

The Fortress

October 6, 2019

When you meditate, you get your body in position: your right hand on your left, your back straight, facing forward, closing your eyes.

Then you get the mind in position, focused on the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. Remember the “breath” here is not so much the air coming in and out through the nose, but it’s the breath energy in the body that exists on many different levels. The most blatant level, as you’re sitting here, is the in-and-out breath. Ask yourself: Where do you feel it most prominently? Focus your attention there. That’s getting the mind in position.

Now, once the body and mind are in position, you want to keep them in position. This is where it gets difficult. When the body’s sitting here without moving, sometimes there’s going to be a pain here or a numbness there. But you have to not let that be an obstacle. Focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable, realizing that all too often the numbness and the pain come from the fact that the breath energy in the body’s not flowing well.

So as soon as the breath gets comfortable, start thinking of that comfort spreading down the spine, out the legs, going down the shoulders, out the arms, out through the fingers; coming in the middle of the chest, going down through the stomach, down through the intestines. In other words, make the most of the breath, its potential to give rise to a sense of well-being in the present moment. If you can take an interest in the breath, then you find that it’s easier and easier to keep both the body and the mind in position.

Now, keeping the mind in position requires three qualities. The first is mindfulness, the ability to remember to keep something in mind. Mindfulness not simply watching things coming and going. You remember to give rise to skilful qualities, and once they’re there you remember to keep them going. So instead of watching things arising and passing away, you make good things arise and you prevent them from passing away.

Alertness is what watches what you’re actually doing: watching how the breath is going right now, watching how your mind is going right now, and making sure they stay together.

If you notice that they’re not staying together, this is where you bring in the third quality, which is *atappa*, or ardency. You really want to do this well, which means that if the mind has wandered away, you try to bring it right back right away. You don’t say, “Well let’s just let it wander for a little bit and come back, we’ve got a whole hour, one minute of wandering won’t hurt it.” You can’t think in that way. We don’t even know if we’ll have the whole hour.

Who knows what's going to happen in the next moment? So if the mind has wandered off, you bring it right back.

If it stays with the breath, that's when ardency focuses on trying to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels, and as sensitive to which different ways you can adjust the breath to make it more and more comfortable, and what you can do with that sense of comfort. It's in this area where the qualities of mindfulness, ardency, and alertness, which are associated with mindfulness practice, turn into the factors of jhana, or right concentration. You're evaluating the breath and then, once the breath is comfortable, you evaluate how to make use out of that comfort.

In other words, you're developing both concentration and discernment at the same time. You're developing the mind—all kinds of good qualities in the mind. And these are things you want to protect. Ajaan Mun used to say that the good qualities in the mind can't be distinguished from the mind. If they could be distinguished, somebody would separate them out and steal them, or somebody might try to sell them. But because they're buried there in the mind, nobody else can destroy them. Nobody else can take them away.

The problem is that we can destroy them ourselves, because the mind is so changeable and so quick to change. Just because there's some mindfulness and alertness and ardency getting started here doesn't mean that your greed and aversion and delusion can't come in and destroy them. This is why you have to develop qualities to protect them.

The Buddha makes a comparison. He says as you're practicing, it's like building a fortress on the frontier. You've got enemies all around, so you have to build the fortress so that it's strong, and then populate the fortress with people who know how to protect it.

So what have you got to make the fortress strong?

You've got shame and compunction, are the moat and the road around the fortress to defend it. The sense of shame here we're talking about is the healthy sense of shame, the shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. In other words, you view some behavior as beneath you and you tell yourself, "I'd be ashamed to do that." That kind of shame is good for you.

Compunction means seeing that it is possible through your actions to create harm, so you decide that you don't want to create the harm. You care about the results of your actions. These two qualities are the road and the moat around the fortress.

The wall of the fortress is discernment, and as the Buddha said, it's well-plastered so that the enemy can't get any footholds or handholds to climb up the wall. What holds the fortress up is the main post, which is conviction: conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that through his efforts and through his developing qualities in his mind, he was able to find true happiness.

And the reason this holds everything up is because the message of his awakening is that if he can do it, you can do it, too. The effort that's put into developing good qualities of the mind is effort well spent. And it is possible to put an end to suffering. So as long as skilful qualities in the mind are not yet fully developed, as the Buddha said, you can't rest content. You have to keep working, working, working at it. But working at it will be rewarded. That's the message of his awakening.

Now, protecting the fortress at the gate is the gatekeeper, which is mindfulness, the ability to keep things in mind and to be alert to what's going on so that when enemies come in, you recognise who the enemies are and you keep them out. When people who are friendly to the fortress come, you let them in. In other words, you make sure that greed and aversion and delusion don't come sneaking in and taking control of the mind. But you're happy to let good qualities come in.

If something unskillful does make it past the gatekeeper, then you've got right effort. Those are the soldiers inside the fortress. In other words, you have the desire that when something unskillful arises, you try to abandon it. If skillful things haven't arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. As for unskillful things that haven't even come into the mind yet, you do your best to prevent them. And when skillful qualities do come, you do your best to maintain them and develop them. You don't just sit there and watch the enemy come in and take over. You fight him off.

Now, to make sure that the soldiers and the gatekeeper are well-fed, you have stores of food in the fortress. This refers to the different levels of jhana, or right concentration. In the first level of concentration, the first jhana, there's directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath, and then you evaluate how the breath goes, as I explained just now. You evaluate it not just to decide whether it's already good or bad. You evaluate it to *make* it good. That way, it gives rise to a sense of pleasure and rapture. That's the food.

Because as we're practicing, there are lots of things we have to give up. Like right now, you're taking the eight precepts. Ways in which the mind used to go looking for food outside are suddenly cut off. But you've got better food inside, to compensate. If you don't feed the mind with a sense of pleasure, it's not going to stay on the path. It's going to start foraging for food in other places. So when you keep the mind with one object with a sense of well-being, that's how you keep mindfulness well-fed, the soldiers of right effort well-fed, and they can protect your concentration better, so that the food gives them energy and then they protect the food.

When you've got this internal fortress like this, then when greed, aversion, or delusion come up, you're in a position where you can fight them off.

So build your fortress well. Make sure it has all the parts of a fortress, and they're all in good shape so that when you do develop good qualities of the mind, they don't get destroyed. Because it's really sad: You see people spending a lot of time practicing and then all of the sudden they change their minds and they throw it away. Then they come to it again, and throw it away again, back and forth. It never gets a chance to develop.

So remember, the big dangers are not outside. They're inside. But we can also develop inside the qualities that keep us protected inside. That's one of the pieces of good news in the Buddha's teachings.