

## *A Mental Fortress*

*October 3, 2018*

It would be nice if you could take whatever sense of peace you felt here at the monastery, put it in a box, take it home with you, and open it up to enjoy anytime you needed it. But it doesn't work that way. What you can take back with you are the skills—the skills that you learn in meditation and whatever lessons you've learned about how to apply them in life—but you've got to protect them.

In the monastery, the environment is conducive. It's part of the protection. But when you go to the outside world, though, it's another issue entirely. Very few people out there will encourage you to meditate, to practice. A lot of people won't understand. You have to deal with their defilements on top of your own. So it's good to think of the qualities that do protect you. The Buddha compares the different aspects of the practice to a fortress. He says you're building a fortress at the edge of a frontier, right on the border, and you're going to have to deal with the enemies who are going to try to come in.

So what does your fortress have? First it has a moat and a road around it. The moat and the road are your sense of shame and your sense of compunction. Shame, not in the unhealthy sense of feeling bad about yourself, but shame in the healthier sense of realizing that certain things are beneath you and you don't want to stoop to do them, no matter what. Compunction is the sense that you really do care about your actions and their results. You're not apathetic. You don't say, "I don't care what happens. I just want to do what I want to do right now." You think about the long term. These two qualities protect you.

And then the fortress has a wall. It's interesting, in that the Buddha says the wall here stands for your discernment, and it's plastered so that nobody from the outside can get a handhold to climb over the wall. In other words, you learn to look at the world around you from the point of view of what's skillful and what's not, so that no bad influences can get a handhold on it. Be discerning: Which influences do you want to take in? Which ones do you want to put aside? That goes not only for what other people say and do, but also to the way you look at the world. Exercise some restraint. If you see that looking at something or listening at something gives rise to greed, aversion, or delusion, learn to look in a different way. Listen in a different way. Bring some discernment to what you choose to focus on and how you approach things.

After all, it's not the case that the mind is perfectly still and perfectly calm, and then all of the sudden things outside come in and stir it up. All too often, we're

out there looking for trouble. So you have to look and see: When you're looking, who's looking? Is your greed looking? Is your anger looking? Who's listening? Is your anger listening? If you see that these things are doing the looking and listening, ask yourself: What would be a wiser way to look, a wiser way to listen? This way you protect yourself, because otherwise you let the mind roam all over the place in the course of the day, and then when you come back to sit down and meditate then you've got to pull it all back in, clean out all the garbage you've been collecting as you've been roaming around. So learn how to look and listen in a way that doesn't collect garbage. That's bringing discernment to your daily life.

Now, the fortress also has a gate, and the gate requires a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper here is mindfulness together with alertness. Your duty as a good gatekeeper is to recognize who to trust, who not to trust, and to let people in you trust and to keep people out you don't. Here again, this refers to ideas and sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. And also, once these things get into your mind, if you notice that something unskillful has gotten into the mind, you have to remember to get it out. So this is not just mindfulness on its own. It's also alertness.

Then who else do you have inside the fortress? Well, you've got your right effort. Those are the soldiers: the realization that looking after your mind is your primary responsibility, so if you see anything unskillful coming up in the mind, first you try to prevent it, and if it moves in, you try to get rid of it. You let it go. As for skillful qualities, you try to give rise to them, and once they're there, you try to maintain them.

And how do you do all this? The soldiers have their weapons, which consist of your knowledge of what the Buddha taught. As we've discussed over the retreat, this has a lot to do with his instructions in how to fabricate your experience: how to breathe, what ways to think about things coming up either in the mind or in the world outside. How would the Buddha have you think about something? Try to keep that in mind. And then your perceptions: What perceptions are helpful in keeping the mind calm, and which perceptions stir it up?

Remember in the Buddha's lessons about dealing with pain, there are ways of looking at the pain that get you get you all worked up. Other ways of looking at the pain can help you see the pain as something separate from your awareness. It doesn't have to invade your awareness, and you don't have to think of it coming at you. As it arises, you can think of it as going away, going away. You don't have to gather it up. You don't have to think about how long it's been there, or how much longer it's going to be there. Just look at the sensations arising and passing away in

the present moment and focus on their passing away, and you'll find that you can stay with pain that otherwise you wouldn't have been able to stand.

So these are your weapons: remembering the various ways of breathing, so that if anger comes up in the course of the day, you can breathe in a new way, because otherwise you either feel that you've got to bottle the anger up, which means it's going to explode sometime later, or you just let it out, which means that you've probably harmed yourself or harmed somebody else. This alternative way of breathing gives you another alternative. You can breathe through the tension that you feel in the body, and then you can deal with the anger without thinking that it's something you have to get out of your system. You can deal with it more calmly. Then you can bring your ways of thinking around the anger and ask yourself: Are these helpful ways of thinking or harmful? What kind of perceptions are you holding? What better thoughts and perceptions can I bring to bear?

So looking at what's going on in terms of these three kinds of fabrication gives you your weapons, so that you can protect the mind and protect whatever goodness you've got in there.

And of course, the soldiers and the gatekeeper need food, and that's what concentration is for. The Buddha talks about the various levels of jhana, and with each level, the food gets better and better. You have to remember that in order to keep with the practice, you need a sense of well-being. Whatever the level of concentration is, try to get a sense of nourishment as you get the mind to settle down, and you can put aside all your thoughts about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. You can just be there with the sensation of having a body or being in a body.

Try not to put a squeeze on it, try not to put too much pressure on it. Just sit with it lightly and allow the energies in the body to flow naturally, to flow smoothly throughout the body. That has a soothing effect on the mind, a nourishing effect on the mind, to give you the strength you need in order to keep watch over the mind, to make sure it doesn't slip off to its old habits. Or at the very least, it brings awareness to its processes of fabrication, so that you can catch yourself when you want to leave the fortress to go out looking for trouble. You have to stay protected.

Now, what the Buddha doesn't mention in his image is another form of protection, and that's goodwill. One of the worst ways you can harm yourself is if you do something hoping for somebody to suffer, and then you have to live with the results of that action. If you really mean ill, it's a hard, hard action to look back on. It really weighs heavily on the mind.

But if you mean well and then try to go beyond simply meaning well to wanting to do something skillfully—in other words, looking not only at the goodness of your intentions, but also at the results that you’re going to get—you realize that this is a learning process. You will make mistakes, but learn how to learn from them, and the best way to be willing and able to learn is to make sure that you start out with the intention not to harm. Then you can check to see: If you’re harming anybody, harming yourself, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you continue. Then, after the action is done, you look at the long-term results. If it turns out you did do harm, you go talk it over with somebody who has experience on the path. Don’t be ashamed. Don’t be embarrassed. We’re here to learn. Talk it over with somebody you trust, and then learn that lesson for the next time around.

It’s this way that your good intentions become skillful, and even when you do make a mistake, the fact that you were operating on good intentions to begin with makes it a lot easier to live with the fact that you made a mistake. It’s in this way that your practice stays protected—you’re protected and you’re protecting others through your actions.

So remember, this is how you protect what you’ve learned. Develop a sense of shame and compunction as a protection. Try to exercise your discernment in how you look at things and listen to things. Maintain your mindfulness to make sure that unskillful qualities don’t sneak into your mind, and if they do, they’re going to have to meet with the soldiers of your right effort to get them out. You arm your soldiers with knowledge about how you’re fabricating your experience and how you can do it more skillfully. And you feed all of this with concentration. This way, the concentration stays protected and at the same time it nourishes the rest of your practice.

So even though the fortress is in a dangerous place—this world we live in is a very dangerous place, not so much because of physical things that people can do to you, but because of the things other people can get you to do if you’re not careful—if your fortress is strong, then you can stay safe in the midst of danger. That’s how you protect the lessons you’ve learned.