

Feel-Good Religion

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When you establish mindfulness in the right frame of reference, you're protecting yourself and you're protecting others. The Buddha said this one time. The image he gave was of a pair of acrobats standing on top of a bamboo pole, one acrobat on top of the shoulders of the other one. Initially, the master, who is one at the bottom, said to his student, "Okay, you look out after me, and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll protect ourselves and come down safely from the pole." And the student replied, "No, master, that's not going to work. I have to look out after myself, and you look out after yourself, and that way we protect each other so that we can do our tricks, come down safely from the pole, and get our reward." The Buddha added that the student was the one who said the right thing.

Think about acrobats. They each have to maintain their own balance. You can't maintain somebody else's balance. You have to maintain your own. And in maintaining your own balance, you help not to throw other people out of balance either.

But how does establishing mindfulness in the right frame of reference protect you and other people? Getting mindfulness established, we're often told, is being established in the body or feelings or mind or mental qualities. But it's a lot more complex than that. There's a whole formula. Keep track of the body, for example, in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That whole phrase is the establishing of mindfulness.

As for your frame of reference, the "in and of itself," means focusing simply on the sensation of having a body, or feelings, etc., right here right now. The primary example is the breath. Stay with the breath coming in, stay with the breath going out. Try to keep in touch with how the breathing feels, the immediate sensation, and try to stay right there. It's very easy for that sensation to switch into something else.

You'll notice this when the mind gets very still, and you begin to see how a thought appears. There's a stirring. In the beginning of the stirring, it's hard to say whether it's a physical stirring or a mental stirring. But then you slap a label on it and say, "This is a thought. It's a thought about that; it's a thought about this." And you go running with the thought. But there's a physical side to the thought as well, but you tend to lose sight of it. It's like a computer keyboard. You press the control button and all the buttons suddenly turn into something else. S turns

into save, C turns into copy, X turns into cut, simply because you're pressing the control button.

The same with these stirrings in the body mind. You label it as a thought and all of a sudden that's what it is. It's a world of thinking, and you're off someplace else. And you can carry all kinds of burdens around with you. This is "greed and distress with reference to the world." You've got these worlds in your body. You can imagine all the worlds hanging from your body. You have thoughts of the past hanging from the back of your neck. You have thoughts of future hanging from your chest. Memories of this that and the other thing are little baubles all over the body. No wonder you feel burdened down.

So you want to see the body in and of itself—just its bodiness right here. Don't go slipping off to other frames of reference.

Then there's "ardent, alert and mindful." Ardent means you really stick with it. Anything unskillful comes up, you drop it. As for skillful qualities, you try to maintain them. The skillful ones here are alertness and mindfulness. Alertness means knowing what you're doing while you're doing it, along with the results of what you're doing. Mindfulness means keeping all this in mind. You keep the body in and of itself, you keep "breath, breath, breath" in mind.

As you really get to know the breath and start exploring the breath, this is what alertness can help even more. You can figure out what kind of breathing is easy to stay with. You are free to manipulate, you know. You don't have to pretend that you're just going to stick with the breath however it comes in and goes out. The mind is constantly fashioning these things anyhow, so you might as well fashion them in a good way, in a way that leads to good strong concentration.

This is how you're kind to yourself. This is how mindfulness leads to protecting yourself, protecting others, showing goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. You give yourself a good place to stay in the present moment. It leads to feelings of rapture and pleasure as the mind settles in. You take that rapture and pleasure and you spread it throughout the body. The image is of working water through a ball of bath powder, or nowadays you might say, working water through flour to make bread. Make sure that the entire ball of flour is moist. A sense of ease permeates throughout all the body. Even with the parts that are painful, you can think of the ease permeating through the atoms of pain, around the atoms of pain, dissolving away all the connective tissue between those little atoms of pain. You've got a good place to stay.

At the same time, you're trying to make your awareness spread throughout the whole body as well. That gets you even more firmly anchored in the present moment, even more firmly anchored in the body in and of itself. After all, the

establishings of mindfulness are the themes of concentration. It's not as if you have mindfulness meditation and then concentration meditation. The two have to come together.

In this way, you create a good place for the mind to stay in the present moment, and you're not weighing yourself down with all that greed and distress with reference to the world, because you're not creating those little worlds, and not allowing them to blot out the body.

When you have a sense of well-being in the present moment, it's a lot easier to be kind to other people. You're not feeling oppressed. You're not feeling exasperated or irritated. In this way, learning to look after yourself protects other people as well.

As for seclusion: Physical seclusion is when you come out to a place like this, where you're cut off from your usual social ties. When you're here, society impinges a lot less on the mind. But the problem is that you don't yet have mental seclusion. You're still bringing in with you all the issues of the past week, or the next week, whatever, weighing yourself down with all kinds of companions—and they're not necessarily good companions. The mind that carries the past around and carries the future around is not a mind that's secluded. It's got a crowd. Here is this one body, but it contains a whole crowd of people and issues. No wonder it feels burdened and confined.

So you've got to learn how to stay with the sensation of the body in and of itself. That way, you can develop mental seclusion as well. In this way, you can be secluded wherever you go, because there it is: the sensation of the body. Nobody else can sense it. It's yours. As long as you're in touch with it, you're in touch with something that doesn't have to be impacted by anybody else. They can say what they want, they can do what they want, but you've still got your sense of the body in and of itself right here that nobody else can sense. As long as you're taking care of this, you've got a good foundation. When you're acting from a good foundation, your actions are going to be good, the things you say are going to be good, because you're not feeling oppressed. You're not feeling squeezed out. You're not feeling burdened by things.

This is how being in touch simply with the body in and of itself, being in touch with the breath, is a way of showing goodwill to yourself, showing goodwill for the people around you. It's your first foundation. So try to be mindful of this foundation. Be alert to what's going on that might make you leave the foundation. Be alert to the ways you can bring yourself back, so that you can stay more and more consistently for longer and longer periods of time.

It's in this way that Buddhism, the Dhamma, is a feel-good religion. It's not a Pollyanna-ish placing hopes on clouds. It's feeling good right in the very foundation of your experience of the mind, your experience of the body. After all, nobody's forcing you to breathe in a way that's uncomfortable. No one is forcing you to direct the energy of your body in a way that's uncomfortable. Yet we do this over and over again. When we oppress ourselves in this way, it's very easy to go out and oppress other people. But when you learn how to take good care of your sense of the body here in the present moment, then you're a lot less likely to oppress anyone else. It's a way of showing kindness to yourself and the people around you. You protect yourself, you protect the people around you, by staying focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's an act of kindness.

So try to be consistently kind.