

A Strong Mind

August 5, 2006

We've got a whole hour now, so focus on developing the mind. That's what the Pali term *citta-bhavana*, the word for meditation, actually means: You're developing the mind. The question is, what do you want to develop? You could sit here and develop all kinds of thoughts. But that's not what the word means. The word really means developing good qualities in the mind. It's like exercising the mind, in the same way that you exercise the body. If you want the body to be strong, you can't simply inject things into the muscles to make them strong. You have to put them to use, give them something else to focus on, focus on lifting weights, focus on running.

The same with the mind: When you're developing the mind, you're not sitting here focusing directly on the mind. You're focusing on the breath. Or you can focus on the meditation word, *buddho*. You give the mind something to work with, to come back to repeatedly, because in the course of sticking with that one object, you've got to develop certain qualities. You don't necessarily have to think about, say, mindfulness or alertness or discernment or concentration. But those things develop as you stay focused on the breath. When you wander off, you've got to know how to come back to the breath. You have to know how to be sensitive to the breath in the present moment. It's really not that hard. The hard part is sticking with it. And the sticking with it is what develops the mind.

It's like physical exercise: You can run once and it doesn't do much for the body. But if you run every day, or exercise every day, after a while the body gets stronger. The same with the mind: You just keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. There may be music off in the distance, or there may be other sounds to distract you, thoughts coming in right now to distract you, but you don't go there. You just keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the breath. And fortunately, the exercise for the mind is not as boring as the exercise for the body. As you work with the breath, you begin to learn about what this breath element can do in the body. We don't think about it too much, but there really is an energy flow in the body that's very directly related to the in-and-out breath, and it has a lot to do with our moods—not only the mechanics of the breathing, but also the moods of the mind.

So as you get more sensitive to this energy flow, try to notice how it feels, say, going down your back as you breathe in, breathe out. Watch your legs for a while as you breathe in, breathe out, to see which parts of the legs feel squeezed off, which parts actually seem to be participating in some sort of energy flow. Look for that. It's simply a matter of looking very carefully, and you'll start noticing these things.

Once you open yourself up to the possibility that it's happening, you begin to notice things that you didn't notice before. It's like that story about the ozone hole over the Antarctic. For years they were getting the data from the satellites that there was a hole, but the computer had been taught to disregard data of that sort, so it didn't see it. Only when they went back and looked at the raw data did they realize that there was something going on there. But because the program had been told that sort of thing would be impossible, then they didn't see it.

The same with the mind: If you think that the breath energy in the body is impossible, you're not going to see it. If you open yourself up to the possibility that it's there and has been there all along, you begin to notice that it really is right there. Some parts of the body may feel closed off, other parts may feel connected. Try to encourage the sense of connection, the energy flowing all through the body: down the arms, down the legs. That changes your relationship to the breath. You learn new things about how your mind relates to the body. And you get new tools as well. When you learn how to play with the breath, you can start using it when you really need it, to give you a sense of well-being wherever you go, whatever the situation.

Once you've gotten sensitive to the breath, then as you go out and deal with other people, sometimes when you're in a difficult situation, you can sense yourself tensing up, say, around a difficult person or a job that has you worried. You can consciously say, "No. Relax. There's no need for me to tense up, no need for me to make myself miserable inside just because a situation outside is bad." It was just an old habit you have, picked up who knows when. We've picked up so many habits, particularly related to our relationship to the breath, our relationship to the immediate experience of the body. We picked up these habits back when we were little kids before we even knew language, as we were trying to relate to our bodies. Some of the old habits are still there, getting in your way. So once you notice that they're unnecessary, causing stress, you don't need them, then you can let them go.

There's a lot to explore here. When the Buddha teaches breath meditation, he doesn't simply have you stay with the breath and do nothing else. He gives you lots to explore. You learn how to breathe in and out with a sense of the whole body. You learn how to calm the sense of breathing. In other words, look for patterns of tension in the body that you associate with the in-breath and the out-breath that are really not necessary. Think of the breath just coming in and out on its own, without your pulling it in or pushing it out: What would that be like? And compare it to the way you breathe when you're consciously saying, "Now I'm going to breathe in, now I'm going to breathe out." If you start seeing anything that's unnecessary—any stress or tension or tightness that really doesn't have to be there—you can let it go.

When you do that, when there's a sense of ease in the body, then focus on breathing in a way that maintains that ease, that doesn't interfere with it or block it off. There can even be a sense of fullness, so learn how to breathe in such way that helps maintain that fullness even as you breathe out. Often when there's a sense of peace or ease in the mind, you grab right at it, and of course that destroys it. So you have to have a more patient attitude, to sit here very still. If it comes, it comes. All you have to do is just stay very still, and it'll stay around. It's like trying to watch a hummingbird up close. If the hummingbird flies by and you grab at it, of course it's going to fly away. But if you go over and stand by the hummingbird feeder, staying very still, the hummingbirds will come. You don't have to do anything. They'll come very, very close. You can watch them. And you don't have to do anything to make them stay. It's just your stillness that allows them to feel comfortable around you.

It's the same with the sense of peace and ease in the mind. When it comes, just be very, very still. You don't have to grab on to it. You don't have to squeeze it. You don't have to hold on to it. Just maintain that same sense of peace and ease that you had going before, and it'll hang around. As you do this, you begin to see that certain ways of thinking are getting in the way. When they come up, just let them go. They come up again, let them go again.

The point here is that you find a lot to study in the course of staying with the breath. It's not just a matter of clamping the mind down on the in-breath and the out-breath. You can explore different things about the breathing, which way of breathing creates a sense of physical ease, which way of breathing creates a sense of mental ease, and then finally how you can be aware of the movements of the mind as you're aware of the breath at the same time.

This way, your focus on the breath brings you back around to the mind. You need the breath to begin with, in order to stay here in the present moment, but finally you get to the point where the breath gets calm enough that you can see the movements of the mind very clearly. It's like a pond of water. As the water settles down, as it's not being stirred around by any currents or any wind, it just gets very still, and you can see all the fish and all the other things under the water.

Then you can start working on the mind directly. You begin to notice if the mind feels unsteady. What can you do to make it more steady? If its energy seems to flag, and you're not getting any joy out of the practice, what can you do to gain a sense of well-being, a sense of gratification out of the way you breathe? Or by the way you relate to the mind? Sometimes it has to do with the breathing. Sometimes simply it has to do with how you relate to your thoughts. But either way, this is the place where you can see it: right here in the present moment.

So there's a lot to explore. This is why mental exercise is a lot more interesting than physical exercise. And of course, it creates much greater benefits. With the body, no matter how much you exercise, eventually it's going to get old and it's going to get to the point where you can't exercise it anymore. But the mind's not that way. No matter how old the body is, your mind can still gain from the practice, it can still get exercise. It's more difficult as you get older in some cases, which is why it's good to get started while you're young. This way, the exercise, the meditation gets more and more habitual. It becomes your second nature. After all, as you're meditating, what are you doing? You're learning to look at things in the mind in terms of cause and effect, watching which actions lead to stress and which ones don't. As aging, illness and death come creeping in, you can take that same approach: Look for your actions. What are you doing that's making the aging, illness, or death have an impact on the mind? What can you do to drop those actions?

When you learn how to see the actions of the mind clearly, then you have a lot more control over how much you're going to suffer or not suffer. And that puts you in a really good position, because you don't have to suffer from everything that comes your way. You're more in control. This is the strength of mind that develops from exercising it this way.

So try to develop the strengths of the mind—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—starting with this simple exercise of sticking with the breath. When the mind wanders off, bring it back. Wanders off again, bring it back again. Learn to make it comfortable with the breath, and then on to the other steps of breath meditation: being aware the whole body, calming the breath, breathing in a way that helps foster a sense of ease and rapture, and so on up the steps. This is how the mind gets strengthened to the point where it doesn't have to suffer in the ways it did before. It can withstand all kinds of things coming at it from the world, both the world outside and also the world inside in terms of the body or thoughts that come bubbling up in the mind. These are all “world.” What you want to do is maintain the well-being, the sense of just knowing in the present moment that doesn't have to identify with anything, that doesn't have to latch on to anything. There's just a sense of well-being in and of itself.

When you've got that, then the mind is strong. The mind is well developed. That's the point of all this exercise, when the mind is totally free. This is something that can't be achieved by sitting around and thinking a lot or theorizing a lot. It's achieved by simply doing the exercise. Just like strengthening the body: You can think about it, you can read about it,, but if you don't actually go and do the exercise, nothing happens.

So think about exercising the mind every day, every day, to keep it strong. At the very least, keep it strong enough so that it can stay on top of things from day to day, whatever the situation may be. Then work on building it stronger so that it can deal with more

difficult situations. Aging comes, most people get overwhelmed. Illness comes, most people get overwhelmed. Death comes, practically everybody gets overwhelmed. But it doesn't have to be that way. The mind can develop a sense of well-being that's not touched by these things. It can find an independent sense of well-being inside. And this is how you do it.

So stick with the practice. When it's easy, you stick with it. When it's hard, you stick with it. When you want to do it, you stick with it. When you don't want to do it, you still stick with it, because it's the most important thing you can do, the most valuable thing you can do. So make sure that it has top priority.