

Strengthening Your Goodness

October 11, 2019

We have lots of responsibilities in life, so many that it's often hard to hold everything together. And one of the first things that goes is our goodness, our desire to be wise and compassionate in our dealings with others. And yet that's probably one of our most valuable possessions. So to protect it, we need strength of mind to be resilient in carrying out our duties, not being overwhelmed by them.

Developing strength of mind is in some ways very much like developing strength of body. To develop strength of body, you have to remember to exercise it and to nourish it with rest and good food. In the same way, the mind needs to be exercised. You need to remember to keep it exercised and to nourish it well.

The remembering there is mindfulness. It's so easy to forget things, so we have to keep reminding ourselves. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, trying to remember to stay with one thing. Every time we forget, we just come back. You forget again, you come back again. That ability to catch yourself and to come back exercises your mindfulness, strengthens it. In other words, you don't just give up and let things slide. You keep at it, at it, at it.

The exercise is right effort. If you see anything unskillful in the mind, you try to let it go. Now with some unskillful things, all you have to do is recognize them: "This is unskillful, this is going to be bad for me down the line," and they'll go away. You look at them and they're almost embarrassed and so they disappear. Other things require more work. You have to figure out *why* the mind likes to go for those unskillful things, what the allure is, and then provide arguments against the allure.

And you may say, "I came here to get some peace of mind, and here I am arguing with my own mind." It's an important part of the exercise in getting the mind trained. You don't give in to whatever urges come up. This is how you develop your set of tools. You begin to recognize some of the excuses that greed gives or that lust or anger or delusion gives, and you begin to recognize their weak points. The more quickly you can recognize the weak points, the more quickly you can deal with them. This is the work of right effort together with discernment.

When the Buddha was teaching mindfulness of breathing to his son, he started out with some discernment exercises, in particular, focusing on inconstancy—and that includes stress and not-self—to give karate chops to your unskillful thoughts. Whatever they propose, you can say that the pleasure that comes from engaging in lust or anger or whatever is very inconstant, and yet you'd be left with the long-term karmic consequences. Is it worth it? No. But that part of the mind will say, "I want some pleasure and I want it now." This is where you try to get the mind into concentration.

Because it is pleasant to be with the breath, to just settle down with the breath. And it's pleasure of a different order. The pleasure of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations: That's called sensual pleasure. That can often irritate the mind, in other words, get it to do things that are unskillful. But the pleasure of just being with the breath is called the pleasure of form, your sense of the body as you feel it from within, and that's totally your own territory. The pleasures of the senses depend on things outside of you and people outside of you being a certain way. If that's where you find your happiness, then your goodness is going to depend on people being a certain way. It's not independent. It's not really trustworthy. But your body as you feel it from within: That's your own territory. Nobody else can feel this; nobody else can move in, push you out. Nobody can even see you enjoying the sense of the body from within, so you don't provoke jealousy in other people when you can find a sense of ease just by breathing, just by being with the breath energy in the body.

And this is where the real strength lies. Just as with exercising the body, it's not the case that exercise strengthens the body. Exercise doesn't build your muscles, it actually uses them up. It's the nourishment, the food, and the rest: That's what builds them up. And in the same way, getting the mind to be still with a sense of well-being with the breath really strengthens the mind.

So create some space here in the present moment to be with the breath. Let your other thoughts be in the background if they're going to be there at all. You don't have to get involved with them; you don't have to chase them away. If you try to chase them away, they've got you.

So notice where you feel the breathing in the body, and ask yourself if it feels good. Learn to be a connoisseur of the breath energy in the body, so that you can recognize immediately what feels good, what doesn't feel good. And you can adjust the breath so it's just right: not too long, not too short. Just like the porridge in the story of Goldilocks: not too warm, not too cold; not too heavy, not too light; not too deep, not too shallow. Whatever way you want to breathe right now, that's totally up to you. Again, this is your territory, so allow yourself to settle in.

The one thing you have to watch out for, though, is that when things *do* get comfortable, there's a tendency to just go straight for the comfort and to forget the breath. So as you're going to be feeding on the pleasure of your concentration, you have to have some manners in your feeding. If you forget the breath, the cause of the comfort will dissipate, and either the comfort will go away or else you'll go into state of what's called delusion concentration, where there is a sense of ease but you're not very focused, and although the mind is resting it doesn't get the energy that comes from being still *and* mindful at the same time.

So allow there to be pleasure, let it spread through the body, but at the same time keep in mind the breath. And here by "breath" we mean not only the breath coming in and out, but also the breath energy you can feel in different parts of the body. Right now it may not be all

that evident, but the more you pay attention to how the body feels from within, the more you feel that there are levels of energy in the body.

You may want to go through the body section-by-section to see how the breathing feels, say, first at the navel, then at the solar plexus right in front of the stomach, up in the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head, then down the shoulders and the arms, down the back, down the legs. Start with small areas of the body one by one, and then add them together.

Try to understand also that the breath energy is something that's already there, it's just that it's squeezed out in some places. Some parts of the body are not getting their full share. But also there are many levels: It's a common mistake to think that if you're going to get the breath to go down to the toes you have to breath *really* long. But actually there's a level of breath energy that's so quick that as soon as you start breathing, every part of the body has already gotten some of that energy. So it is possible to breathe through the whole body and yet have your breathing short at the same time. This helps make the breath become more comfortable. You're not forcing it in ways that are unnatural, and you're basically listening to what the body needs.

If you want to be friends with the breath, it's as with any friendship: You have to listen to the other person, observe, and then make whatever contributions you can make to make the other person comfortable. Here you're trying to make the breath comfortable. So be friendly with it. Watch it, observe it, listen to it. Give it the space it needs.

There was a cartoon years back of a woman sitting and meditating. At first she was sitting there very still, and then the word *think* appeared plastered across her forehead, blotting out the forehead. And then another *think* appeared in a different part of the body. And in the final panel, you couldn't even see her body at all, it was all covered by *think, think, think, think, think*.

Your thoughts take up space in the body, so the more still you are, the more room you give to the breath to move, to saturate the body, permeate the body, so that there's a sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and everything is coordinated. When you get to that point, your sole duty is to stay focused in one point but then spread your awareness to fill the whole body.

So choose a point that seems congenial, and think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Maintain this sense of centered but broad awareness, because that's the awareness that's going to be strengthening. The more you can stay there, the more everything gets strengthened.

As you go through your day, try to be in touch with the breath as much as you can. When you have the time, you can sit down and fill the whole body with your awareness. Now, you have to *make* time for this. As with all aspects of the practice, there's a lot here in society that doesn't encourage you at all, that tells you, "You have other duties, other responsibilities, other

things you want to be interested in.” But you have to make up your mind as to what your values are, and don’t be so easily taken in. All too often, we’ve internalized the values of people outside without really thinking about why.

So if you’re going to practice, you have to be deliberate in deciding what you *really* want. Get your priorities straight. One of *the* big priorities, of course, is the state of your mind. The world out there doesn’t care about it. You’re the one who has to care about it most. So make sure that the state of your mind *is* your top priority.

And show some respect for concentration, as the chant said just now. Remember: It is a source of your strength. So give it time, give it your attention. Have a sense that it’s a real privilege to be able to concentrate, to do this work, and it’s a privilege that you’re up for.

So be mindful to exercise the body, be mindful to exercise the mind. Be mindful to nourish the body properly, be mindful to nourish the mind properly. That way, you’ll be strong enough to meet all your duties and then some. In other words, you’ve got your own inner set of duties, what the Buddha sets out in the four noble truths: to comprehend the way the mind creates suffering for itself, to abandon the cause, to realize the cessation of suffering by developing the path. It may seem a little disconcerting that here are even more duties for you, but these are the ones that are for the sake of your true happiness. So give them the space and the priority they deserve.