll say, “Well, I’ve got to do something hurtful back.” Let their karma be their karma. You don’t have to make it your karma. You have to watch out for the state of your mind. So as long as you realize where the true dangers are, develop this fortress mentality, be heedful, and then use your heedfulness to develop the karma. These are qualities that keep you safe. Because all these qualities acting together take you on beyond simply being able to withstand bad influences from outside or bad influences from within the mind. They can take you to an attainment that is totally secure. It’s not subject to the vagaries of space or time at all. That’s not in the image of the fortress. But it’s where all those elements of the fortress can lead. And you don’t want to do anything that would get in the way of their leading there.

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