Protected Through Mindfulness (outdoors)

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The Buddha once said that a teacher’s duty is to give protection to his students. And this doesn’t mean he goes around with a shield and a sword to fend off enemies. It basically means he gives knowledge to the students so they can protect themselves. Of course, from the Buddhist point of view, the big dangers in life are not so much the things outside, they’re the things inside the mind itself. Greed, aversion, and delusion. These things, when they take control of the mind, can get you to all kinds of things that are not in your best interest, and leave you open to all kinds of further dangers. So that’s the kind of protection the Buddha offers, is how to protect yourself against your greed, aversion, and delusion, so that you have a clear idea of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. And the Buddha gives some general guidelines, but also he teaches you the qualities of mind to develop so that, in areas where the general guidelines don’t reach, or you need to know more detail, you can fill in the detail yourself. And one of the most prominent ways in which he has you do this is through developing the establishing of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to keep things in mind. And you can see how that’s necessary for any kind of practice. If you’ve been learning lessons on how to protect yourself, but then you forget them, or you can’t bring them to bear at times when it’s really necessary, then it’s as if you didn’t have those lessons at all. So sati, mindfulness, the ability to keep things in mind, is an important part of your protection. But on its own it’s not enough. When you’re establishing mindfulness, you’re trying to stay aware of the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves. Mind states in and of themselves, or mental qualities in and of themselves. Which means that you look at them on their own terms. The body in and of itself. So you look at the breath. The body in the world would be the body as it’s measured against your desires for material gain, status, praise, sensual pleasures. That’s not the context you’re in. You want the context simply the body as a phenomenon that’s appearing right here, right now. Then you bring alertness to bear. Alertness is watching what you’re doing as you’re doing it, being very clear about what you’re doing as you do it. And then finally, ardency. You try to do it well. For example, when you’re with the breath, you try to remember each time you breathe in, stay with the breath. And then you watch. One, you watch the breath to see if it’s comfortable. It’s going to be the kind of breath that you would like to stay with. And then two, you watch the mind. Is the mind really with the breath? Because sometimes it gives signals that it’s about to leave. You want to be alert to those signals so you can head them off. That’s why I say when you bring the mind back, you try to bring it back quickly. While you’re with the breath, you try to be very detailed in your powers of observation. Because the more refined your powers of observation, the better the results are going to be, first in terms of concentration. Try to be really sensitive to the details of the breath. When there’s the slightest little bit of discomfort, see if you can release it, release it. Try to be very careful to note what kind of in-breathing feels good, what kind of out-breathing feels good. When you know that the in-breath has gotten long enough, you know that the out-breath has gotten long enough. Try to take note of those things. That way, the more detailed your knowledge, the greater the sense and the more refined the sense of well-being you’ll be able to make. It’s like sifting flour. If the wires in a sifter are far apart, the flour that comes out is lumpy. It doesn’t have the same qualities of flour that would come from a sifter, where the wires are very close together. That way you can get really refined flour, which brings a higher price. In the same way, the sense of well-being that comes with the breath, the more sensitive you are to even the slightest disturbance in the breath, the greater the sense of comfort will come. The breath will get so refined that it doesn’t seem to have an impact on any part of the body at all, aside from allowing it to relax. As for your discernment, the more detailed your powers of observation, the more you’ll be able to catch things coming to mind. The Buddha gives the example of a gatekeeper in a fortress at the frontier. He knows there are potential enemies coming in, and so he has to be very careful to watch the faces of every person who comes in and out of that fortress to recognize who are the friends and who might be the enemies, and then actively allow the friends to come in, but keep the enemies out. The more detailed his powers of observation, the better job he’s going to do. You see troublesome people even from far away. It’s the same with your mind. Greed, aversion, and delusion sometimes start out very small, just like the wildfires here in Southern California. Sometimes they start with just a tiny spark, but if the conditions are ready, that little spark can spread really fast. In the same way, greed, aversion, and delusion can be little sparks in your mind, and if you’re not careful, all of a sudden the whole mind is being consumed by the flames. So you want the discernment that catches these things when they’re small. They’re a lot easier to handle. A little fire only needs one firefighter to put it out. Once you allow it to spread, sometimes you need hundreds and thousands of firefighters, and they still can’t bring it under control. So you want to catch every little fire in the mind before it amounts to anything, which is why you have to make sure that your alertness is really, really refined. When your mindfulness and alertness are working together like this, then they give guidance to your ardency, your desire to do this well. As you get a better and better idea of what really counts as well, and you can commit yourself fully to doing this, that’s when you get the best results. So this is the kind of protection that the mindfulness offers to you when it’s established. And when you place it in charge, Buddha calls this mindfulness as a governing principle, that it’s not going to just be watching what comes and goes and being okay with whatever comes and whatever goes. If skillful qualities haven’t come yet, you do what you can to give rise to them. Once they’re there, you want to make sure they don’t go. So you use your powers of analysis, you use your powers of mindfulness and alertness, you use your ardency. This way you’ve got yourself fully protected to see what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. Do what you can to encourage what’s skillful and discourage what’s not skillful. When you’ve taken care of those dangers inside, then the dangers outside don’t really pose much of a problem. So as we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, we’re doing the right thing. We close our eyes so we can watch our minds more clearly. That’s where the danger is, but also that’s where the possibility of getting past the danger lies as well.

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