

The Four Biases

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Ajaan Suwat often liked to call the monastery here a *quiet corner*, a place where people can get away from the madness of the world and have the space and the environment to get their bearings—because when you live in the world, you start spinning along behind the world. It's so easy, unless you have your own quiet corner inside.

That's the purpose of having a place like this, not for people just to hide away, but so that they can find their own quiet corner in their mind: the part that's not affected by the currents of the world, that's not affected by the spinning of the world. It's not attached to the world, and as a result it doesn't have any fear about what's going to happen in the world.

It's that quiet corner that allows us to have a basis for our integrity, a basis for our skill in how we approach life, so that we're not influenced by what the Buddha called the four wrong courses, or the four ways of going off course: going off course through *desire*, going off course through *aversion*, going off course through *delusion*, or going off course through *fear*.

In one of his discourses he says, "Arahants are incapable of going off course in these ways. These things have no power over their minds." When we look at the way the world has power over our minds, it's because of these four qualities within the mind. So these are things we have to work to get rid of.

In English, they're often translated as four forms of *bias*, four forms of *prejudice*. I think *bias* is probably the best translation. It gives a sense of getting off course, looking at things at a slant, doing things in a slant way. It's not straightforward.

The only way the mind can do things in a slant way like this is if it learns how to lie to itself, to hide things from itself. And its motivation for doing that is because it doesn't know any sense of security. So this is why we have to meditate—to find a sense of security within.

One of my teachers in Thailand was a woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang. She was the person I went to during my first rains retreat when I didn't have contact with Ajaan Fuang. She told me one time that there's a part of the mind that's always aware, totally unaffected by anything that happens, and it's our duty as meditators to find that.

As we peel away all the different layers of our involvement in our thoughts, our involvement in things outside, we finally come to this part of the mind and often we're afraid of it, because we feel that it makes us antisocial or unsocial or unfeeling. But that's not the case. It puts us in a place of security, a place of strength.

Once you've found that place of security and strength, then you can take on the fears that come from being attached to this or that, where you're unable to even think of something being taken away—so that you don't look really carefully at all the defilements hiding under that fear. Like all the weird creatures hiding under rocks: You're afraid to move the rock, and

so these things have a chance to fester and grow. Lift up the rock, expose them to the light of the sun, and then they can't stay there any longer. They've got to go.

We suffer because there is this element of dishonesty in our minds, and the reason the dishonesty stays there is because, as I said, this fear, this lack of security. Once you have a sense of security inside you, then the dishonesty has no basis. There's no reason for the mind to hide things from itself, because there's nothing that it's afraid to take on.

This is why concentration is a basis for discernment: You get a sense of stability, a rock-solid sense of imperviousness, where things just don't seep in. That's what enables you to live in the world without getting thrown off balance by the world. The people of the world may be slanted, they may be biased, but you don't have to be slanted and biased along with them. In that way, you're safe. You're safe from the things that you might do under the influence of desire, aversion, delusion, or fear.

As King Pasenadi Kosala once remarked to the Buddha, that's the greatest security there is—knowing that you can trust yourself. At the same time, you give security to others. They're not subject to your desire, aversion, delusion, or fear. So it's a gift not only to yourself, but to the people around you as well.

So this is why we work on the meditation, getting the mind to be solid here in the present moment. It's not just the case that virtue allows the mind to settle down. Once the mind is settled down and solid, it allows your virtue to become more and more solid and reliable, too.

And it's not just an abstract thought. There's a real visceral sense when your mindfulness fills the body, and you can allow the breath energy in the body to flow together and form a unified whole. There's a sense that it can't be penetrated.

All too often, we pick up these weird energy currents that other people radiate. Sometimes you just sit and talk to a person, and if you're not guarded about what you pick up, you can come out with all sorts of weird energy. It sounds kind of New-Agey, but there's a real visceral sense that you get when you're meditating and you work with the energy field in your body. You really do feel sometimes that if you're not careful, you can get invaded.

Whereas if your awareness fills the body, fills this energy field, you can't be invaded. The image they have in the Canon is of the difference between a lump of clay and a solid wood door. When people don't have mindfulness saturating the body, their mind is like a lump of clay: You throw a stone into a lump of clay and it goes right into the clay. Whereas if mindfulness does saturate the body, it's like throwing a ball of string against a hardwood door. It just doesn't penetrate, doesn't make any impression at all. It bounces right off.

So as we live in this world and all the strange currents that are going around in the world, we need to have a sense of protection. And that comes from this inner stability. The world may spin around, but you've got a spot in the mind that doesn't spin. That's where you take your stand.

Now, this means you have to give up a lot of the things that the world holds dear, but you begin to realize that if *you* hold them dear, you just get spun around as well. And the spinning of the world isn't all that innocent. It's more like the spinning of gears on a machine: If you get a sleeve or part of your clothing caught in the gears, they just pull it in, pull it in, pull it in. If you don't strip off the shirt or whatever, you get mashed by the gears as well.

And again, as we live in the world we're often afraid of having this kind of equanimity, because we feel that we're not being loyal to the people around us. But putting yourself in a position of weakness like that is not loyalty to anybody. It doesn't help anybody. You're actually a lot more help to other people when you can have this sense of being a little separate—independent, unaffected by things.

We look at the Buddha, all the good he did for the world. Two thousand six hundred years later we're still benefiting from the goodness he left behind. And as he said, he had trained his mind so that when people followed his teachings, he didn't get excited about it; when they didn't follow his teachings, he didn't get upset. He offered his teaching because it was true, and the people who were willing to benefit from the truth would pick it up. That kind of attitude is the attitude of the person who offers the greatest good for the world, at the same time protecting himself.

So this exercise we're doing here, focusing on the breath, getting the breath to be comfortable, letting that comfortable breath sensation spread throughout the body, bringing all the different strands of the breath energy in the body into alignment: It's a gift not only to ourselves, but also to the people around us.

It's our protection. They talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and this is what they mean: You take the qualities of the Buddha—his mindfulness, discernment, concentration, integrity—and you train the mind so that it can be protected by those qualities inside. That's the true meaning of refuge. When you have that quiet corner in the mind that you take as your refuge, then you can go anywhere and be safe.

As they say, make an island for yourself. The image there is that the world is like a river with all these currents flowing along. River imagery is very strong in the Pali Canon. They tend to compare craving to a river as well. In fact, they say there's no river quite like craving. It pulls you along like nothing else. As we meditate here, we're creating an island in that river. So even though we have to live surrounded by that river, at least we're not *in* the river. Our island is solid enough and high enough above the level of the water that we don't have to fear being flooded away.

The world is a risky place, but only as long as you've got risky qualities in your mind. When you can learn how to uproot them, get the mind above things like craving, attachment, and ignorance, you find that there's a true security. And it's the security that comes from your own integrity.

Unlike the security that's being sold by a lot of people right now, that we've got to go out and kill and attack and all those other things to make ourselves secure. That never works. As King Pasenadi Kosala said to the Buddha, the people who go out and do wrong that way aren't really protecting themselves. They leave themselves *wide* open. No matter how big an army they might have, he said, they really aren't protected as long as they're still engaging in misconduct in body, speech, and mind.

But when you have this solid basis inside, you see that there's no reason to engage in misconduct. And whether you have an army or not, you're protected. You have nothing to fear from the most fearful thing in life, which is your own mind, the craving in the mind—if you've got that inner island that's above the flood.