NR Mindfulness as Protection

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The Pali term for being mindful of the body is kayapadasati, and it doesn’t mean just mindful of the body. It means mindfulness immersed in the body. In other words, you want your awareness to fully inhabit the body. Try to notice how you focus on the breath, which part of your body is your awareness in. For most of us, it’s in the head. And if we’re going to be aware of another part of the body, it’s the head being aware of that part of the body. You impose your head awareness on top of, say, your leg awareness or your knee awareness. But that’s not being immersed in the body. To be immersed in the body means that you let the awareness that’s already there, in the leg, in the knee, in your back, come to the surface. In other words, allow that awareness that’s already there to develop, to come more into your consciousness. When you do that, you’re less likely to impose weird ideas about the breath on the breathing process. You’re more likely to sense how the breathing actually feels. You’re also more grounded, grounded in a way that makes it easier to stay with the body, even as you get up and move around and do other things. In other words, the body isn’t just one more thing you have to think about, one more ball you have to juggle in the air. It’s where you actually take your stance. You want to fully inhabit the body. And then as you go through the day, go through the day fully inhabiting your body. Have some poise, have some awareness. When you’re thinking, think from that awareness. When you’re speaking, speak from that awareness immersed in the body. That way it’s a lot easier to maintain mindfulness immersed in the body throughout the day. You’re also putting yourself in a better position to sense what’s going on around you. This may seem strange and contradictory, but it’s not, as most of us are in our heads. We have little worlds in our heads, and they tend to blot out the actual world that’s going on around us. The more you can inhabit the body, the more you’re aware of the body’s surroundings, the situation in which you find yourself. And that puts you in a more solid position to deal with whatever comes along. The issue of fear came up this afternoon. It’s relevant to this issue of inhabiting the body, because when you’re inhabiting the body, you’re more present to the situation, and as you’re more present to the situation, you’re more likely to see what’s going on and to figure out the appropriate response. If you’re off somewhere else in your head, you’re going to miss what’s going on, and when you’re missing what’s going on, the response isn’t going to be appropriate. The other part of fear is just not knowing what’s going to happen in the future. There’s lots of uncertainty right now. Of course, the uncertainty is already always there. The world is swept away, it does not endure. That hasn’t changed for who knows how long. It’s simply that people are more aware of it now. And it seems more threatening. When things are improving, the idea that the world is changing is a nice idea. It’s going to get better and better. But change has its other side as well. Things can get a lot worse. And so are you going to prepare? You don’t know, really, what’s going to happen. But you do know that if you’re mindful and aware, alert to what you’re doing, alert to what’s going on around you, you’re much more likely to respond in an appropriate way. In this way, mindfulness is a kind of protection. And that’s something that you can practice, something you can develop, something you can work on. It is a skill. Like that old joke about being able to chew gum and walk at the same time. You want to be able to inhabit your body and be aware of what you’re thinking, aware of what’s going on around you, all at the same time. It takes practice. It’s one of the reasons why we do walking meditation in addition to sitting meditation. If you walk, try to stay as fully in the body as possible. You can be aware of the breath or you can be aware of the stepping of the feet. It’s better to be aware of the breath if you can, because you want to take the breath and make that your constant theme. The sense of the breath energy in the body, you’re inhabiting that breath energy in the body. You want to maintain that sense of inhabiting the breath as much as possible in all your different activities. So walking meditation is a good way of practicing that, maintaining that sense of full presence. So that when other activities come along, you can do them with full presence as well. You can be immersed in the body and, from that position, deal with whatever situation comes up. So regardless of what the future holds, the more mindful you are, the more alert you are, the more likely you are to respond in an appropriate way. Because the things that are really fearsome in the future are not events outside. It’s your own greed, anger, and delusion coming in and taking over. That’s something to be really afraid of. The more mindful you are, the more alert you are, the more you can see these things as they begin to form. And you can check them before they take over the mind. If you hold them in check, they will come in and take over you. This way you’re less likely to go under. So think mindfulness as a kind of protection. In Thailand, when they hand out amulets, they often make this point that it’s not so much the amulet that’s going to protect you, it’s the fact that you’ve got that amulet banging against your chest. It keeps reminding you of where you’re supposed to be, reminding you of the Buddhist teachings, reminding you of the need to be alert and aware and mindful, to inhabit the body. To be fully in all your activities. During my years in Thailand, I noticed that this was one of the main themes that would bring people to Buddhism, the quest for protection, seeing that the world is a dangerous place and wanting to have as many good things on your side as possible. One of the best things, of course, is the practice of meditation. It is a kind of protection. When I first came back to America, I noticed how complacent everybody was and how heedless. The idea of protection didn’t seem to be important. Now we’ve learned we have to be more heedful. Remember, the protection lies within. That’s the best place for it to be, because the dangers lie within as well. Right at the spot where these things come flowing out of the mind, these asavas that come flowing out of the mind, sensual desire, your views about things, the desire to become this or that, your ignorance, these keep flowing out of the mind. If you don’t watch out, they can turn into a flood and you get submerged. Fortunately, the island is here as well, the island of mindfulness, alertness. It’s something you can make through your actions. So it starts right here, allowing the awareness that’s already there in your hands, in your arms, in your chest, in your shoulders, in your back, allowing it to have some space. Don’t keep crowding it out with your head awareness. Give every part of the body, give your awareness in every part of the body some space, and then try to maintain that sense of space inside, of fully inhabiting. Let that develop, because it is your foundation, and it can become secure.

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