Guarding Against Infection

October, 2002

When you practice concentration, you have to set boundaries for yourself. In other words, take the area right around your body and say, “You’re not going to think of anything outside of this little area right here for the next hour.” You focus on what’s right here, right now, what you immediately sense, without turning it into anything else, anything that points outside of the past or the future, or any place outside of this immediate area you’ve set for yourself. Because you’re setting aside a place to heal the mind. After all, there are these diseases in the mind. We may not have the kind of mental illnesses that would put us into an institution, but there is greed, there is anger, there is delusion in the mind. These things are illnesses as well. The fact that we have them in common with normal people all over the world doesn’t make them any less damaging. It doesn’t mean that they cause less suffering. It’s just the common suffering that we all have. These are the diseases we’re going to treat. So as with any disease, on the one hand, you have to keep the sick person away from infection, and at the same time build up the sick person’s resistance inside. So that’s what we’re doing right here, right now. This sense of boundary is to help keep you from focusing on things that would cause your greed to flare up, or your anger to flare up, or for your delusion just to totally take over. So we create these boundaries as a kind of protection, as a barrier. Then to build up a resistance inside, focus on the breath. This is one part of your immediate awareness of the body that you can have some control over. You can choose to breathe short, you can choose to breathe long, deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, or slow. Any kind of rhythm might be in long and out short, or in short and out long. You can vary the texture of the breath. There’s a lot to do here. Think of it as a healing process. What kind of breathing feels most healing for the mind right now? It feels best for the body. Sometimes when you’re tired, you need something that’s energizing. When you’re tense, you need a breath that’s more relaxing. So think of balance. In Asia, when they talk about developing health in the body, they talk about a balancing out of the different properties of the body. The different nations analyze it in different ways, but the concept of balance is what they have in common. That’s what you’re looking for here, right now. Bringing some balance to the body, some balance to the mind. It’s hard to do that unless you focus your attention exclusively on what’s right here, right now. It’s another reason why we want to create that boundary. So if you find your thoughts heading outside of the boundary, bring them back. One of the reasons we have a Dharma talk at the beginning of this sit is to help create that boundary. In other words, if your thoughts leave the breath, they run into the Dharma talk, which points them right back inside. Then take the time to get familiar with what does balance mean? Because many times we live in such unbalanced conditions. Or that we live in skewed conditions that, in order to balance those conditions out, we have to go into a state of imbalance. So we try to bring ourselves to a place where things are more balanced, where their environment impinges a lot less on your mind. So you have time to just see the mind in and of itself. See the body in and of itself. Once you see them in these terms, then it’s a lot easier to get a sense of what really is balanced right now. So you can tell what kind of breathing is too long, what kind of breathing is too short, and what kind of breathing is just right. Once the breath gets comfortable, then you can start spreading that sense of comfort throughout the whole body. Because the in-and-out breath is related to the other forms of breath energy in the body, any kind of energy flow in the body. It’s going to be heavily influenced by the way you breathe. Once the breath feels good, then the energy flow in the body begins to loosen up as well. It begins to flow more naturally, more easily. If you work through the body, section by section like this, you’ll find that you can fill your whole range of your awareness with a sense of comfortable energy. At the same time, you broaden the range of your awareness, so it fills the whole body. You’ve got the breath filling the body. You’ve got awareness filling the body. This is what we refer to as “filling the body.” We referred to it earlier as “building up resistance.” As you live out in the world, many times you leave yourself so wide open to outside influences, most of which are not very healthy. A lot of that has to do with the way your awareness relates to the body. If your awareness fills the body, if the breath fills the body, it creates a sense of resistance inside. You’re sensitive to impact from outside, but you don’t take it in. You find you can go out into the world and not be impacted, or not feel the impact of things outside. They don’t penetrate. This way you learn how to resist unhealthy influences, either mental influences or physical influences from outside, by maintaining this sense of energy that comes from within and spreads out to fill the whole body. This is mindfulness immersed in the body. It’s like you inhabit the whole body. When you’re inhabiting your whole body, then other things from outside can’t come in and inhabit it, can’t lay claim to different parts of it. What this means, of course, is that you don’t have to sit and hide away in a quiet corner like this all the time in order to develop the mind. Once there is that sense of inner strength, inner health, inner balance, and you learn how to spread it out throughout the whole body, then you can go anywhere you want, and you don’t pick up things from outside. There’s an analogy in the suttas. The person whose mindfulness doesn’t fill the whole body like this is like a lump of clay. Someone throws a stone into the lump of clay, and the stone makes a big impression in the clay. Whereas if you do have mindfulness spreading throughout the body, it’s like a hardwood door. Someone throws a ball of string at the door, and the string doesn’t penetrate. It bounces right off. Then again, it’s not that you’re not aware of outside things. It’s simply that you don’t bring them in. Our minds, so often, are like vacuum cleaners. They just suck in all kinds of stuff from outside and, like a vacuum cleaner, most of it is not the good stuff. Then we complain that we can’t live with ourselves. It’s hard to sit still with ourselves. It’s because we’ve brought in all this outside garbage to infect the mind. So we’re learning a new habit, a new sort of energy balance in the mind. Instead of taking things in, develop a strong center of good energy inside and let that radiate out. When it becomes solid enough, you’re not the only person who benefits. The people around you benefit as well. So work on getting in touch with what is a sense of balance inside, what kind of energy feels good, feels right for the body right now, feels right for the mind right now. Then tend to it. Look after it. Take care of it. Treat it as a valuable position. It’s not something you just throw away every time you get up from meditation. When you get up, try to maintain that same sense of inner centeredness. Maintain the good quality of that center. Carry it around inside you wherever you go. And don’t be afraid of being attached to it. It’s something you want to rely on, something you want to learn how to depend on. Giving yourself a position of strength. The Buddhist path is not one of letting go immediately. It teaches you how to develop good qualities so that you can let go of other ones. Metaphorically, the hand of the mind is always ready to grasp onto things. Not until the moment of awakening can it totally let go. So in the meantime, give it good things to grasp. They can put you in better and better positions, better and better situations. So you really do get, that’s the chant we had just now, right in the presence of nirvana, this broadened awareness in the body. It may not be the transcendent, but it’s the one that takes you in the right direction. It takes you there. So it’s worth cultivating, worth paying careful attention to. Give it some space. As long as it needs boundaries, create those boundaries. Then you find that it grows more and more solid. It’s like setting concrete. If the concrete hasn’t set yet, you can’t take away the form. Because it all will turn into mush. But once it’s set, then the forms can be taken down and the concrete stays in place. That’s the kind of strength and solidity you want to develop in the mind. So we create this space as we sit here and meditate. To give this space a little bit of this inner sense of energy we have, the opportunity to reach balance, to reach strength, so that you’re less a victim of outside things and the mind becomes more proactive. It radiates its energy throughout the body. It radiates energy all around, healing energy. It helps to undercut the power of greed, anger, and delusion. It helps build up resistance against the things outside that would spark greed, anger, and delusion, so that you’re protected from infection both inside and out. Until you develop that kind of strength, you don’t know what an infected mind is, because that’s the only kind of mind you’ve been living with. But when you get a sense of what it’s like to have this inner sense of calm and well-being and centeredness and balance, and learn how to appreciate it, then you find all the good that it can do. As the mind begins to find that it’s suffering less and less, it’s less and less burdened. There’s a more stable, solid sense of well-being that comes from within.

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