Developing Inner Resources

February 17, 2011

We start by getting the body and the mind into position. Getting the body in position means that you sit straight, face forward, close your eyes, place your hands on your lap, your right hand on top of your left hand. Getting the mind in position is something we’ve already started doing. There’s chance on goodwill. We remind ourselves that we want to be happy, but we want all beings to be happy. Which means we’re looking for happiness that doesn’t harm anyone. And that kind of happiness has to come from within. Because when you look for happiness outside, you end up taking something that someone else is going to have to give up. You gain, someone else loses. They gain, you lose. That’s the way it is with external happiness, for happiness based on external things. So we remind ourselves of why we’re here. We want a happiness that comes from within, that comes from developing inner resources. Then we focus on the actual developing. Focus on your breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s a movement of energy through the body that brings the air in and allows it to go out. That’s part of the breath, too. Notice if it’s comfortable. If long breathing feels comfortable, keep it up. If not, you can change. Here we move from putting the mind in a position and to learning how to keep it in position. That’s a little bit harder. It’s not that difficult to focus on the breath. But to stay with the breath requires mindfulness, requires alertness, requires ardencing. Mindfulness here means keeping it in mind. This is where you want to stay. Trying to develop qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, you have to be able to stay with something. For periods of time, in order to see anything at all, in order for the mind to settle down. So you want to keep reminding yourself that each time you breathe in, this is where you want to be. It’s with the breath. Each time you breathe out, this is where you want to be. Then alertness means actually watching what’s going on. Are you with the breath? If not, come right back. Regardless of how amazing or wonderful or important or pressing your thoughts may be, they’re not what you want right now. You don’t have to tie up any loose ends before you come back. As soon as you notice a thought forming and you can leave it with the ragged ends, just come right back. And when you come back, reward yourself with a really nice breath, something that feels really good. You may begin to notice as you watch the breathing process in the body that there are certain parts of the body that seem to be starved of breath energy. They’re not getting involved, they don’t feel as energized as the other parts do. Well, allow them to have their share. You might want to make a scan through the body to see where the breathing process feels good, where it doesn’t feel so good. Can you coordinate things so that it all feels good? The body feels coordinated all the way in with the in-breath, all the way out with the out-breath. This relates to another quality we’re trying to develop, the one of ardency. You want to do this well. You want to give it your full attention. So if mindfulness lapses, you’re right there. If your alertness feels fuzzy, you want to sharpen it. If you catch yourself wandering off, bring the mind right back. If you notice any discomfort in the breath, try to make yourself as sensitive as possible to the breathing process in the body so you can detect even the slightest bit of stress. And then just keep that up. That’s all you’re responsible for right now. Lifting the mind up from its ordinary preoccupations. The Buddha calls this the heightened mind, the mind in a state of concentration. On the full moon night in February, the first year after he’d gained awakening, he gave a talk summarizing his major teachings to 1,250 of his Arahant disciples before sending them off to teach. And he concluded the talk with this principle of being devoted to the heightened mind, which means a mind that lifts itself above its ordinary preoccupations. As you’re here with the breath, sensing the body from within, you can put aside sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, any sensual desires, any ill will you might have for anybody, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty, and lift the mind above those things. Don’t let it get involved the way it normally has been involved. Think of the mind as being up in a tall tower or on the top of a mountain, looking down in the valley below and looking at your ordinary concerns and realizing they’re not that important. This is much more important. It’s giving the mind a sense of gathering in together, gathering its strength. Because the mind is the source of what shapes your life. Your life is shaped through your actions. Where do your actions come from? They come from intentions. The intentions come from the mind. And it stands to reason that if the mind is in good shape, it’s bound to act on better intentions. If you’re feeling weak and threatened, that’s when you do harmful things to yourself, to other people, just out of desperation, out of fear. If the mind has a sense of inner strength and stability, knowing that it has a source of happiness that nobody else can touch, then you find it a lot easier to do the right thing, say the right thing, think the right thing. As in that chant we had just now in the Four Noble Truths, it’s called the Dhamma Wheel. The image comes from the mind. It’s an idiom they had back in the time of the Buddha whenever they would have a set of variables, what we would call tables nowadays, where you list variables against one another. In those days, they called them wheels, like the wheel on the wall here. In this case, you had four noble truths, and each truth had three levels of knowledge. First, you knew the truth, you knew the duty with regard to that truth, and then you realized you’d completed that duty. In the case of stress, you realize it’s clinging to the five aggregates. That’s the essence of stress. The cause of stress is craving. Its cessation is when you learn how to let go of that craving. And then the fourth truth is the path to the cessation of stress. That’s something you develop. With stress, you try to comprehend it, you try to let go of the craving, and then the craving has been let go. You try to realize that, what goes along with the abandoning of craving. And you develop the path, which is essentially virtue, concentration, and discernment. You’ve got to get from that second stage, knowing the duty, to the third stage, realizing you’ve completed the duty. That’s a big step. It’s very easy for us to see that something should be done, but we don’t have the strength to do it. Or we have other agendas that want to do something else. So this is one of the reasons why we try to train the mind to lift it above its ordinary concerns. Because the mind, when it’s strengthened like this, when it feels more secure and has a greater sense of well-being within, finds it a lot easier to do the right thing. Your vision is a lot clearer, you’re a lot less hungry for other ideas, other satisfactions. And that enables you to see clearly what your actions are and what their results are, and where they’re going to lead. And because you’re already feeling a sense of well-being, you’re a lot more likely to see that if something has long-term good consequences, you’re willing to do it, even if it’s hard. If something in the long-term is going to lead to harm, even though it may be pleasant to do it, you’re much less likely to do it. Because you’ve got the strength now. You’ve got your nourishment now that comes from within. This ability to breathe in and out, allow the breath energy in the body to flow with a sense of fullness, refreshment. That’s food for the mind. It strengthens the mind. When the mind is stronger, it lies on a higher plane. It doesn’t have to go dumpster diving. It doesn’t have to go around picking up things that other people have thrown away or spit out. Jon Lee likes to talk about this. He says when you go around and take the nasty words of other people to think about, it’s like food they’ve spit out and then you take and you chew on it yourself. And the only reason we would do that is because we’re really, really hungry. We give the mind something much better to feed on, a sense of inner well-being, inner fullness, inner strength. We look at the things that other people spit out and we say, “We don’t need that. Just leave it right there. That’s their business and none of yours.” You think about other pleasures you can get that would carry harmful consequences in their wake. You realize you don’t need that either. Why would you want to go for that? You’ve got this sense of well-being right here. So work on developing this. This is why meditation is not a selfish activity. The fact that you are able to build an inner sense of well-being and inner sense of strength means that you’re going to treat other people a lot better than you have in the past. You don’t have to cling to them. You don’t have to feed on them. And when the mind is in a heightened state like this, it can look at its various unskillful habits and realize it doesn’t want to go there anymore. It can look at the normal concerns that people run around and fight over with a sense of dispassion. The Buddha talks about this. He says it’s like looking at fish in a puddle as the water’s beginning to dry up. The fish are struggling with one another to get that last little bit of water, and they’re all going to die. You wonder, “Well, what’s it worth? What’s this all about?” Well, you’ve got something better inside now, a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, that doesn’t have to take anything away. You don’t have to struggle with anyone else. No one’s coming to fight you, to look at your breath. This is your own territory, so cultivate it, make the most of it. This is what heightens the mind, a sense that you have within that the mind is no longer concerned with its old concerns. It lies above them. And it lies above all the squabbling that goes on in the world out there. This is a mind that’s good for you, and it’s good for the people around you. So do your best to keep it here. It may take time to get that sense of inner strength and inner nourishment. But if you stick with it long enough, you develop a taste for it, and you develop the ability to fix it for yourself every day, in the same way that you fix food for yourself every day. And whatever food you have left over, you can share with others. So do your best to keep the mind right here. Keep it in position. When you find that has lots and lots of benefits, that you’ll see for yourself.

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