Strength of Mind (outdoors)

October 16, 2016

When we’re meditating, we’re trying to develop the strength of the mind, because to live in this world requires a lot of strength, particularly if we’re going to protect our goodness. That’s a word you don’t hear much in English—your goodness. We tend to live in a society that is suspicious of goodness, always looking for the weak point, telling you that goodness isn’t really good, that instead wealth is good or status is good or fame or whatever. But those values just suck you dry. You have to have a sense that your goodness is something really valuable. You want to have a sense of honor around it, too, because that’s what enables you to protect it. And you need the inner strength to keep it going. This is why we meditate. Meditation involves developing five strengths altogether. One is the strength of conviction, that your actions really do matter, that they really can lead to suffering or really can lead to happiness. So you want to be careful about what you choose to do and say and think, and that the care you put into that is energy well-spread. Without that conviction, it’s very easy to say, “Well, it doesn’t matter,” and to get apathetic. You find that when the results of apathetic actions come back, they really do matter. They really do hurt. Together with that conviction goes that word I mentioned just now, the sense of honor. That’s another word you don’t often hear in our society. I was looking at a book on honor one time, and they were defining it as your sense of how you look in other people’s eyes. We have to be careful about whose eyes you’re concerned about. If you’re concerned about the eyes of people in general, there are no real clear values there at all. Fashions come, fashions go, and people can look at you any way they want. But if you’re concerned about how you look in the eyes of the noble ones, people who have trained themselves to find true happiness, that’s a sense of honor that’s worth trying to maintain. Again, the conviction that this is worth following, that these people are worth honoring, and that their appreciation of your behavior is something worth keeping in mind, that conviction keeps you on your toes, keeps you heatful, gives you the strength you need to do what needs to be done. But on its own, conviction isn’t enough. It requires other qualities as well. The second one is persistence, that you really stick with this. Like when you’re meditating right now, you make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath, but then you have to keep with the breath. You remove a few thoughts here and there. You don’t stop with just the first few thoughts coming in the mind. You have to keep at it. They’re like bugs getting on a flower. You take the bugs off. Oh, it turns out there are other bugs, but you take those bugs off too. You keep at it until there are no more bugs. The same principle applies to keeping the mind with the breath. It’s not that you focus on the breath and then leave it there. You go off and do something else. You have to keep reminding yourself to stay here. This is why persistence has to be paired with mindfulness. That’s the third strength. The ability to keep something in mind, to remember this is what you’re here for, and to remember there are things that are going to get in the way that you’ve got to constantly be on the lookout for, to be vigilant for. The quality of mindfulness goes together with alertness, seeing what’s actually happening so you’re on top of things when they come. Noticing what the mind is slipping off, you bring it back. If the breath isn’t comfortable, you change it to make it more comfortable. If another thought comes in, you drop it, drop it, drop it, again and again and again. You get used to doing these things until they become second nature. That’s what you want, to make it habitual for the mind to be here, settled in. It’s this way that mindfulness shades into the fourth strength, which is concentration. When you feel that you really can settle in and it feels good to be here, you’re with the breath, the breath energy feels good throughout the body, and there’s enough of a sense of fullness and refreshment that will incline you to want to stay and spread out here inside. This quality of full body awareness is important because otherwise, when the breath starts getting comfortable, you tend to follow the sense of ease or comfort and you’d float away. It may be still, but it’s not alert, it’s not mindful, it’s not strong concentration. Strong concentration is when you’re with your object no matter what else comes up. You stick with it, stick with it. Because there’s a sense of ease here, a sense of well-being. Once that sense of ease becomes well-established, then the concentration becomes a basis for wisdom or discernment. Because it’s still, it allows you to see things clearly that you wouldn’t have seen before. And because there’s that sense of ease and well-being, you don’t feel so hungry to just jump for whatever. Because the duty of wisdom and discernment is not simply to let go of things that are obviously unskillful, obviously bad. You also have to let go of things that are not so obvious. And that requires that you pay careful attention. Because there are a lot of things in the world that, at first glance, look to be good. But when you have the chance to look at them for a long period of time or look at them closely, you realize that they’re not as good as you thought. You’ve probably noticed that there are some people who look good at first glance, but if you actually look at them for a long period of time, you realize that they’re not that good-looking after all. Well, the same goes for lots of the qualities of your mind. A thought comes up, an urge comes up, and at first glance it seems something like something interesting and intriguing. If you don’t have the sense of stability that comes from the concentration, if you don’t have the sense of well-being, you tend to jump for it. But if you do have that stability and well-being, you’re not quite so hungry and you’re not in so much of a hurry to jump for things. That gives you the chance to look at them carefully, and you begin to see, “Oh, these looked good or not so good after all,” and then you realize you don’t need to follow them. You lose your desire to follow them. You’re in a better position to judge things because you’re not so hungry all the time. It’s like having a judge who is well-paid and is living in a secure position, as opposed to one who’s not so well-paid and whose position is insecure. The second kind of judge is always going to be looking for special favors under the table and making whatever decision seems at first glance to be in his interest. The second one can sit back for a bit and is in a better position to decide what’s appropriate and what’s not. So you want the kind of judge who’s well-paid. In other words, your mind has a sense of well-being. You’re secure. So you can see what’s coming up, because, as the Buddha said, there are four kinds of things that present themselves for you to do at any one time. There are the things that are good to do, that you like doing, and they’re going to give good results. Those are obvious. There’s no problem there. It’s very easy to do those. The things you don’t like to do and they give bad results, that’s not hard either. You don’t want to do those at all. It’s the things that you like to do that are going to give bad results, and the things you don’t like to do that are going to give good results. That’s where it’s difficult. Because your mind is a type that tends to jump at things, make rash decisions. You’re just going to go for your likes and dislikes. You want the mind to be solid enough, secure enough, so it can actually see when something comes up. This is the allure of that. It’s something you like, but these are the drawbacks in the long term, and you realize it’s not worth it. You want long-term results that are good, and those become your motivation for being willing to put up with things that are difficult to do. This is the quality of your discernment. It thinks strategically and it judges wisely. Discernment is not just a matter of knowing reality in terms of somebody else’s picture of reality. It means making the right judgments about what to do and what not to do, what’s worth doing and what’s not worth doing. This principle goes from some of the obvious things about the precepts all the way into deeper levels of concentration and deeper levels of discernment. We’re making value judgments, so you want to put the mind in a position where it can judge wisely and judge well. It’s in that way that discernment is a real strength of the mind. In fact, of the five strengths, the Buddha said it’s the one that makes all the rest of them secure. The image he gives is a house. You put the rafters up for the roof of the house, and then you put the ridge pole up on top of the rafters. It’s only when the ridge pole is in place, connecting all the rafters, that’s when the rafters become secure, too. So try to develop this quality of discernment based on all the other strengths so that, working together, they can make the mind strong. When the mind is strong, then you can live in this world where there are so many dishonorable people behaving, and you can say no to them. You can stick with what’s honorable. You don’t care what you look like in the eyes of the world. You care what you would look like in the eyes of the noble ones. And you’re able to maintain that sense of honor no matter what.

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