Healing & Protection

October 10, 2009

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to see how it feels. Notice where you feel the sensation of the breathing process. It can be anywhere in the body, where it seems most prominent. It’s the easiest to follow. Focus your attention there. And then notice if it’s comfortable. At what point does the breath get too long? Or what does it feel like when the breath is too short? You can experiment. There are lots of ways to experiment. You can make it long in and short out, or short in and long out. Then tweak the precise length of each breath. Or you may decide, “I’ll just stick with each breath, and when it feels too long, I’ll just turn around and breathe the other direction,” realizing that it may take a while for the body to settle down to a regular rhythm. Then you may notice that when you breathe in, you tend to pull the breath in one direction. Does it feel good to pull it in that direction, or does it tense things up? Sometimes you have the feeling you’re pulling the breath up, or you may be pulling the breath down. So experiment. Just pose that question in the mind. What would it feel like if the breath went the other direction? Then you can try shallow, deep, fast, slow, heavy, light. There are lots of ways of experimenting with the breath. But the main issue right now is what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing feels nourishing, what kind of breathing feels healing for the body. And when you find it feels good for the body, it’ll have a healing effect on the mind. Then try to maintain that. This is where you have to be very mindful and very alert, because it’s very easy when things get comfortable in the body for the mind to start drifting off. The mind is very fickle. When things are painful in the body, it wants to drift off as well. When it gets comfortable, it’s drifting off for another reason. It just kind of loses its firm grip on its mindfulness. When John Freud had a phrase, he said, “Your hands and your feet let go.” You just kind of fall into the pleasure. And as a result, you lose the cause for the pleasure, which was your mindfulness of the breath and alertness that was keeping watch over things. So be very careful not to lose those qualities of mind. And then try to be ardent in what you’re doing. In other words, try to keep observant. Catch the mind wandering off, bring it right back. This is no time to start admiring the flowers of Mara. You’ve got work to do here. While the mind is with the breath, try to be very sensitive to what the breath is doing and notice any slight changes in the needs of the body. Allow the breath to adjust in response to that. We’re doing two things here as we meditate. One is to heal some of the pain and suffering and stress that we already have. And then secondly, it’s to protect us from creating more in the future, both healing and protection, among the purposes of why we’re here. So as you breathe in a calm way, breathe in a comfortable way, a refreshing way, whatever feels good for the body. Sometimes it may need to breathe in a way that feels energizing. Other times it may feel a need to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. Just notice what the body seems to need. Be like a doctor diagnosing what’s wrong with the body. This requires that you stay with it for quite a while to get a sense of when is the energy too low and when is it too high. When is the breath too weak in response? When is it too strong? Get a sense of what is a balanced state in the body and then what the breath can do to bring you into balance. See where you’re off balance and what the breath can do to bring you back. That’s the healing part of the meditation. As the body feels good, then the mind begins to have a sense that it can settle down and become healed by the breath as well, soothed by the breath. This is one of those healing processes. If you compare the breath to medicine, it’s like a cream that you put on your skin. It’s not like an injection where you need just one shot and you’re done. The cream has to stay on the skin for twenty-four hours if it’s going to have its effect. So the mind is staying with the breath. It takes a while for the mind to be soothed by the breath. And this right here is one step in also protecting the mind. Because when the mind feels soothed and calm like this, then when the thought comes to go out and do something that’s harmful, you see immediately that it’s disturbing. It disturbs the calm, disturbs the peace of mind you’re feeling. You begin to ask yourself, “Why would I want to do that?” Many times we do cruel and stupid and harmful things because we feel we’re suffering. There’s a sense of dis-ease in the mind, and we place the blame outside. Even if we don’t blame the people outside, we feel, “As long as I’m suffering, let everybody else suffer.” But if you can get the mind to calm down, to be soothed and more comfortable, you begin to see how much you cause yourself to suffer by thinking in those unskillful ways. The simple act of healing the mind is the first step in protection. And then as you develop your powers of mindfulness and alertness even further, you can use them to protect yourself even further. The Buddha gives several images for why being mindful, say, of the body in and of itself, is a kind of protection. For one thing, if you go out foraging among sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tastes, tastes, tactile sensations for your pleasures, you put yourself in a dangerous position. Because those things can change. They can be affected by other people, which means that other people can take your pleasure and squeeze it. It’s in the story of the Ramayana that one of the characters, one of the bad guys, seems to be invincible no matter what. You pierce his chest and you can’t kill him. And they figure out it’s because he’s taken his heart out and he’s put it off in a tree someplace. It’s a magical way of protecting himself so that no matter how much you spear the middle of his heart, the middle of his chest, you can’t get it to his heart. You can’t kill him. And so what they do is they go out and they find the tree where the heart is. And all they do is just squeeze it and the guy dies. He’s miles and miles away because he left his heart there in the tree. It’s the same with us. We leave our hearts with sights and we leave our hearts with sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations. We leave them with other people where they can have control over them. All they have to do is squeeze us a little bit and we die. So you want to look for your pleasure inside. So this is one way of protecting yourself from the dangers of the outside world. But the even greater danger is the harm that you do to yourself. And this is one of the scariest things in life. The real danger in life is not the dangers that come from outside. It’s the dangers that we pose to ourselves if we haven’t trained our minds, if we haven’t trained our hearts. Then we can do all kinds of unskillful things. It doesn’t take much. You hear about cases where societies break down. People lose all their civility. That’s something we’re already seeing here in our country. But they go further than that. They start hunting one another and they just basically turn into animals. Food gets hard to find, there’s not much safety in life, and people just turn into animals. And the question is, are you sure that you wouldn’t do that, too, if things broke down here? That’s a scary thought. And even if society doesn’t break down, we see people doing all kinds of unskillful things. So the real protection is learning how to protect ourselves from ourselves. This is where the mindfulness and alertness that we’ve developed here come to help us, because we gain a sense of being able to see what we’re doing, what our intentions are before we do something, and then to look at the results. We have the capacity to learn from our mistakes. The problem is that we tend not to. We just keep making our mistakes over and over again. We blame somebody else. It’s this wrong view that we have that we suffer because of other people. But if we realize that the real cause for suffering comes from inside, it comes from our craving, it comes from our ignorance. The ignorance is the big problem, so that’s what we have to solve. And how do you solve your ignorance? It’s not by reading books. It’s by looking at your actions and saying, “What am I doing that’s causing suffering so I can learn how to stop?” What other actions can lead to an alleviation of suffering, or perhaps even to the end of suffering? You can read the books and get some general ideas, but the specifics are there in your own actions for you to watch. So you’re trying to be alert to your intentions, and then you’re trying to be mindful. Remind yourself, “Okay, if this intention is going to cause harm, I better not act on it.” Or, “If while I’m doing something I see that harm is coming up, I better stop.” Or, “If I notice after an action has taken place that I’ve harmed myself or harmed other people, I have to remind myself again not to do that again.” So in this way, by developing mindfulness and alertness, together with that quality of ardency, the desire to do things skillfully, those qualities protect you. And as it so happens, they protect other people, too. Because if you’re not going to act on unskillful intentions, you’re not going to harm anybody else. The image the Buddha gives is two acrobats. One standing on the shoulders of the other. The acrobat underneath is the teacher. He says, “Okay, now you watch out after me, and I’ll watch out after you, and that way we’ll protect each other.” They’re standing on the end of a bamboo pole. They come down from the end of the pole safely and gain a reward. The student, a woman who’s standing on her shoulder, says, “No, that won’t do. I have to look after myself, i.e., I have to keep my sense of balance, and you keep your sense of balance, and that way we’ll protect each other.” In this case, it was the student who was right. If you’re mindful and you’re careful, you’re protecting the other people as well. You keep your balance. Nobody else can make you skillful. You have to learn how to be skillful yourself. That’s your sense of balance, just in the same way that nobody else can keep someone else balanced. You keep your balance and you find that you’re not harming anybody. And as you learn to find a source of happiness inside, you’re more and more secure in your knowledge that if things get really bad outside, you still would not act in an unskillful way. Because you realize that regardless of what short-term benefits you might get from that unskillful action, the long-term results are not worth it. And as the meditation progresses and you find that there really is something inside that you can touch—as the Buddha says, you touch it with your body, you touch it with your mind—that there is a deathless dimension that’s not subject to conditions. And it’s a happiness that nobody can touch. That’s when you’re really protected, because you know that’s true. What the Buddha said is true. There is a deathless happiness, and we can attain it. We can attain it through our own efforts. And our unskillful actions make it harder and harder to find that. So you have to protect the skillfulness of your intentions, the skillfulness of your actions, as much as you can. That way you protect yourself from causing further harm, both to yourself and to others. So it’s in this way that meditation is both a healing process and a protective process. It’s in line with the fact that the mind has both a passive side, i.e., the side that experiences pleasure and pain, and an active side, the side that’s actually causing the pleasure and pain. So you have to heal the passive side and protect yourself from the ignorance that tends to motivate the active side. And part of that’s by learning how to understand this. The passive side is the side that experiences the pleasure and pain. Exactly what is the pleasure? What is the pain? And seeing how pleasure and pain can make us act in unskillful ways, and learning how to switch that around so that we can help ourselves to act in skillful ways. So regardless of the pains that there may be in the body, the mind doesn’t have to be pained, because it is the suffering and stress that’s caused by the mind. That’s the suffering that really gets to the mind. If the mind is well trained, the pains of the body can’t seep into the mind, because they’re there in the body. They stay there in the body. The mind doesn’t pull them in. It’s learned how to protect itself from its unskillful habits, both in terms of dealing with other people and the way it relates to pleasure and pain inside. So when a physical pain comes up, the perception you have of the pain is the major cause for why that physical pain torments the mind, burdens the mind. You’ve been pulling the pain in through your perception by laying claim to it, saying, “This is me,” or it’s invaded something that’s mine, i.e., the body. One way around that is to see how the sensations of the body, i.e., the different elements of solidity, liquidity, warmth, energy, are one thing, and the actual pain is something else. And how the awareness of these things is something else as well. We can divide things up like this. That’s even further protection for the mind. You’re not tormenting the mind to no purpose at all. So remember, the mind has these two sides, the active side and the passive side. We meditate to heal the passive side and to train the active side to protect us from the unskillful actions of the active side by training that side to be more skillful, more perceptive. So work as much as you can on being mindful of the breath and being alert to what’s happening with the breath, because those two qualities of mindfulness and alertness, when you combine them with the desire to do things skillfully, are your healers and your protectors.

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