

## *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. Wherever it seems most prominent or easiest to follow, focus your attention there. Then notice if it's comfortable. At what point does the breath get too long? Or when does it feel 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, and 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.

You may also 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 or deep, fast or slow, heavy, or 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 and healing for the body? When it feels good for the body, it'll have a healing effect for the mind as well. 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 your 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 loses its firm grip on its mindfulness.

In Ajaan Fuang's words, your hands and your feet let go, and you just fall into the pleasure. As a result, you lose the cause for the pleasure, which was your mindfulness and alertness that were keeping watch over things. So to be very careful not to lose those qualities of mind.

Then try to be ardent in what you're doing. In other words, try to keep observing, catch the mind wandering off, bring it right back. This is no time to start what they call 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 we already have coming from the past, and the other is to protect ourselves from creating more in the future. Both healing and protection are among the purposes of why we're meditating. So 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. At other times, it feels 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 the energy is too low and when it's too high, when the breath is too weak in response, when it's too strong.

Gain a sense of what's a balanced state in the body and of what the breath can do to bring you into balance—to see where you're off balance, and what the breath can do to bring it back. That's the healing part of the meditation. If the body feels good, the mind begins to have a sense that it can settle down and become healed by the breath, soothed by the breath, as well. This, too, is part of the healing process. If you compare the breath to medicine, it's like a cream 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 24 hours if it's going to have its effect. In the same way, when the mind stays with the breath, it takes a while for the mind be soothed by the breath, calmed by the breath.

This right here is also one step in protecting the mind. When the mind feels soothed and calmed like this, then when the thought comes to go out and do something harmful, you see immediately that it's disturbing. It disturbs the calm, disturbs the peace of mind you're experiencing. You begin to ask yourself, "Why would I want to do that?" Often we do cruel and stupid and harmful things because we're suffering. There's a sense of dis-ease in the mind, and we place the blame outside. Or even if we don't blame the people outside, we feel that as long as we're suffering, let everybody else suffer. But if you can get the mind 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.

So the simple act of healing the mind is the first step in protection. Then as you strengthen your powers of mindfulness and alertness, you can use them to protect yourself even further. The Buddha gives several images for why the mind being mindful, say, of the body in and of itself, is a kind protection. For one thing, if you go out foraging among sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations

for your pleasure, 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.

In one of the stories of the Ramayana, one of the bad guys seems to be invincible. No matter what pierces his chest, you can't kill him. The good guys figure out that it's because he's taken his heart out and has put it off in a tree someplace: a magical way of protecting himself so that no matter how much you spear the middle of his chest, you can't get to his heart, so you can't kill him. What they do is to go out and find the tree where the heart is, and all they have to do is squeeze it, and he dies.

It's the same with us if we leave our hearts with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, if we with them with other people, where they can have control over them. All they have to do is squeeze us a little bit, and our goodness dies. So you want to look for your pleasure inside.

This is one way of protecting yourself from the dangers the outside world. But the even greater danger is the harm you do to yourself. This is one of the scariest things in life: that the real dangers in life are not the dangers that come from outside, they're the dangers we pose to ourselves if we haven't trained our hearts and minds. 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 basically turn into animals. Food gets hard to find. There's not much safety in life, and people just turn into animals. 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 when 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. And this is where the mindfulness and alertness we develop here come to help us. We gain the ability to see what we're doing, what our intentions are before we do something, and then look at the results, while we're doing the actions and after they're done.

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, or we blame somebody else. It's because of this wrong view we have: that we suffer because of other people. But if you realize that the real cause for suffering comes from inside—it comes from our craving, it comes from our ignorance, and ignorance is the big problem—you realize that 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

seeing, “What am I doing that’s causing suffering, so that I can learn how to stop? What are the actions that 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 for you to watch in your own actions.

So you try to be alert to your intentions and you try to be mindful. Remind yourself, “If this intention is going to cause harm, I’d better not act on it. If, while I’m doing something, I see harm coming up, I’d better stop. Or if I notice after an action has taken place that it harmed myself or other people, I have to remind myself not to do that again.”

This way, by developing mindfulness and alertness together with that quality of ardency—the desire to do things skillfully—you have qualities of heart and mind to protect you. And as it so happens, they protect other people, too. If you’re not going to act on unskillful intentions, you’re not going to harm anybody else.

The image the Buddha gives is of two acrobats, one standing on the shoulders of the other. The acrobat underneath, the teacher, says, “Okay, now you watch out after me and I’ll watch out after you, and that way we’ll protect each other and come down” —they were standing on the end of a bamboo pole— “we’ll come down safely from the end of the pole and gain our reward.” And the student, a woman standing his shoulders, said, “No, that won’t do. I have to look after myself— i.e., I have to keep my sense of balance—you keep your sense of balance, and that way we protect each other.” And the Buddha says, in that case it was a student who was right. In other words, if you’re mindful, you’re careful, so you’re protecting the other people as well. You keep your balance. After all, nobody else can make you skillful. You have to learn how to be skillful yourself. That’s your sense of balance. Nobody can keep someone else balanced. You keep your balance and you find that you’re not harming anybody.

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 won’t 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.

As the meditation progresses, you find that there really is something inside that you can touch, as the Buddha says, with your body, you touch it with your mind. 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, and that what the Buddha said is true. There is a deathless happiness, and we can attain it through our own efforts. You also see that your 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.

It's in this way that meditation is both a healing process and a protective process, in line with the fact 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. Part of how it does this is by learning how to understand this passive side, the side that experiences the pleasure and pain, to see exactly: What is the pleasure, what is the pain? You also see how pleasure and pain can make us act in unskillful ways, and you learn how to switch things around so that they help us act in skillful ways.

That way, regardless of the pains there may be in the body, the mind doesn't have to be pained, because 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 in the body can't seep into the mind because they're there in the body and 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 in terms of the way it relates to pleasure and pain inside.

That way, when a physical pain comes up, you notice that the perceptions you have around the pain are the major cause for why that physical pain torments the mind, burdens the mind. You've been pulling the pain in through your perceptions, by laying claim to the pain, saying, "This is me," or it's invaded something that the mind has laid hold of, i.e., the body. One way around that is to see how the sensations in the body—i.e., the different elements of solidity, liquidity, warmth, energy—are one thing, and the actual pain is something else. And the awareness of these things: That's something else as well. When you can divide things up like this, that's even further protection for the mind, so that you're not tormenting the mind to no purpose at all.

So remember that the mind has these two sides: the active side and the passive side. You meditate to heal the passive side and to train the active side, to protect it from the unskillful actions of the active side by training that side to be more skillful, more perceptive. So work as much 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 the protectors.