

Protect Your Energy

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When the Buddha analyzes the causes for suffering, one of the most basic points he makes is that we don't suffer simply from having unpleasant sights or sounds or smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas. We suffer from what we bring to these things, whether they're good or bad. In fact, we can even be surrounded by all kinds of pleasant things outside and have nice pleasant thoughts, but still someplace deep inside, we're suffering. So we have to look for the causes inside: what we're bringing to the situation.

This is why we meditate: to train the mind—first to be sensitive to what we're bringing and then learning how to change what we bring to our situation in any case where what we're bringing is causing stress and suffering. Simple things, like the breath: the way you breathe, the way you relate to the breath energy in the body. That's one of the things you can do in ignorance and cause stress—or you can learn how to do with knowledge in a way that leads to less and less stress and suffering in your life. In fact, you have to be very protective of your breath energy, reminding yourself of the extent to which you can change it; you can have a good effect on it. Otherwise, you find yourself picking up energy from other people. If you're not fully inhabiting the range of your body, other people's energies come in.

The image the Buddha gives is of a solid door made out of hardwood, and someone tries to throw a ball of string at it. Of course, the ball of string is going to bounce off the door because the door is so much more solid. In the same way, when you fill the body with awareness, when you fill the body with mindfulness, you become like the solid door. The way most people live, he said, is like a lump of clay. You throw a stone into a lump of clay, and the stone makes a huge impression. In other words, other people's energies can make a big impression on you. You pick up what they're feeling, often unconsciously, and then you wonder why you're miserable.

The fact that you're not looking after your own energy also means that the energy that you're broadcasting to other people is not good either. So mindfulness is not just for your own protection, it's for the protection of others, making a positive contribution to the situation by the way you breathe, by the way you understand the breath energy in the body.

Get mindfulness immersed in the body. It's good at the beginning of the meditation to scan the body and see how things are going, to get a sense of where

there's tension and, to whatever extent you can, relieve it. Get a sense of where your posture is not helpful and how you can change the posture.

Then notice how the breath comes in, goes out, where you feel the breathing process, and to what extent it's comfortable. If it's not comfortable, you can change. You do have some control over the breath processes. This is why the Buddha calls it "bodily fabrication," because it's something you can shape and it has an impact on how you're going to experience your body. So try to protect that. Try to develop a sense of well-being inside and be clear on how important this is.

All too often, we get up from a meditation where we're nicely centered in the body and totally drop it. Our awareness goes outside to other people again—what they're doing, what we think they're thinking—which is a much less solid foundation for any kind of happiness. At the same time, we've abandoned the spot that we really need to protect. It's because we're concerned about other people and think that what they're going to do and say and think about us is going to cause us suffering. So we have to be wary. True, there is an extent to which other people cannot be trusted, but you can't let that cause you to abandon what's really your territory. So you've got to work on your understanding.

This is where the other forms of fabrication come in. First there's verbal fabrication, which is the way you think about things and evaluate situations. Then there's mental fabrication, the perceptions and feelings you have. Those are things you have some control over as well. Those are things that you use to shape your experience, too. If you do it with ignorance, it's going to add more suffering on top of things. If you do it with knowledge, with right view, it actually becomes a part of the path to the end of suffering.

So look at how you're thinking about your priorities. If you feel that the body is an area that you want to inhabit only when you're sitting here meditating, you'll have a few moments of respite, but not much. You certainly won't have the protection you need when you're dealing with other people, and you won't be able to project good energy to them. After all, ninety percent of human communication is sub-verbal, non-verbal—in other words, the way you hold your body, the expression on your face, the micro-expressions on your face. When you're dealing with other people, they're going to be picking these things up. Whether they're conscious of it or not, they will pick it up.

So one thing you can do to strengthen yourself in the face of other people, especially difficult people, is to maintain your foundation here—to be fully aware throughout the body.

This is why the forest ajans stressed so much those three qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. In other words, you try to develop right view

about what's really important in terms of what's going to cause suffering and what's not. You want to keep that in mind. That's a duty of mindfulness.

Alertness is being aware of what you're actually doing. And as for ardency, that's a quality you use to develop the meditation as a skill—because it's not the case that you learn about right view and that'll solve all your problems right away. If it did, we wouldn't have to be sitting here and meditating. We'd be reading books and discussing things and that would be the end of the issue. But it's not. We're learning a skill. That means you learn the basic principles and then you try to put them into practice, because you learn a lot that way that you couldn't learn simply by hearing things or reading things. You learn about your own mind—where your weaknesses are, where your strengths are, and how you can use your strengths in order to work around your weaknesses. It requires that you learn some patience and some persistence, sticking with things even when they don't come easily, because this is really an essential skill. You need to develop it.

If our educational system really were designed for people's needs, rather than using people as means for other purposes, one of the basic skills we would learn would be how not to make ourselves suffer and how not to cause unnecessary suffering to other people—in other words, the skill we're working on right now. No matter how easily it came to people, we'd be very clear on the fact that everybody has to master this if they want to find any happiness in life. But we can't let the fact that the educational system doesn't see things that way deter us. We have to look after our own interests, not in a selfish way, but simply in a responsible way, one that leads to genuine well-being.

And it turns out that what you do for your genuine well-being will also spill over into doing something positive for other people. If you can maintain a good solid and healthy energy throughout the body, then when you're dealing with other people, they're not going to be sensing any threat or any imbalance in where you're coming from. And maybe even the way you breathe will be helpful to them.

So think about this quality of energy—the way you fabricate your experience of the body; the way you think about things; the way you perceive things—and ask yourself where you're fabricating unnecessary suffering; where you're leaving yourself open to unhealthy influences from outside—and to what extent the ways you're shaping your experience are harming other people. You've got to start with this as your foundation.

Make this as solid and reliable as possible, and you'll become a more solid and reliable person. Your happiness will become more solid and reliable. Your influence on other people will become more solid and reliable—because you really

do work sincerely at mastering this practice, you really do bring the quality of ardency.

As to whether it's easy or not, that's not the issue. You stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. Find ways to energize yourself so that you can keep at this until you start seeing results, and the results become more and more reliable. Keep that image in mind: this protected spot here that you're filling with your awareness. In filling it with your awareness, that's the protection. It's as if you create a magnetic field around it that repels negative energies because you're generating good energy inside.

This is another one of the Buddha's basic principles, that the mind is not essentially passive. It's active. It's generating things all the time, so you might as well learn how to generate good electricity rather than erratic currents that would fry people's computers. You want something steady, reliable, full. That's your contribution to yourself and to other people. Whether or not they consciously know that you're contributing something good, they'll pick it up and it'll be good for them.

This practice is something that radiates its benefits all around.