

Freedom from Fear

August 31, 2023

Part of the formula for right mindfulness, and the means for getting the mind into right concentration, is “putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” In times when that’s hard, when you have anxieties about what’s going on in the world, fear about what’s going to happen, you have to learn how to get that fear under control.

The quality of fear in and of itself is not necessarily bad, because there are things that are skillful to fear, such as fear that you’re going to do unskillful things. But as for unskillful fear, it’s usually related to an attachment of some kind. It’s greed about something, anger about something, or delusion about things. You have to look at what you’re attached to. In almost every case, it’s something that’s totally or partially beyond your control. That’s what’s maddening. If it were totally beyond your control, you wouldn’t even bother with it. But there’re some things that are partially under your control and partially not, and you’re worried about not doing enough to exert control over them. But the Buddha says that you should focus instead on things that can be put under your control. Realize that those are actually your most valuable possessions.

He points out two things: your virtue and your right views. If you look at your behavior and keep to the precepts, that’s the quality that develops all kinds of good qualities in the mind. Ajaan Mun was once asked if you could divide a person’s mind from his or her precepts. He said, “No, it’s a quality of the mind in and of itself.” Then he went on to make a joke: If you could divide a person’s mind from his precepts, you’d be having people who would steal somebody else’s precepts. But because they’re yours and they go with you wherever you go, they’re part of your habit.

That’s what *sila* means. It’s a habit of the mind. When you have skillful habits, wherever you go, you’re safe. You have something inside that you can depend on, and nobody can take your precepts away. You’re the only one who can discard them, abandon them. So they’re the kinds of things that, if you hold on to them, it’s a good holding on. After all, virtue is part of the path.

As for right view, you realize that what causes the mind to suffer is its own actions. So again, if you hold on to right view, it’s not something that anyone else can take away from you. You’re not hoping to depend on somebody else to make you happy or for things to be a certain way. You try to develop the skill so that no matter what comes up, you don’t have to suffer from it. That’s a valuable treasure.

As the Buddha points out, as long as you have virtue and right view, they can protect you from going to a bad destination. That's looking to the future.

But looking to here in this present life: On the one hand, he says that they're the foundations for mindfulness. If you can look at your behavior and see nothing with which you can criticize yourself, it's easy to develop powers of mindfulness, for your memory to go far back. If there are things you've done that you're upset about, realizing that you've harmed somebody else or harmed yourself, it's very easy to put up walls, very easy to go into denial. And denial doesn't make it easy for insight to arise. Walls block your ability to see into the past and remember useful lessons you've learned.

Of course with right view, the focus is on what skillful qualities you're developing right now. It's in this way that virtue and right view can develop your concentration, because you can remember the skills in the past that have worked to get the mind to settle down. And in the course of holding by the precepts, you've had to be alert, you've had to be mindful, you've had to put forth an effort to be skillful: mindful to keep the precept in mind, alert to what you're doing to make sure that it's in line with the precept, and then ardent in holding to the precept even when it's difficult. That's when you have to exercise your discernment.

Years back, I read a statement by a Mahayana teacher saying that the wisdom that comes from the precepts is learning when to follow them and when not to follow them. But there's nothing special about that discernment. It's the way of the world in general. People are constantly making exceptions to the precepts.

The Buddha himself never made those exceptions. The discernment that comes from following the precepts is the sort that says, "I'm going to stick by the precept but learn to do in such a way as to minimize harm in other areas, minimize loss in other areas," like figuring out how not to tell a lie when it's very easy to tell lies, when people seem to want you to tell lies. There are times when you realize that if you give certain information to other people, they might abuse it, so you have to learn how not to tell a lie but at the same time keep the information to yourself. That requires that you exercise your discernment.

That's what the precepts are all about. They're not just a matter of following rules and being good about it. They develop qualities you're going to need for mindfulness and concentration and to develop your discernment. This is why they're so valuable.

There's another place where the Buddha says that holding the precepts and having right view in line with the standards of the noble ones is conducive to harmony in the community in which you live, because you're not harming

anybody else. At the same time, it's a lot easier to forgive other people in the community for their lapses. After all, you realize your happiness doesn't have to depend on their providing what you want out of them.

This is one of the big problems in society in the world. Everybody has a plan for everybody else. People tend to be pretty lax in their own behavior, but they have very strong demands for what other people should do. This is why we can't get along. On the other hand, if you have strong ideas about what *you* should be doing, realizing that this is where your happiness lies, then it's a lot easier to have equanimity with regard to other people—patience, endurance. As the Buddha said, if you develop these qualities, it's beneficial for other people and it's good for you, too. That's because you're going to need endurance, you're going to need patience, you're going to need equanimity in the training of your own mind.

At the same time, if you can create a harmonious community in which to live, or at least make sure that your contribution to the community is harmonious in this way, then it's a lot easier to settle down.

So when you look at your fears about the world, remind yourself that the things that are really valuable to hold on to are not the sort of things that anyone can take away from you. It's inevitable that we're going to lose our wealth, lose our health, be separated from those we love. This comes with the territory. But we don't have to lose our virtue. We don't have to lose our right view. Those are things that we can hold on to and hold on to safely. And they don't cause fear, one, in the sense that no one can take them away; and two, in the sense that these are the qualities that protect you from doing unskillful things, which is the one fear that the Buddha praised as being a good quality in the path. So that takes care of that fear, too.

So you can be fearless in your meditation, fearless in your practice, because you know you've got what it takes to find true safety, to find true refuge inside.