Strength for the Brahmaviharas

November 16, 2011

Part of what we do as we meditate is a matter of technique. For instance, you stay focused on the breath. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and see how it feels. Notice where it feels good. If long breathing feels laborious, you can change the rhythm. You can change the depth, the speed, the heaviness or lightness of the breath. You’re trying to do two things here. Make the breathing a comfortable process so it’s easy to stay here. It feels good for the body, and it’s also easy for the mind to stay with, in the sense that it’s engaging. As the Buddha says, you bring three qualities to this. One is mindfulness, the simple ability to keep something in mind. And then there’s alertness, watching the breath, watching your own mind. Seeing what you can do to make them fit together. The third quality is urgency. You want to do this really well. You put energy into it. You try to be meticulous, noticing what’s working and what’s not working. If something’s not working, you try to figure out what would work better. For instance, if you’re focusing on the nose and you’re having trouble staying there, try the middle of the chest. Or you might try the middle of the head. There are lots of places in the body where you can focus, where you can have a sense of the energy in the body flowing in conjunction with the breath. Try to focus your original attention on the parts that feel good so that you’re coming from a position of strength. And then there’s well-being. When you can hold that, and it’s a kind of gentle holding that Jon Fuang used to use the word “prakong” in Thai, which means the way you hover around a child as the child is learning to walk. You don’t grab the child because that way the child will never learn to walk. And you don’t back too far off. You’re just right. So if the child falls, you’re there. Grab it before it hits the ground. But otherwise, you give it some freedom. That’s one of the qualities you want to bring to the practice. This is what ardency means. It’s trying to do it really skillfully. It doesn’t mean that you simply put in a lot of energy without thinking. You have to put in skillful energy. Notice what’s needed and try your best to provide what’s needed. This is the part of the meditation that goes beyond technique, because it also requires some motivation. Why would you want to do this to begin with? This is where your values come in. This is where the meditation requires some reflection sometimes. Just to remind yourself why you’re here. Otherwise, it starts getting dry. If the techniques are not working, you begin to wonder, “What am I doing watching my breath?” The mind can very easily slip off to something else. So one of the set of values you want to think about is what they call the four sublime attitudes, the four brahma-viharas. It starts with goodwill. It’s a universal goodwill for everybody. Because you realize that you want happiness, other people want happiness. And if it’s just a struggle, it gets pretty depressing. The Buddha once commented on how prior to his awakening he looked at the world and it was like a puddle of water that was drying up and all the fish were trying to fight one another for that last little bit of water. And of course, eventually they’re all going to die because the water was going to run out. He had a strong sense of dismay, he felt. But then he said he turned around and looked in his own heart and realized that the problem wasn’t outside, the problem lay inside. Like we chanted just now, everything is a slave to craving. Train the mind so it’s not a slave to craving. Then you don’t have to fight with the other fish. Maybe you can show them that there’s another way. Then you don’t end craving simply by telling yourself not to crave. You try to find something that’s really satisfying inside. This is the ultimate expression of goodwill. You find a happiness that’s satisfying and it doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. Train the mind. So you’re showing goodwill for yourself by training the mind. And the more you think about it, you realize the different kinds of happiness, the different kinds of pleasure you look for in life, either don’t last long enough to be really satisfying, or they actually cause harm one way or another. Even some of the things we take on as duties end up really being harmful. So you have to look carefully at what kind of happiness you want in life and where you’re going to look for it and how you’re going to look for it. And the more you try to develop this attitude of goodwill for all, the more you realize that training your mind is really important. The next two brahmavaharas is basically a matter of applying goodwill to different situations. Where you see there’s suffering, you try to alleviate it. That’s compassion. Where you see someone is already happy, either yourself or others, you empathize with that person. May that person continue to be happy. And again, this applies both inside and out. It’s not just a matter of saying, “May other people be happy,” or “I want to help other people who are suffering.” You have to look at your own sufferings. You have to look at your own happiness. And the attitude of compassion and empathetic joy apply not only to people who are already suffering or already happy. They also apply to people who are doing things that are going to cause suffering down the line. You have to have compassion for people who are harming themselves or harming others. And you empathize with people who may not be happy right now, but they’re working on the causes of happiness. You feel happy for them. This way there’s no jealousy, there’s no resentment. And you remind yourself that these are qualities that you need to train in. It’s easy to feel compassion for people you love. But then there are a lot of people you don’t love, but they’re also suffering or else doing something really harmful. And you have to have compassion for them as well. Otherwise you can’t trust yourself to behave skillfully toward them. This is really important. Because when we develop these attitudes, it’s not like we’re waving a magic wand around, hoping that everybody will be happy. It’s primarily an issue of getting our own motivation. You want to develop the attitudes that will make sure that you don’t do any harm to anyone else. So you don’t pile suffering onto others who are already suffering, and you don’t try to tear down the happiness of those who are happy, regardless of whether you like them or not. So again, you realize, why would you want to do things like that? It’s because you might feel threatened by their happiness, or you feel threatened by their unskillful actions, or you don’t want to be bothered by people who are suffering. And it comes down to an issue of your own mind feeling weak and threatened. And that’s because you don’t have your inner resources fully developed. So these values, again, bring you back to the breath, bring you back to the realization that you’ve really got to train your mind. Finally, the Brahma-viharas, which is equanimity. In cases where you see someone who is suffering or doing something that’s really unskillful and you can’t stop it, there’s nothing you can do to help. You realize that their karma is so strong. It’s like a raging river. And if you’re trying to put your boat into the river and turn the river back, you just get swept down the river. So you realize you have to step back. Again, this may be easy with people we don’t care about much, but many times you have to develop equanimity in situations where you really do love the person, really do care about the person, but you realize there’s something in that person that’s beyond you. And you notice this especially when, say, a child is crying, and there’s nothing you can do to stop the crying. Or when someone is getting old, losing their faculties, or when someone is dying, you realize there’s something in each human being that’s beyond you and is chastening. We don’t like to run up against limits like that. But a greater part of compassion is seeing where your limits are so that you don’t waste your energy in areas where it’s not going to do any good. And so then you can use that energy in areas where it will. This, too, requires a lot of mental training, because oftentimes we have our identity heavily invested in our ability to help somebody else. Our own self-esteem is at stake. And here’s a case where self-esteem is actually getting in the way. You need another strength to fall back on. So that, of course, brings you back to the breath, brings you back to the skills you can train in the mind. A sense of inner well-being, a sense of inner rightness, a sense of inner self-sufficiency. You don’t need to base your self-esteem on what you can do for others. You have a happiness, you have a well-being inside, a strength inside that’s sufficient unto itself. It’s only when the mind is strong like this that it really can express these attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, in a skillful and appropriate way so that you can trust yourself not to harm yourself, not to harm others. You can apply these attitudes where they’re appropriate, regardless of your likes or dislikes, because you’ve developed the strength that you need. So you don’t have to feed off one of these attitudes or their unskillful opposites to find a sense of satisfaction. So it’s important as you meditate that you not only master the techniques, but also remind yourself why you’re doing this. Because that reflection can be so powerful that it can give you the strength to deal with the ups and downs of the meditation and keep you going when things are not going quite as you’d like them to go. And so that the way you deal with other people is actually beneficial for everybody involved. Those benefits may not fit in line with your preconceived notions or ideas about what’s going on, what you would like to see happen. But an important part of being a human being is your willingness to learn. They say that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks, but we’re not dogs. We’re human beings. And human beings can learn and up to their last breath, if they want to. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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