

Strength to Be Good

May 7, 2015

Try to be as fully aware of your body sitting right here as you can, how it feels in all the different parts. The ideal awareness of the breath has one spot as its main center, but its range should go all the way down through the body, all the way down the arms to the tips of the fingers, all the way down through the torso, the legs, to the tips of the toes. This is your space, and you don't want to leave it. The more fully you can inhabit it, the less likely you will be to go anywhere else. The body can settle down and have a sense of being secure. The mind can settle down and have a sense of being secure right here.

There are so many insecurities in the world out there. Of course, the body itself is not all that secure. One of our chants reminds us that we're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. But for the time being, this is your home base. And home base here has some potentials.

The texts talk about different elements in the body. And they're not talking about the chemical elements; they're talking about the elementary feelings by which you know you've got a body sitting here. The breath is the primary one you want to focus on because it's the most responsive to what you want to do. All you have to do is think, "longer breathing," and it'll breathe a little bit longer; "shorter breathing," it'll be a little bit shorter; "deeper," "more shallow," "heavier," "lighter." It'll respond to your thoughts. And you can take advantage of that. Try to gain a sense of what the body needs right now in terms of its energy, and adjust the breath accordingly. When you find something that feels good, stick with it as long as it feels good. And if it starts feeling not so good—well, you can change again. Try to keep on top of things.

As you get more sensitive to the breath, you get sensitive to the other elements as well. There's a sense of heaviness: That's earth. Warmth is fire. Coolness is water. On a cool night like this, you might want to think of a little bit more warmth inside. It's like playing with the knobs on your stereo. You can think about each of these different elements and then focus on where in the body that particular sensation is strongest. With warmth you might find something warm down inside the stomach or around the heart. Coolness might be closer to the skin. For heaviness, you can think about where your bones are.

And then ask yourself, what's lacking there?

The breath and the heaviness—i.e., "wind" and "earth" in the old terms—balance each other out. Water and fire balance each other out. So try to gain a

sense of what's just right in the balance. After you've fiddled with the knobs in your stereo, you can decide exactly how much bass, how much treble, how much volume would be just right. And then you can enjoy. Learning how to create a sense of well-being inside like here is a gift you can give to yourself. And it's one of the potentials we've got with these elements. It puts the mind in a better mood; it's healthier for the body.

And when the mind is in a better mood, it's a lot more likely to be willing to do what has to be done. Many times we know what we should be doing but we don't want to do it because we don't feel like it. Or we know what we *shouldn't* be doing but we'll do it anyhow because we want it. This is because we have a certain hunger for these things. But if you can satisfy your hunger for pleasure by breathing well, then, one, it's cheap, you don't have to pay anybody for the breath—at least not yet. Who knows how they're going to try to figure out to privatize it in the future, but right now we've still got our breaths. Two, when you feed on comfortable breathing, it puts you in a good mood. You're much likely to do the right thing because your hunger for pleasure is being fed.

This is why it's good to learn how to take this skill as you go through the day. Otherwise, you're going to be hungry for other people's words or actions that can make you happy. You're going to be needing other people all the time for your sense of well-being. You look for food there because you're not providing food for yourself. And when you're feeding on other people like that, often it can get unhealthy. And dangerous.

So learn how to feed yourself well inside. You become more and more self-sufficient. Even when things outside turn bad, you've still got everything you need here inside. Because when things turn bad outside, that's especially when you're going to need this. It's very tempting when things get difficult to say, "Well, the rules don't apply anymore." When things start breaking down in society, people start behaving toward one another in ways that really are not human. They become more animal-like. You don't want to take that kind of behavior as your guide. You want to take as your guide what you've learned from the Buddha as to what's always right and you want to stick with it regardless. Now, to really make that regardless, you've got to learn how to develop your own inner sense of strength. A sense of well-being that comes from concentrating the mind and the breath like this is an important strength. It's really food for the mind.

In addition to concentration, the Buddha lists other strengths as well: conviction, effort, mindfulness, and discernment.

Conviction here means belief in the Buddha's awakening, that it really is possible through human effort to find true happiness. And the belief that our

quest for happiness is not a very short thing – it’s something that’s been going on for a long, long time. So when you make any decisions, you want to keep not only your immediate interests but also your long-term interests in sight. Long-term into the future, in terms of preparing yourself for future contingencies, and long-term into the past, in terms of remembering that you worked hard to get the good opportunities you have in this lifetime, so you don’t want to squander them on unskillful behavior.

You combine conviction with discernment, in which you realize that there are short-term kinds of happiness and long-term kinds of happiness. The beginning of discernment is when you see that you want to be willing and able to abandon the short-term ones, if necessary, to gain the long-term ones. It’s a trade.

Then there’s the strength of effort. You realize there are certain things you’ve got to do. You’ve got to put in effort. As we chanted just now: “giving rise to the desire to abandon unskillful things that have arisen, or to prevent them from arising to begin with; and the desire to give rise to skillful things that aren’t there yet, and once they’re there to maintain them.” This involves your motivation in addition to your ability to put in the energy. And the concentration is really good here. It helps give you the strength you need to stick with this.

Then there’s the strength of mindfulness. Sometimes we hear mindfulness defined as open awareness or open acceptance or bare awareness, a purely receptive state of mind. That’s not mindfulness, that’s equanimity. Mindfulness is keeping things in mind, particularly what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. You learn this either from listening to others or reading books, or from your own experience. And you want to have that at your fingertips, so that when something bad comes up in the mind—greed, aversion, delusion—or something good comes up, such as rapture, you can remember how to handle it. If you’ve had experience in the past, then you apply what you’ve learned.

The basic principle with regard to rapture is that whatever comes up, you want to stay with the breath. Don’t go jumping off into any rapturous feelings that come up. The breath is the cause. And your ability to stay with the breath will allow the sense of rapture to bathe over the body and, once it’s done its work, to fall away. So you stay with the cause, and the results will take care of themselves. You want to be able to remember that.

Sometimes visions come up in the meditation. You want to remember how to deal with them. One, if you don’t like them, just breathe deep down into your heart three times and they’ll go away. In other words, you re-establish your alertness, re-establish your frame of reference. If the vision seems to have some information for you—or sometimes it’s not a vision, sometimes words come into

your head—you have to remember that you can't believe everything that comes into the mind, even when you're meditating. If the message sounds reasonable, you can put it to the test and see what kind of results you get. In other words, the visions themselves are not the measure of whether they're true or not. The measure of their truth lies in what happens when you put their message into practice. This is a principle that goes all the way through the teachings.

So these are some of the things you want to remember. This gives strength to your practice. You realize you've got some tools to deal with whatever comes up. You're not left defenseless.

When the mind is strong inside like this, with a sense of well-being, a sense of solidity inside, feeling less and less threatened by things outside or coming up inside, you're a lot more likely to act in ways that are for your interest and for the interest of others.

Notice that your interests and the interests of others are not a zero-sum game. In other words, it's not always the case that when you gain, other people lose, or that when they gain, you lose. There are some things to which that does apply: material wealth, status. With those things, there's only so much to go around. But with the goodness that comes from the meditation, the goodness that comes with generosity, the goodness that comes with virtue: That kind of goodness spreads around.

And because your gain in these things doesn't mean that anybody else has to lose, these kinds of goodness create a good society where people can live together without constantly putting up boundaries and trying to amass as much as they can within their own little boundaries. The goodness of generosity, virtue, and meditation is a goodness that overflows boundaries, erases boundaries. So it's good all around. It strengthens you and it strengthens your relationships with other people.

And as Ajaan Mun once said, the goodness that doesn't have any drawbacks: That's genuine goodness. Meditation is one of those forms of goodness. The more you do it, the better. In this way, the goodness spreads into you, throughout you, and then spreads out into the world.