A Position of Strength

May 7, 2014

The Buddha’s teaching is all about the importance of action, how you shape your life and how you have an impact on others by what you do and say and think. And yet it also gives a lot of emphasis to being very still. And actually, the two teachings actions go together. Because when you’re acting, you have to have strength. In John Lee’s images of a person walking, you get the strength from the foot that’s there on the ground, not from the foot that’s moving. And if your actions are going to be good, they have to come from a place where the mind can consider things carefully, clearly, and quickly. And the more still the mind is, the more it’s able to do these things. But above all, the mind needs strength, and it gathers its strength from the meditation. You sit here with a breath and tell yourself you have no other responsibilities right now—at work, at home, in the family. Just let them all go. As soon as a thought begins to move off in the direction of those things, just cut it off. And when you cut it off, have a sense that you’ve liberated the mind. Not that you’ve cut off anything vital. You’ve cut off all the vines that come and try to entangle you. So the mind can stand tall and free. Just give the mind time to be right here and settle into your body. We’re focused on running out, out, out all the time. So think of yourself backing into your body, feeling the back, feeling the legs, feeling the arms, being very conscious of where all the parts of the body are right now. If you give the mind that task, it won’t have much extra ability to take on other things. It’s as if it has only so many hands. And you’re filling all those hands with the work of being right here with a breath. So notice how the breath feels in your hands, in your wrists, coming up your arms, your shoulders. Then start with the feet coming up, the feet, the ankles. The calves, the thighs, the pelvis, up the back, through the neck, and all the muscles in the head. Try to be fully aware of these things as much as you can. And that should occupy your awareness. And if the mind tells you that it has other things to think about, you say, “Not right now.” This is one of the reasons why we have a Dhamma talk. Because the mind has so many ways of getting out of the meditation. The Dhamma talk is to give you ideas about how you can say no to these things. First off, you need your strength for all those important duties you have to take care of. If you’re coming from a position of weakness or a position of fatigue, you’re not going to do well. And the actions that shape your life are going to shape them in a very weak and fatigued way. So you have to have the strength of first conviction that your actions really are important and they require care, and they require this kind of foundation. And then you need the strength of persistence. That’s the effort part. This has to build up over time. You build on conviction because you find yourself getting more and more tired sometimes, even if the days are long or if your body’s not feeling strong. It’s very easy to give up and say, “Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to care about that anymore.” Of course, there are some things that don’t really require a lot of care, but there are things that do, and you want to be prepared for them when they come, because they don’t signal themselves ahead of time, saying, “Tomorrow there’s going to be a big issue. You’ve got to care for us, so get ready.” Sometimes they spring up at you. So you want to be in a position where you’re ready for them, whatever they do to challenge you. So this combination of conviction and persistence is what keeps you going, trying to do your best, do your best. And then, when the time comes, you can rest. That’s right now. Take the time and really move into this time fully, move into your body fully right now. Because it’s awareness filling the body. That’s what heals the body and heals the mind. And then keep at it. It requires mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. That’s another strength. Because if you forget, all of a sudden you find yourself off in Omaha. Or New Jersey. Or wherever. And you wonder, “How did I get there?” Well, you forgot. And then something came bubbling up from inside, and there you were. These little thought worlds create themselves inside. And then you get inside them, and they can carry you anywhere. It’s like getting into a television set. So you want to be able to see these little television sets as they come up and say, “No, I don’t want to get into that.” And then they’ll float away. You can just stay here with the breath. As you stick with this, your mindfulness turns into concentration. Sometimes you hear the idea that mindfulness is one thing and concentration is something else, but they really do go together. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. And, of course, you can’t be concentrated unless you have something in mind and that you stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. And as you get more concentrated, it’s easier to remember. In fact, in the really strong levels of concentration, that’s when your mindfulness becomes pure. In the topics of mindfulness, the body, your feelings, mind states, those are the objects of your concentration. So be mindful to stay right here, right here, right here, and do your best to make it comfortable right here. Because mindfulness doesn’t mean just remembering to be here. It remembers other things as well. How do you settle in right here so it feels really good? And when something comes up, what do you do with it? Something unskillful comes up. Can you remember how to handle that? Something skillful appears. Can you remember how to nurture that? Can you keep it going? Mindfulness is the governing principle in that it reminds you of what to do. And if you can’t remember that you’ve encountered this before or what you thought was going to work doesn’t work, that’s when you bring in your discernment. Discernment is also very closely related to concentration. It’s not the same thing. Some people find they can get their minds concentrated without much effort. They just kind of plop down. For most of us, it requires figuring things out. What’s wrong with the mind that it won’t settle down? Is it something having to do with the breath? Is it something having to do with ideas you’ve been carrying in from the day or emotions you let yourself get entangled with? In that case, you have to do a little work. As I was saying today, there’s that image from Ajahn Mahaprabhu of cutting down a tree. You’ve got a tree in the forest and it’s entangled with all kinds of branches and other trees and things. If you want to bring the tree down, you’ve got to cut those branches, get rid of the entanglements. So whatever comes up, you say, “Nope, that’s not for me.” And if the mind argues, you should have your reasons too. But don’t try to get involved in long, drawn-out arguments. See if you can find the argument that cuts things right through and you’re right back where you want to be. That’s what your discernment is for. And as you understand these things that have been entangling with the mind, your concentration gets more and more firm. Because when they come up again, you can strike them down again without much effort. So it really does strengthen the mind to be very still right here. Of course, getting still takes some effort, but when the stillness gets really strong, this is where exercising the mind is different from exercising the body. To strengthen the body, you need to make it move. Of course, if it doesn’t rest, you can wear it out that way. But the real strength of the mind comes from its stillness. And from that, you develop your discernment, your mindfulness, and everything else gets strengthened as your concentration gets strong. So settle in right here. The rest of your life really needs this. And regardless of what responsibilities you may have, you can’t let them occupy your mind for the whole time that you’re awake. The mind needs some time to settle down. Sleep helps to some extent, but mindfulness, concentration, and all the qualities that are developed by the concentration meditation practice, those do a lot more for the mind. You’re not just resting here. You’re also gathering your strength, gathering your discernment. So when you need to act, you can act with awareness, you can act with clarity. And your actions don’t pull you off your center. Your center of gravity stays right here, right here, right here. And it’s from being right here that the real strength comes.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/140507_A_Position_of_Strength.mp3>