Strength of Mind

June 6, 2019

We live by two kinds of strength. Strength of body and strength of mind. And of the two, strength of mind is the more important. Because no matter how much strength you have in your body, if a mind is weak, you’re going to do a lot of things that are not really in your own best interest. You mistake right for wrong. And even when you do have an idea of what’s right, you may not have the strength to do it. In which case, your strength of body is worthless. And sometimes, if you have a lot of strength of body, you can do a lot of harm. Which is why we meditate—to strengthen the mind. You make up your mind you’re going to stick with one thing right now, and then develop all the qualities that are needed to stay here. And in doing that, the mind gets stronger. And then as when you go down to the gym and exercise, you come back, the body is not strong only in the gym. It carries its strength around with it in the same way with the mind. The strengths you develop as you meditate can get carried into your life. So focus on your breath. Think thoughts of goodwill for yourself and for other people. Remind yourself that’s what you’re here for—happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. And you have goodwill for yourself. That’s why you’re here. Then you focus on the breath with the conviction that this is going to make a difference. Conviction is one of the first strengths. Technically, it’s conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, which in practical terms means you’re convinced of the power of your actions, that your actions will make a difference. Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. So you’ve got to train the mind so that your actions will be skillful. So we’re doing good groundwork here. You remember to stay with the mind. That’s mindfulness. You’re alert to what the breath is doing. You’re alert to what the mind is doing. That’s alertness. And then you try to do this well. That’s a quality called ardency, which is the second of the five strengths that the Buddha lists. Your ardency, your persistence, your energy. Because your mind is so important, you want to really do this well. There are a lot of jobs in the world that you can do well. You can do and just sort of do a good enough job, get them done. But this is the kind of breath that requires your full attention. Because if you don’t train your mind, who’s going to train it for you? And if you don’t train it now, when is it going to get trained? It doesn’t get easier as you get older. So if you find the mind slipping off in the breath, you bring it back. And then you do your best to try to make the breath comfortable so it’s a good place to stay. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. Keep at it. Try to find a rhythm of breathing that’s just right for the body right now, energizing when you need energy, relaxing and soothing when you’re feeling wired and tense. Get a sense of what the body needs and then how you can provide for those needs with the breath. And keep at it. Once you’ve found something good, keep at that too. In other words, try to maintain it. Try not to squeeze the breath too much. Sometimes when we’re focusing on the breath and we’re told to stay with the in-breath and stay with the out-breath, we try to squeeze it a little bit at the end of the in-breath and a little bit at the end of the out-breath to mark it clearly. But that makes it uncomfortable. Think of the in-breath and the out-breath flowing into each other. Think of the whole body being nourished by this. Once the breath gets comfortable, one of the exercises you can try is to go through the different parts of the body and ask yourself, “How does that part of the body feel when you breathe in? How does it feel when you breathe out? Does it feel good?” Try adjusting for that part. Start down around the navel, work up the front of the body, then go over the head, down the shoulders, out the arms, then back to the neck, down the back, out the legs. Make a survey of what you’ve got here. Because one of the important steps is going to be, once the breath gets comfortable, you want to be able to breathe in and out aware of the whole body. Otherwise your awareness tends to get blurry. Or if the range of your awareness is too small, as the breath gets more and more still, more and more refined, you lose it. And you may drift off. You latch on to the comfort, and the comfort can take you for a while, but then it stops. Or you fall asleep. So as soon as the breath gets comfortable, start surveying the body. Try to get to the point where you can sense the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. It feels like the whole body is breathing. Then you’re right here. All of that strengthens your energy, strengthens your ardency. Because you’ve got to give it your full attention. And of course, in doing that, you’re going to be strengthening your mindfulness. Mindfulness, as it’s defined in the popular culture, means simply being aware of things as they’re happening. But that’s not how the Buddha defined it. Mindfulness, for him, is the ability to keep something in mind. Here, keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. And if you’ve had meditations in the past that have been helpful, where you’ve learned lessons about how to stay with the breath comfortably, well, you remember those lessons and apply them. So we’re not just sitting here watching things come and go. We’re trying to make good things come, and prevent good things from going, and prevent bad things from coming, and making sure they go if they do come. So your mindfulness works together with your persistence. When you do that, the mind gets into concentration. That’s another one of the strengths of mind, your ability to stay with one thing comfortably, steadily. It feels nourishing. There’s a sense of ease that comes with that, a sense of pleasure, sometimes a sense of fullness. The mind is content to be here and the body feels nourished. When the mind gets steady like that, solid like that, that’s when the ultimate strength comes, which is the strength of your discernment, your ability to see cause and effect as they happen in the mind. You can see it starting with the effect of the breath on the mind itself. When something disturbing comes in, you begin to see, “Okay, this has an impact on the breath, and it has a bad impact on the mind. Why go with it?” The mind may have some reasons, “Well, I want to think about this, I want to get involved in that.” But when you can create a sense of well-being here, you begin to change your values as to what’s really worth going with in your thoughts. And you begin to see that a lot of the things that you wanted in the past have been harmful to you, caused a lot of unnecessary stress on you, and unnecessary suffering. Why go with them? You’ve got something better here. Now, this is an acquired taste. Sometimes a sense of ease that comes with breathing doesn’t seem like all that much. When you stick with it, give it a chance to grow. And as you get more and more used to these moments of stillness, you want to connect them. And they get stronger. And that’s what changes, as it changes the balance of power in the mind as to which thoughts you really want to identify with. You find that you can let go a lot of your old habits that have been causing unnecessary suffering for yourself or unnecessary stress. And when you have the mind trained like this, then it’s a lot easier for the mind to see what should be done, what shouldn’t be done. And you’ve got that sense of inner well-being, inner strength that says, “I’m up for it.” If what needs to be done is hard, you don’t let the fact that it’s hard get in the way. If there are things you have to let go of that you really like, you find it easier to let go. And this is what strength of mind means. It doesn’t mean that you just stick with something all the way through, regardless. I mean, that is a quality of concentration and persistence. But you have to use your discernment as to what really is worth sticking with. And if you see that’s causing harm, then you let go. You have the strength to let go. And as the body begins to age, get ill, weaken, you find that you’ve got this source of strength in the mind. Because as illness comes and as death approaches, the mind is going to be all over the place. If it hasn’t been trained and it’s going all over the place, it’s going to create a lot of needless suffering. Whereas if your mind is strong enough, a thought that comes up is going to be harmful. It’s going to be causing a lot of pain and distress. You can say, “No.” You can let it go. Because, after all, it’s one of the skills we develop as we work on our concentration and our mindfulness. If something comes up in the mind that’s not related to the breath, you can let it go. Let it go. Even though that thought is there in the mind, you don’t have to run with it. You’re not committed to it. It’s not committed to you. That way you learn how to think the thoughts you want to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think, and you get a better idea of what things really are worth thinking about. So this is all to the good. This is why meditating like this, developing strength of mind like this, is an expression of goodwill for yourself. And as you cause less suffering for yourself, you’re going to be less of a burden on the people around you. So take some time to strengthen the mind in this way. Because this kind of strength is good for you and for the people around you. It’s good long-term. Unlike strength of the body, strength of the body develops as you grow up and then begins to fall apart, which is why we need a different refuge. And strength of mind is just that refuge. When you work on it, when you train the mind, you find that you really can depend on it. So take this opportunity now. Opportunities like this don’t always come, but here it is.

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