Nobility through Inner Strength

November 15, 2016

Get your body in position. Have a posture that you can try to maintain for the whole hour without putting too much strain on different parts of the body. Because the mind has work to do. To get the mind in position is not all that hard, but keeping it in position is going to be the work for the hour. Getting in position simply means focusing on the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the sensation of the breathing. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change the rhythm. You can have short in-breaths and long out-breaths, or long in and short out, or short in and short out. Deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. Try to get a sense of what breathing feels good for the body right now. If you’re feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. If you’re feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. And if you find that the needs of the body change, well, you can let the breath change too. Try to stay on top of things. We’re trying to develop three qualities of mind here as we do this. The first is mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind. In this case, try to keep in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. The question might come up, “Well, why do you want to stay with the breath?” Because it gives you an anchor in the present moment. And when you’re in the present moment, you can watch the mind, see what it’s doing. And then we see what it’s doing. Then you can see if there’s anything that needs to be changed. So seeing what it’s doing is the second quality we’re trying to develop, which is alertness. We’re in the present moment not just to hang out here. We’re here to watch what we’re doing. Because what we’re doing shapes our lives more than anything else in the world. It’s your decisions as to what you’re going to do or say or think. That’s the big force shaping your life. So you want to do it well. You want to do it with alertness. You want to know what you’re doing. And then there’s that third quality, ardency. You want to do it well. Because you realize that if you act in ways that are unskillful, you’re going to suffer. The people around you are going to suffer. It’s not worth it. So any unskillful thoughts come up in the mind, you don’t want them to get out into your words or deeds. So you want to stop them before they have that kind of influence. And one way of preventing them is to give the mind a good place to stay, because all too often the reason we do things that are not in our own best interest or anybody else’s real interest is because we feel ill at ease inside, either afraid of something or just irritated by something. We don’t want to hang around here, so we want to head out someplace else. We’re not happy in our own skin, so we want to get out someplace else. And the meditation is to make you feel comfortable here. Because once the breathing starts feeling comfortable, you can start letting that sense of comfort spread through different parts of the body. When the Buddha talks about breath, there’s the in-breath, but there’s also the energy flowing around the body, and they’re connected. And once the breathing feels good, then you can think of that breathing energy affecting the energies in the body—the energy going down the spine, the energy going down the arms, going down the legs, out through the hands and the feet, the energy circulating around in your head. Try to get a sense of how much movement there is in the body right now, and see if there are ways that you can bring all those various movements into harmony. Because once you have a sense of well-being right here, it’s a lot easier to say “no” to thoughts that you know are unskillful. You look at the energy that goes into doing unskillful things, and the bad results that are going to come, and you say, “It’s not worth it. You’ve got something better here, a better place to stay.” And it gives you strength. Concentration is one of the ways the Buddha says you strengthen. You strengthen the mind by just staying in one place. There are five strengths altogether, and we use those to counteract anything unskillful coming up in our thoughts or words or deeds. The first strength is conviction. Conviction that your actions really do matter. You’re not apathetic. You don’t say, “What the hell?” You realize that if you do something well, the results are going to be good. And that’s something no one else can take away from you. These are your true possessions. Ajaan Sawat would often comment, “The Buddha talks about not-self, not-self, not-self.” But when he gets to karma, he says, “We’re the owners of our actions, like we chatted just now. All beings are the owners of their actions.” So you want to hold on to good actions. And staying right here gives you a good place to stay, to get more skillful in your actions. So once you have the conviction that your actions really do matter, then the next quality is persistence, which is basically the same as that quality of ardency we mentioned just now. You want to do it well. You want to be a part of it. You have to learn how to motivate yourself. The Buddha didn’t say that all kinds of desire are bad. Some kinds of desire are on the path. There’s the desire to be careful about your actions, to look at what you’re doing and saying and thinking, and give some importance to them, give some weight to your actions. That’s a good desire. So you learn how to motivate yourself in different ways, either through the reflection we had just now that we’re the owner of our actions, so we have to be careful. That’s called heedfulness. Based on that is compassion. You don’t want to harm yourself. You don’t want to harm others. There’s a passage in the Canon where a king is in the private chambers with his queen, and in a tender moment he turns to her and asks, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Of course, you know what he’s hoping. He’s hoping she’s going to say, “Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” But this is a Pali Canon, so she doesn’t say that. In fact, she says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anybody you love more than yourself?” The king has to admit she’s right. So that’s the end of that scene. It didn’t go where the king wanted it. Instead he goes down to see the Buddha and reports the conversation. The Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You could search the whole world over and you wouldn’t find anybody that you loved more than yourself. At the same time, everybody else loves themselves with that same fierce quality.” And then the conclusion the Buddha draws from that is not that this is a dog-eat-dog world. Instead he says, “Because of that, you shouldn’t harm anyone.” You think about his reasons. One is if you love yourself and you mistreat other people, it’s not fair. Secondly, if your happiness depends on their misery, they’re not going to stand for your happiness. They’re going to do whatever they can to destroy it. So if you truly want to be happy, you have to take other people’s happiness into consideration as well. That’s the basis for compassion. And that’s one of the ways we motivate ourselves to want to practice. We see the harm that we’ve done with our lives. Things we’ve said, things we’ve done. We don’t want to cause that harm anymore. That’s a good motivation for the practice. The next strength is mindfulness. As I said, the ability to keep something in mind. And here you want to keep in mind the fact that you want your mind to stay under control. And you don’t want the control to be tight or oppressive. Learning how to keep the mind with a sense of well-being in the body is actually a really good way of controlling it. Because it has a sense of freedom even in the control, being where it wants to be. In the beginning, it requires a little bit of forcing it. But after a while, it’s like training any animal. After a while, the animal decides that being well-trained is actually happier than being not trained. Then it’s willing to behave. The mind is the same way. But you’ve got to keep this in mind, that what really matters is your actions. Because all too often it’s tempting when you see other people behaving in outrageous ways, ways that are threatening, ways that are unfair. Fear takes over. Anger takes over. And you forget everything that you may have known about what’s skillful and what’s not. It just gets pushed to the side. Mindfulness is what keeps reminding you, “No, no, you’ve got to stay here. Be careful about what you do.” And if there’s a choice between breaking your precepts to gain something or sticking with the precepts and having to lose something, remember that the better choice is to stick with the precepts and lose whatever has to be lost. Because things outside can always be replaced. But the virtue of your mind, once you’ve destroyed it, is hard to repair. There are things you do that you regret for the whole rest of your life. Well, remind yourself of that when you’re tempted to do something like that, that you can save yourself a lot of regret. So mindfulness takes the lessons you’ve learned about the importance of your actions and whatever skills you’ve developed in developing skillful qualities in the mind and abandoning unskillful qualities. It keeps those lessons in mind so you can apply them all the time, not just when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. The fourth strength is concentration, the ability to keep the mind with one focus. One topic, regardless of what else comes up in the mind or comes up outside. Again, you hold to your conviction, you hold to your sense of well-being inside that you develop here. And that strengthens you. Remember, this is your territory here, the energy inside the body. You don’t have to let anybody else invade that space. The more fully aware you are of the body, the more you are aware of the breath energy throughout the body, the more this really is your space, and it’s your safe space inside. And having that sense of solidity inside makes it a lot easier to do what you know is right. This is where discernment, which is the fifth strength, comes in, because you can hear a lot of things about what the Buddha said or what other wise people say about what you should do and what you shouldn’t do. But you’ve also got to learn how to observe things on your own. And notice, when you’re doing something unskillful, you can correct it. This is one of the things we learn in the course of the meditation, even in simple things like staying with the breath. You find that you lose your focus, you bring the mind back to the breath, and then you try to figure out, “How do I keep it here the next time?” How do I get the impulse to go away? How do I say no to the impulse? How do I learn to keep the mind here, keep it here, with a sense of well-being? That way, you’re developing your discernment. It’s through trying to be skillful that our discernment develops. Otherwise, we can just learn about all kinds of wise things in the books, but they just stay there as wise words. They don’t become more wisdom until we realize, “Okay, if I can change the way I act in a positive direction, that’s wisdom in action.” Whatever skills you need in learning how to talk yourself into doing the right thing and abandoning the wrong thing, that’s all discernment. It’s a strength. Because you can carry that with you wherever you go. You see the results in your own actions, and it becomes a lot clearer and a lot more convincing. Your conviction in the power of your action grows as your discernment about your action grows as well. All these qualities work together. So we can take this potential we have, our ability to make choices, and focus it in the right direction, the direction that gives us the life we want to lead. A life in which we can behave in an honorable way, regardless of what people around us are doing. And knowing that there’s an ability that comes with that. It’s an innate ability. It doesn’t come from being born in this clan or this family or whatever. It’s an ability of doing the right thing, regardless of situations around you. That is our strength, and this is how the strength is developed. Simple things like developing these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and urgency. So you can apply them not only when you’re focusing on your breath, but when you’re focusing on any task that needs to be done. These are the qualities that keep you strong and protecting your most important possessions. They’re that state of your mind. So even though there may be slips and falls as you try to stay in the breath, just keep coming back, coming back, coming back. Because the rewards are really fun.

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