Strength Against Fear

December 19, 2010

There’s a poem in the canyon. A monk is sitting in his hut and it’s raining outside. The poem is very short. It simply says, “My roof is well thatched. The hut is watertight, so go ahead and rain as much as you want.” Of course, that hut is a symbol for the mind that’s been thoroughly trained. The rain stands for all the dangers of the world. A thoroughly mind-trained mind is totally impervious to them. It has nothing to fear from them. That’s the state of mind we’re trying to develop. We’re trying to access that state of mind. The potential is there. It’s simply a matter of accessing it. And we do it by strengthening the mind. Because our fear of danger largely comes from our sense of being exposed, being weak, presented with something that we don’t have the strength to deal with. And so as we practice, it’s important that we try to develop those strengths. We see exactly where we’re lacking so that we can work on them more precisely, more effectively. The traditional list is five. Conviction, Persistence, Mindfulness, Concentration, and Discernment. As with concentration and mindfulness, those are the things we’re developing right now as we focus on the breath. And that has to build on persistence and conviction. Conviction here is conviction in the truth of the Buddha’s awakening, that it was possible for a human being to find true happiness and unchanging and deathless happiness through his own efforts. But that’s not just a matter of conviction in what the Buddha did. It’s a possibility for us that we, too, could find that same happiness. Because the Buddha never claimed that he was any special god or had special qualities that no human being could have. He found awakening through human effort, through human abilities. These are the abilities we have. These are the ones we can develop. So conviction here means more than just conviction in something that happened in the past. It’s conviction in the potential for what we can do now. It’s conviction that our actions can make a difference and it’s really worth putting the effort in. And so where do our actions come from? They come from the mind. So the mind has to be trained. So these are the basic elements of conviction, that our actions do make a difference. And the mind can be trained. So then we set on our path and we realize that there are different qualities in the mind. There are skillful and unskillful qualities. That’s what we have to focus on, is learning how to strengthen the skillful ones and weaken the unskillful ones. So persistence here doesn’t mean simply just a lot of effort. It means the precise effort that needs to be applied at any one particular time. The Buddha divides it into four. If unskillful qualities have already arisen, you try to abandon them. In other words, if you recognize that greed, aversion, and delusion have taken over or taken hold, you do what you can to let go of them. Or if the hindrances come in, sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty, these are things that, once you notice them, you have to learn how to put them aside. And if they haven’t arisen, you do what you can to prevent them. As for skillful qualities, if they haven’t arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. Once they’re there, you try to maintain them and develop them further. So the main list of skillful qualities the Buddha has in the strings are mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Mindfulness is the big one you have to work on, remembering what we’re here for. Because that’s what mindfulness is. It’s keeping something in mind. It’s usually paired with alertness, where you notice what’s actually happening. So you’re trying to keep in mind the fact that whatever comes up, you have to brand it as skillful or unskillful and then figure out what to do with it. And if skillful qualities haven’t arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. It’s not just sitting here passively waiting for them to come. You do what you can to create them or develop them. It’s not that you’re creating them out of nothing. We all have some mindfulness, some concentration, some discernment. It’s just a matter of learning how to take what we’ve got and develop it further. So right now we’re trying to be mindful and alert to the breath. So we can settle down and develop some concentration. Sometimes it’s thought that you need mindfulness before you can have concentration and concentration before you can have discernment. And the mindfulness before the concentration, that’s true. Without mindfulness, there is no concentration. But you also need some discernment to get these things going. The Buddha has an image where he says it’s like building a house. You put up all the beams and rafters. And the whole thing is still pretty wobbly until you put the ridgepole at the top of the roof in place. That’s when everything gets solidified. And the ridgepole here stands for discernment. So you use discernment, actually, in all of these qualities. The discernment that tells you what conviction is and what it can do, what its implications are. The discernment that helps you figure out what skill is. The discernment that helps you be mindful and concentrated. In this case, you’d learn at the very beginning just to focus on the breath, get the breath comfortable. Because if you’re going to stay with the breath, you want it to be a place where you like to stay. So you can experiment. Notice which ways of breathing feel good, which ways of breathing don’t feel good. And then how good. There’s good, better, and best. So you work on them. And you learn to think about the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the whole energy flow in the body. As you breathe in, think of the breath as there in every pore, coming in, going out. And then when you think of the body in that way, how does the body feel? Which parts feel blocked? Which parts feel like they’re not participating? Focus some attention on those. It’s like an animal creating a nest. You find things that make the nest nice. So you feel snug and secure. And it’s a good place to be. So here we’re using breath energy as our nesting material. And if the mind wanders off, remember, that’s an unskillful quality. You don’t want to go there. So you just drop it. It’s not like you’re pretending it’s not there. Sometimes important things come up. But you say, “For the time being, we don’t need that.” And you don’t have to get entangled with things at this point. Just try to learn how to stay with the breath as consistently as possible, so you give rise to a sense of ease and well-being. And as you get more and more consistently with the breath, and the breath energy throughout the different parts of the body begins to connect and feel nourishing, there’s a sense of fullness, refreshment. Allow that refreshment to nourish the body. You don’t have to drop the breath and get carried away with it, because then you’re going to lose your concentration. You stay with the breath. But when you find that things are in the proper balance, where it feels full and easy, just try to maintain that balance as best you can. Don’t tip things over. When the breath feels really good, then you don’t have to do so much evaluating the breath. Just stay with the breath energy. Stay with that sense of ease and fullness. This way you’re strengthening your concentration and you’re strengthening your mindfulness. And different people will find that the concentration develops in different ways, but eventually gets to the point where everything settles down. The breath energy feels full, like water in a big jar. No matter how much more water you try to put in the jar, it can’t get any more full than that. That’s where the in-and-out breath is getting very, very subtle, very still, and it actually gets to the point where it stops. Then maintain that. That’s when mindfulness is pure. The concentration and mindfulness help each other along. The discernment helps these things along as well. Once the concentration is solid, then you’re in a position where you can watch things arise and pass in the way. You begin to see how the mind gives rise to thoughts to the point where it latches onto the thoughts. It creates whole thought worlds. It’s not just a matter of thought worlds in the mind, it often has an effect on the body as well. Then you want to be able to look into those thoughts without getting into the thought world. Because once you get into the thought world, then you’re exposed to the dangers of that thought world. You want to learn how to watch it from the perspective of your concentration. Because this is your foundation. This is your relatively secure area where you can learn how to look into different aspects of the mind. Notice where there’s greed, where there’s aversion, where there’s delusion, where the hindrances may come and nibble away for a bit. And you can begin to see what’s the attraction. Why does the mind focus on those things? Because sometimes it focuses on things that are obviously going to harm it. Why does it do that? It’s by learning how to stay solidly in this frame of reference of the body, with breath energy feeling solid, secure, nourished, refreshed. So you can look into things and begin to see them for what they are. And there are some truths you’ll find in it that you don’t like about yourself. Well, at least you’re coming from a secure position so you don’t feel threatened. Something goes back to that principle of conviction. It’s our actions that make all the difference here. So regardless of what may have happened in the past, it’s what we’re doing right now that’s really important. And as long as you can maintain this sense of secure and settled mind, then you don’t feel threatened by the things that come up. You don’t feel scarred by the things that come up. You can watch them and understand them. You can see where the suffering is in there. You can learn how to understand the suffering, the element of clinging and feeding that goes on in the suffering. And you begin to see you don’t want to cling that way anymore. It’s not worth it. You’ve got something better here with the concentration. So this is how discernment begins. You work on all the disturbances and learn how to untangle them. And you step out of them, not by pushing them away, but actually examining them to the point where you comprehend them. And then you can let go. The last step, of course, is when you turn around and work on the concentration itself. It’s done its work with regard to other attachments. And the only attachment that remains is the attachment of concentration. Then you start taking that apart, too. That’s when you go beyond these strengths into a state of mind that doesn’t need their protection anymore, because it’s just there, totally unconditioned. But prior to reaching that point, you’ve got to work on these strengths. These are the things that we have to develop in order to gain at least some sense of security, so that we’re not out there exposed in the rain all the time. We have some shelter over our heads, walls around us to protect us from the wind and the rain, whatever else may come up. Because the stronger the mind is, the less it has to fear. Because the main things that are dangerous and fearful in the world aren’t things outside. They’re things the mind does to itself. So you’re taking care of the main danger right here.

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