Strength When You Need It

November 11, 2017

Strength of body and strength of mind. They help each other along. When the mind feels frazzled, you can work with the breath. Try to find where in the body there are some good breath energies, and if you can’t find think of good breath energies coming in from outside. I’ve noticed since starting to have heart troubles that if I think of breath energy coming in from the back, right at the area around the heart, but coming in from the back, it clears up a lot of the congestion that you sometimes feel in the heart. Or again, think of the energy coming in through the solar plexus. Remind yourself that there are good energies around. And given whatever your physical ailment may be, or whatever your mental distraction may be, you can choose different parts of the body to focus on. There are times when the body is weak and you can’t seem to get much good energy going anywhere, and the mind may feel a little fuzzy. But there’s still something that can do. Think of your awareness spreading out to encompass everything. It’s not just confined to the body. It’s everywhere. And it takes on that quality of space. There are two points in the Canon when they talk about how one of the features of space is that you can’t draw anything on it, because it has no surface. So whatever thoughts that come up in the mind, whatever pains that may be in the body or weaknesses in the body, think of them as things that people are trying to draw in space. Don’t let them leave any traces. Just hold on to that perception of space. It’s not very complicated. It doesn’t require a lot of engineering. It’s just a continuous focus and some steady mindfulness, which is what we’re working on right now, to develop that mindfulness as a strength. Mindfulness is one of the five mental strengths the Buddha talks about. The others are conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Those are all five. Venerable Sona, the monk who had been doing walking meditation to the point where his feet were bleeding and he was beginning to get discouraged in the practice, thinking he’d put in so much effort and still wasn’t getting anywhere. As the Buddha taught him, you start out with what level of energy you have. Allow your expectations to work with that level of energy. And so if you find you can’t do any complicated analysis of what’s going on in your mind, and your powers of ingenuity are not very ingenious, just be mindful of something that’s a perception that’s helpful, that you can hold in mind. Goodwill is another one. When the Buddha was sick, a splinter of stone had gone through his foot. He was lying down, and Mara came to taunt him. “What are you doing, moping around?” The Buddha said, “I’m not moping. I’m spreading goodwill for all.” Cut through the narratives. That’s one of the features of the Brahmaviharas. They have no narratives. You’re not talking about what so-and-so did or at what point, who did what to whom. That kind of thinking tends to develop into anger or desires for what you might call justice. For the Brahmaviharas, there’s no justice. There’s nothing, anything at all. There’s no anti-justice. It just doesn’t deal in those terms. The attitude of goodwill, the attitude of compassion, the attitude of empathetic joy, of equanimity—these cut through the narratives. All too often, when you’re feeling sick, feeling weak, a lot of narratives build up. “Why is this happening to me? Why isn’t it happening to somebody else? Why isn’t it happening to everybody else?” You have to realize that it does happen to everybody else, it’s just at different times. Think of the universality of all this. This is another way of making your mind larger than the problem. Space is larger than the problem, and you want your metta to be larger than the problem as well. The Buddha talks about being as wide as the River Ganges and as deep as the Ganges. Some people try to burn up the River Ganges with a torch. They can’t do it because the torch is so much smaller. Or the image of the man trying to make the earth be without earth by digging a little here and urinating a little bit there and spitting a little bit here or there. Try to see the issues of the stories that may come up as small like that, and your mind is much larger. This way, even if the discernment is not very strong, you can at least keep your mindfulness. Hold on to that because you don’t have to keep that much in mind. When your level of energy comes up, there are other things you can keep in mind. You can be more proactive in how you develop the factor of ardency in your mindfulness. There are times when the body is weak. Use the mindfulness of what kind of perceptions are helpful. Perceptions of the Brahma, of the Haras, or perceptions of space. Perceptions of the whole vast universe of beings dying and passing away. It takes you out of your narratives. Oftentimes you’ll find that the narratives are some of the most mentally afflicting things there are. The body’s not well. So you can work at this issue of strength from two directions. When you’re tired, you need some energy and will work with the breath. The breath can be energizing. When you’re feeling frazzled, the breath can be soothing. As long as you use enough imagination and figure out what the breath can do, where it can come from, where it flows. And where to focus when there’s a problem in the body. Where to focus when there’s a problem in the mind. If you’re feeling sleepy, it might be good to not focus down in the stomach. Focus on higher places in the body. If you’re feeling nervous and frazzled, focus lower down to help ground you. In this way, strength of body and strength of mind can help each other along. So that when one is weak, the other can move in. When both are feeling weak, still they can shore each other up. Because ultimately the important thing is strength of mind to come to a point where you have to shed the body. And you want to make sure that your mind is as strong as possible at that moment, and weakening itself with its various narratives. That’s one of the reasons why we practice concentration, so you learn how to pull yourself out of a narrative. Sensual desire comes up. Ill will comes up. These tend to have a lot of narratives. And you have to learn how to cut through the narrative. It’s not about the object that you’re attracted to. It’s a story about how you get the object, especially if it’s out-and-out lust. The narrative can be a lot more fascinating than just the other person’s body. So you want to learn how to cut through that, to see where is the allure of that narrative and what are the drawbacks. Learn to step outside the narrative. It’s the same with ill will. So-and-so did this, and you’d like to see them suffer. But then if you take the story back through several lifetimes, you begin to wonder, well, who started it? And what do you gain from seeing someone else suffer? Part of you says, “Well, I have good will for them, but I’d like to see them suffer first.” That doesn’t usually work. Because when people are suffering, they don’t connect to the fact that they did something wrong. They just lash out. It’d be better for the whole world if everybody could suddenly understand what the true causes of happiness are and how to act on them, and be willing and able to act on them. That’s what you should wish for others and for yourself. So it’s important that we learn how to get out of these narratives, either by constructing good new narratives, or just thinking in terms of good will, or stepping back and thinking about the whole large expanse of the universe, dying and being reborn, dying and being reborn, around and around and around, all under the influence of karma. It’s interesting that the reflection on karma functions in so many different ways. In the five reflections that we often do, it functions both as a spur for heatfulness and also a spur for passada, confidence. Heatfulness in the sense that you’ve got to be careful. Confidence in the sense that there are things that you can do. You can make choices. You can make your lot a better lot in life. In the context of the Brahma-viharas, it’s more about equanimity. Learn how to accept that there are certain things that are beyond your power to change. But don’t let that get fatalistic. Put the two of those contemplations together. Be heatful. Have some confidence that, yes, you can work your way out of this. Even though there may be some things you can’t change, there are things you can change. Put all those lessons together, and that’s strengthening. At the same time, it cuts through a lot of narratives and lets you see things in the larger picture. That can be strengthening. It helps you put down a lot of the burdens that you’re carrying around unnecessarily, because that’s a lot of what our weakness is. We’ve got so many burdens on our shoulders that we can’t do anything else. We can’t help anybody else. We can’t pick up anything else. But when we learn how to put a lot of those burdens down, we find we have a lot more strength than we would have had otherwise. That’s how you develop strength of mind, so that even when strength of the body begins to fail, you’ve still got something to hold on to. Something that will give you support.

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