A Position of Strength

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One of the good things about the breath as a topic of meditation is that it’s always right here, wherever here is. Whether you’re here as in the monastery, or at home, or traveling from the monastery to home, or wherever you go. The breath is always right here. So it’s there as a friend, if you learn how to make it your friend. If you have an antagonistic relationship to the breath, then you have an enemy wherever you go. So you don’t want that. You want to be on good terms with the breath. So listen to it for a while and see what it has to tell you. Is it comfortable or is it not? If it’s not comfortable, give it a little space. Just pose that question in the mind. Is it comfortable right now? And see how the body responds. Or you can exercise that a little bit. Just tell yourself, “How about some long breathing?” See how that feels. “Short breathing.” See how that feels. “Fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, or shallow.” See how it responds. And then when you find a texture and rhythm of breathing that’s agreeable to both sides, settle down with it. Learn how to make use of it. The Buddha talks about the different properties of the body—earth, water, wind, fire—in their space and consciousness. And the way they use the word “property” or “dhatu” in Pali is as a potential. You have the potential for breath feelings all over the body—solid feelings, liquid feelings, warm feelings—all over the body. And you can make them comfortable or make them uncomfortable. So when you look at the present moment, what you’ve got is a lot of raw materials. Sometimes they’re in good shape, and sometimes they’re not. If they’re not in good shape, you do what you can to make up for the lack. If they are in good shape, you try to maintain them that way. This way you give yourself strength. Again, it’s the strength of having friends. In Thailand, one of the old ways of teaching the strength of harmony or strength of concord in a group is to show a little kid a stick and say, “Can you snap the stick?” He says, “Yes.” Then you give him two sticks and put them together. “Can you snap the two sticks together?” “Well, you can still do that. It gets a little bit harder.” Three, four, five. You finally reach a point where no matter how hard you try to snap the sticks, when you’ve got lots of sticks together, they won’t snap. It’s a principle that works with a group of people outside and also works with all these potentials you’ve got inside. Learn how to make use of them so you can depend on them. They give you a good, solid center no matter what’s happening around you. So take the time this evening to get familiar with your breath. Where in the body does it feel best to focus? It might be right between the eyes and the forehead, at the palate. Breath here meaning not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the whole energy flow in the body. It could be in the middle of the chest, the right over the navel, any spot in the body where the mind finds it easy to stay snug with the sensations right there, and there’s a certain steadiness to those sensations. Because from the steadiness of the breath sensations, you allow the mind to get steady as well. This is where the Buddhist teachings to Rahula and the four elements come in, to try to make your mind like water. Like wind, like earth, like fire. These things don’t get upset by, say, whether the fire is burning pleasant things or unpleasant things, whether the wind is blowing pleasant things or unpleasant things, or the water is washing away pleasant things or unpleasant things, or pleasant or unpleasant things get thrown in the earth. The earth doesn’t react. So as you stay with these elements, try to pick up a little of that steadiness, a sense of solidity. Because when you’re coming from a solid center, you’re feeling less threatened, more secure. And when you’re feeling unthreatened and secure, it’s easy to be kind. You see this in nation-states. When they’re feeling threatened, they can do all kinds of evil things. When they’re not feeling threatened, they look back on their evil behavior and say, “Oh my gosh, how could we have done that?” People are the same way. So you want to make sure that you don’t put yourself in a position where you feel threatened. That means you’ve got to find a good center inside. Make use of these elements. Make use of these properties of the body, properties of the mind. So no matter what happens outside, you don’t feel threatened by it. You realize that your center of security is in here, first with the breath, and then as you develop it, it becomes more and more centered in the mind itself. That’s when you can learn how to trust yourself. So take advantage of this. When the Buddha taught mindfulness of feelings or mindfulness of mind states, he didn’t stop simply at recognizing that you have a particular mind state. Then the next question comes up, what do you do with it? If you stick with this mind state, where is it going to take you? Is it going to be skillful or unskillful? The Buddha, as we know, had a very strong sense of time and place, but there are some things he said his teachings were categorical. In other words, they stayed the same across the board, no matter what the outside circumstances were. So you want to make sure that you never do anything unskillful. Never kill, steal, have illicit sex, never lie, speak divisively, speak with the purpose of hurting people’s feelings. Let your conversation wander off in all kinds of idle chatter. Give in to greed, ill will, or develop the wrong views. All these things he said are categorically unskillful. You want to avoid them no matter what, which means that you have to learn how to make the mind categorical as well. Live categorically still, solid. Put it in a position where you can trust it. So there’s a skill we have to work on so that no matter where we go, we have a sense of security, we have a sense of belonging, of being at home right where we are. Ultimately, we’re going to start taking apart this sense of home, but before you do that, really develop and make good use of it. Because your awareness is centered right here, you’re a lot better positioned to see what’s going on in the mind, to see what unskillful potentials are coming up and learn how to undercut them before they get strong, and to use whatever skillful potentials you see or hear as your allies. Make the present moment a position of strength so that whatever you choose to do or say or think comes from a position of strength and not a position of weakness. The strength here is the strength of skillful qualities in the mind, conviction in the importance of maintaining a skillful state of mind, persistence in keeping it going. Mindfulness, concentration, discernment. When these things are strong, when they’re in charge of your mind, then you can trust it. It becomes your refuge. Because you realize your happiness doesn’t have to depend on things outside. It can depend on these qualities inside. And nothing outside can touch them unless you let it come in, which is why it’s important to have right view about this. This is what’s really important to maintain. This is what’s really important to develop and bring to the culmination of its development. This is where you want to invest your time and energy. Give this your first top priority, and everything else will fall in line.

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