Feel Good Religion

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When you establish mindfulness in the right frame of reference, you’re protecting yourself and you’re protecting others. The Buddha said this one time. The image he gave is of a pair of acrobats standing on top of a bamboo pole. One acrobat on top of the shoulders of the other. The master, who was the one on the bottom, said to a student, “You look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and that way we’ll protect ourselves and come down safely from the pole.” The student said, “No, that’s not going to work out. I have to look out after myself. You look out after yourself, and that way we protect each other.” So we’re going to do our tricks, come down from the pole, and get our reward. The Buddha added that it was the student at that time who said there was no reward. That’s the right thing. Think about acrobats. They have to maintain their balance. You can’t maintain somebody else’s balance. You have to maintain your own. And in maintaining your own balance, you help not to throw other people out of balance either. So how is it that establishing mindfulness in the right frame of reference is going to protect yourself and other people? Getting mindfulness established is, many times we hear, being established in the body or feelings or mind or mental qualities. But it’s a lot more complex than that. That’s the whole formula. Keep track of the body, for example, in and of itself. Alert, mindful, and ardent. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That whole phrase is the essence of mindfulness. That’s your frame of reference. The body in and of itself, simply the sensation of having a body right here, right now. The primary example is the breath. Stay with the breath coming in. Stay with the breath going out. Try to keep in touch with how the breathing feels, the immediate sensation. And try to stay right there. It’s very easy for that sensation to switch into something else. You’ll notice this when the mind gets very still and you begin to see how a thought appears. There’s a stirring. In the beginning of the stirring, it’s hard to say whether it’s a physical stirring or a mental stirring. But then you slap a label on it and say, “This is a thought. It’s a thought about that. It’s a thought about this.” And you go running with a thought. But there’s also a physical side to the thought as well. But you tend to lose sight of it. It’s like on a computer keyboard. You press the control button and all the buttons suddenly turn into something else. S turns into “save.” C turns into “copy.” X turns into “cut.” Simply because you’re pressing that control button. Same with these stirrings in the body-mind. Label it as a thought and all of a sudden that’s what it is. It’s a word. It’s a world of thinking. And you’re off someplace else. And you can carry all kinds of burdens around. This is greed and distress with reference to the world. You’ve got these worlds in your body. If you have a picture of all the worlds hanging from your body, you have thoughts of the past hanging from the back of your neck. You have thoughts of the future hanging from your chest. Memories of this, that, and the other thing are little bubbles all over the body. No wonder you’re burdened down. So you want to see the body in and of itself. Just its bodiness right here. Don’t go slipping off to other frames of reference. Ardent, alert, and mindful. Ardent means you really stick with it. Anything unskillful comes up and you drop it. As for skillful qualities, you try to maintain them. The skillful ones here are alertness and mindfulness. Alertness means you know what you’re doing, the results of what you’re doing. In mindfulness, you keep all of this in mind. You keep body in and of itself. You keep breath, breath, breath in mind. And as you really get to know the breath, start exploring the breath. This is what alertness can do for you. Figure out what kind of breathing is easy to stay with. You’re free to manipulate it, you know. You don’t have to pretend that you’re just going to stick with the breath however it comes in and goes out. The mind is constantly fashioning these things. So you might as well fashion them in a good way. Fashion them in a way that leads to good, strong concentration. This is how you’re kind to yourself. This is how mindfulness leads to protecting yourself, protecting others, showing goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. You give yourself a good place to stay in the present moment. This leads to feelings of rapture and pleasure as the mind settles in. And you take that rapture and pleasure and you spread it throughout the body. The images of working water through a ball of bath powder are nowadays, we might say, working water through the flour to make bread. Make sure that all the ball of flour is moist. The sense of ease permeates throughout all the body, even the parts that are painful. You can think of the ease permeating through the atoms of pain, around the atoms of pain, dissolving away all the connective tissue between those little atoms of pain. And you’ve got a good place to stay. And as you’re trying to make your frame of reference, your awareness spreads throughout the whole body as well. That gets you even more firmly anchored in the present moment, even more firmly anchored in body, in and of itself. Because, after all, the frames of reference are the themes of concentration. It’s not like you have mindfulness meditation and then concentration meditation. The two have to come together. In this way, you create a good place for the mind to stay in the present moment. And you’re not weighing yourself down with all the greed and distress with reference to the world, because you’re not creating those little worlds, not allowing them to blot out the body. And when you have a sense of well-being in the present moment, it’s a lot easier to be kind to other people. You’re not feeling oppressed. You’re not feeling exasperated or irritated. In this way, learning to look after yourself protects other people as well. That’s what the Buddha means when he talks about mental seclusion. Physical seclusion is when you come out to a place like this. It’s when you’re cut off from your usual social ties. Society around here impinges a lot less on the mind. But the problem is, you still don’t yet have mental seclusion. You’re bringing in all the issues of the past week, the next week, whatever, weighing yourself down with all kinds of companions. And they’re not necessarily good companions. The mind that carries the past around carries the future around. It’s not a mind that’s secluded. It’s got a crowd. It’s this one body, but it’s got a whole crowd of people and issues. No wonder it feels burdened. You’ve got to learn how to stay with the sensation of the body in and of itself. That way, you can develop mental seclusion as well. And this way, you can be secluded wherever you go. Because there it is, the sensation of the body. Nobody else can sense it. It’s yours. And as long as you’re in touch here, you’re always in touch with something that doesn’t get impacted by anybody else. They can say what they want. They can do what they want. But you’ve still got your sense of the body in and of itself right here that nobody else can sense. And as long as you’re taking care of this, you’ve got a good foundation. When you’re acting from a good foundation, the actions are going to be good. The things you say are going to be good. Because you’re not feeling oppressed. You’re not feeling squeezed out. You’re not feeling burdened by things. So this is how it is that being in touch with simply the body in and of itself, being in touch with the breath. It’s a way of showing goodwill to yourself and showing goodwill to the people around you. It’s your first foundation. So try to be mindful of this foundation. Be alert to what’s going on that makes you leave the foundation. Be alert to the ways you can bring yourself back so that you can stay more and more consistently for longer and longer periods of time. It’s in this way that Buddhism, the Dhamma, is a feel-good religion. It’s not just sort of some Palian-ish placing your hopes on clouds. It’s feeling good right in the very foundation of your experience of the mind, your experience of the body. Because nobody’s forcing you to breathe in a way that’s uncomfortable. Nobody’s forcing you to direct the energy of your body in a way that’s uncomfortable. And yet we do this over and over again. When we oppress ourselves, it’s very easy to go out and oppress other people. When you learn how to take good care of your sense of the body here in the present moment, then you’re a lot less likely to oppress anyone else. It’s a way of showing kindness to yourself, the people around you. You protect yourself. You protect the people around you. You stay focused on the body in and of itself, hardened, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That’s an act of kindness. So try to be consistently kind.

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