

Protection through Mindfulness Practice

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The Buddha often talks about the practice of satipatthana, or the establishing of mindfulness, as a kind of protection. He says that you make yourself a refuge when you practice the establishing of mindfulness. You make yourself an island, a safe place in the middle of the flood.

There's also the passage where he tells the story of two acrobats. As each acrobat maintains his or her own sense of balance, each is protecting him or herself and also provides a protection for the other. This, too, the Buddha then he says, is an analogy for the establishing of mindfulness.

So, what kind of protection does mindfulness provide?

It's useful here to note that when the Buddha talked about a the duties of a teacher, one of them is to provide protection for the student in all directions. In his own case, this meant that he gave the student clear reasons for what should and shouldn't be done, lessons that the student could take along wherever he'd go, and that would be valid wherever he went. After all we go through life active. We're shaping our experience, so we need guidance as to what ways will provide us with happiness in the long term and avoid suffering in the long term.

The main danger in life is our own lack of knowledge in this area—or even worse, believing that our actions don't matter or have no results. That's *really* dangerous—a lot more dangerous than the dangers other people can pose to us.

So this question of protection comes down to what you're doing with your mind right now.

This is where the establishing of mindfulness provides a really good protection because when we look at the three qualities that go into establishing mindfulness — ardency, alertness, and mindfulness—we can see that they're not just matters of accepting or resigning ourselves to whatever comes up. They give guidance as to what to *do*, right here, right now.

Mindfulness is what keeps in mind the ability to recognize things, the labels we have for naming things as they come up in the present moment. That's the first step. The second step is that, once you've recognized what something is, mindfulness reminds you of what should or shouldn't be done with it. It reminds

you not only what you've read in the texts or heard from teachers, but also what you've learned on your own in your practice, as to what works and what doesn't work in giving rise to skillful qualities.

That's how your power of memory is a protector.

Then there's alertness. Alertness watches what's actually happening—and in particular, what you're doing and what results you're getting from what you're doing. You might say that it takes note of what's happening and then sends the information over to mindfulness. Mindfulness then recognizes what's going on and gives instruction as for what should be done. If something is unskillful, and you recognize it as something unskillful, then you remember that it's something you've got to get rid of, and you try to remember how.

And finally ardency is what *does* what should be done.

So these three qualities working together all provide you with your own protection. And their interaction goes further.

Once ardency has done something well, alertness notes that. When it's done something not so well, alertness will note that, too. Then you send that information off to mindfulness to remember.

So you want to strengthen these qualities as much as you can, because if you're missing any of them, you're left without protection. Each of them provides protection in its own particular way.

For example, in some cases you may not be able to recognize if something is skillful or not. You can't recognize what's happening—and in this case, your protection is to be really, really alert.

That means that you have to watch it for a while, as in Ajaan Mun's advice to Ajaan Maha Boowa: If something comes up in your meditation and you're not sure about it, watch it. Stay with that sense of awareness—the observer, the knower—and don't be too quick to come to any conclusions until you can see what's actually happening.

Then you can recognize it as something skillful or unskillful, something to be developed or something to be abandoned.

That's alertness over the long term.

There are also the times when alertness has to be very quick—as in Upasika Kee's advice: When something comes up in the meditation that seems really good or an insight comes up that's really compelling, note what happens immediately *after* that. In other words, you've got to be alert continuously. You can't go riding

with a sense of, say, pride, or a sense of total conviction in the insight. Look and see what happens as a result of believing that insight.

So, there are times when alertness provides protection by being long-term, and other times when it provides protection by being very quick.

You really can't lack any of these three qualities. If you forget what you've learned from the past, you're totally defenseless. At the same time, if you know what should be done but you don't carry it through, then you're not really protecting yourself either. So you have to work on all these three qualities together.

One main problem is that when something comes up in the mind we tend to think of it in our own vocabulary. Lust comes up and our vocabulary says that it's something good. Anger comes up and even though part of us may think that it's not all that good, another part of us really likes it.

This is why mindfulness, remembering the Buddha's vocabulary for these things, has to be strong.

That enables you to recognize when there's something that, for the sake of the practice, you don't want to go with and it reminds you of the tools you have to deal with it.

Say, when lust comes up, the mind can create all kinds of reasons for why the object of lust is really attractive. What you've got to do with it is remember to recognize it as a hindrance, and to remember that if you follow through with it, it's going to create a lot of trouble.

Among the tools that mindfulness can use to help you here is the ability to remember that lust has its dangers. Here it's good to think of all the stupid things people do under the power of lust—and the awful situations they get themselves into, getting tied down with a person they thought was attractive, and then discovering what else is there in that person: the person's background, personality, family, all the connections that get tied in with that person.

That helps you realize how risky it is.

When this really hits home, you'll be a little more likely to want to actually apply that meditation in the chant right now, on the different parts of the body.

First think about your own body. What's in there that's really worthy of lust? Take out all the parts and examine them to see which of them could be really attractive.

Only then do you apply the same contemplation to the other person—which is what makes it fair. In other words, you're not saying that the other gender or the other person is the bad one. Your body, too, has the same sort of stuff.

But as the Buddha says, this analysis is going to work only if you have an alternative source of pleasure. This is why we work with the breath. The two contemplations have to go together.

All too often, when you're really tired or stressed out, you say to yourself that the pleasure that comes from the lust is really worth it; it's something you really need; you want your quick fix.

But if you can take a few minutes to just stop and breathe in a way that's really refreshing, really nourishing, you give yourself some relief, you give yourself some strength, you give yourself some food. and then that enables you to say to yourself, "Well, I don't really need that other kind of pleasure after all."

This is why ardency in developing concentration can be your first-line protection against lust.

As the Buddha said, you can know all the drawbacks of sensuality but if you don't have an alternative form of pleasure, all that knowledge is worthless.

So ardency here has also to develop concentration, a sense of well being, working with the breath.

We've talked for the last couple of days in the Q and A about different ways of working with the breath energy, and it's important to take some time to explore this aspect of your relationship to your body.

What kind of movement of the breath is actually helpful?

What kind of movement of the breath makes it more difficult to stay with the body?

And learn to play. Take the breath energy in the body as your playground here and be open to new ideas about how the breath energy can move.

You'll notice in Ajaan Lee's basic instructions, that he talks about the breath energy going down the spine, down the legs as you breathe in. But it can also do that as you breathe out. There are other times when he talks about the breath energy starting in the soles of the feet, coming up the legs and up the spine, in the other direction.

You may read in manuals on Tai Chi that there's an energy circle running from the head down to the spot between the legs and then back up the spine. As you breathe in, a certain part of the energy can run a circle that goes up the front and down the back, or up the back and down the front, whichever way you want the energy to go.

There're lots of different ways you can work with the energy. Don't limit yourself. The more variety you can find in dealing with the breath, the more

intriguing it will be to stay with the body—and the more able you'll be to find a sense of wellbeing for the body, giving it just what it needs at any particular time.

This allows you to step back, say, from whatever gets you angry or wherever the lust was, and you can look at the other physical symptoms and the mental symptoms that you've put together to create that lustful state or that angry state to begin with.

Because, after all, these are things that we fabricate. We're really good at putting them together. A little sensation here, a little sensation there, you tie them together, and that's it: Lust is overcoming you. It's laid claim to your body and to your mind. You've suddenly got all that pressure inside that you've got to do something about.

The same with anger: This person did that and that and that, and then you can stitch all the "that's" together into a big story and it gets your blood boiling.

There was a report recently about how people with strong bouts of anger are more likely to have a heart attack a couple of hours later. The researchers said they didn't know what the connection was, although it's all pretty obvious. We stitch all these things together and then all the stitched together parts block the energy flow, pressure builds up, and something explodes. All it takes is a little random sensation here and there, and the mind has learned how to be really good at stitching them into a web to catch itself. We've been doing this for who knows how many lifetimes.

But if you have a sense of wellbeing with the breath, then you can step back from these fabrications. You begin to take them apart—to cut, cut, cut through all the connections you've created.

Ask yourself: What was the first sensation in the body? What was the first little thought in the mind? — that little whisper of thought that suggested that lust might be a good antidote for whatever sense of irritation you're feeling or that anger would be an appropriate response for what someone's done.

And how does that work its way through your inner bureaucracy, influencing this person, that person inside, all those committee members working together, creating little sensations here and there, and all of a sudden you've got a full blown case. If you want to believe their propaganda when that happens, you're throwing away your protection.

Your protection is to remind yourself, "This is an unskillful state," and you have to be alert.

One of the things you remember with mindfulness is that if you stay with the body—or in particular, stay with the breath—you're going to be here in the present moment. That way, when these things happen, you'll see them in time and you'll be alert to upcoming trends. If you see that things are going in a bad direction, you can start doing something about it.

This is how these three qualities keep spinning around the mind and the body, working to give you the protection you need from things like lust, aversion, delusion, greed—all the unskillful things that come welling up inside, that you've been so good at creating and then that create so many dangers for yourself.

This is why, when Ajaan Lee was writing about the establishing of mindfulness, he kept hammering away at these three qualities: mindfulness, alertness, ardency; mindfulness, alertness, ardency. They lie at the essence of how the establishing of mindfulness can provide you with a protection and be your refuge, be your island in the middle of the river—or, as they say in another passage in the Canon, your island in the middle of a lake.

The lake is rising, but you've got this island that keeps you from drowning in the lake. So don't abandon it.

Think of that image of the quail being hunted by a hawk. As long as the quail stays in its safe territory, the hawk can't get it. But as soon as you wander out, there's no guarantee. And what does it mean to wander out of your safe territory? To get fascinated with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, all the raw materials for things like passion and aversion. If you do that, the hawk can get you. But if you stay in your proper territory, the establishing of mindfulness, you're safe.

Of course, it's not just a place. It's a combination of activities here in the mind. They're your protectors. So nourish them well.