

Strength for Stillness

April 30, 2012

It's a great night to meditate. There's a gentle drizzle coming down. Looking out, all you can see is the fog of the drizzle. Everything turns your attention back inside.

So what have you got here? You've got the breath, coming in and going out. And a mind that may or may not want to settle down. Or a mind whose various committee members may or may not be in agreement about settling down. So try and find the members that want to stay with the breath, that want to look inside, and strengthen them.

How do you strengthen them? First through conviction, the conviction that this is a good thing to do, this practice we're doing here. Something taught by people of no defilement: people who have found true happiness; people who have no ulterior motive in teaching this to anyone else. They'd found that this method worked. They'd tested it inside and passed it on to others, who have passed it on to us. And so now we have the opportunity to practice.

Then there's the strength of persistence, which is a matter of coming back, coming back, coming back, figuring out how much energy you have to put into this right now, the kind of energy you can sustain. It takes a little while to get the right balance. The image the Buddha gives is the tuning of a lute. You try to tune the strings so that they're not too taut, not too loose, so that they give just the right sound. This is a skill that comes more and more with practice.

Then there's the strength of mindfulness. You try to remember: This is really what you want to do. Remember all the various reasons you have for wanting to be here. And those reasons point you to what's happening with the breath right now. If you're going to see anything about the mind, you've got to see it here in the present moment. So you want to look carefully, you want to look skillfully, so as to get results.

The practice of mindfulness involves bringing three qualities to your practice: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. Ardency is the quality of wanting to do it well. It's the element of will in the practice.

Alertness is the attention you're paying to see what you're doing in the present moment, seeing what's actually going on. Is the breath coming in? Is it going out? How is it going in? How is it going out? Does it feel good? If it doesn't feel good, then you can bring in some more ardency to pay careful attention to what you're doing here. You can experiment and see what's working, what's not working. Mindfulness is what reminds you as to why you're here, reminds you of what you've done in the past that's worked, what hasn't worked, to get the mind to settle down. You want to bring that to bear as well.

You see these three qualities in all kinds of activities. Years back I was reading a piece by Cicero. He was talking about how the mind has three functions: will, attention, and memory. These functions correspond to ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. Of course, Cicero had a different use for these faculties. He was a lawyer who wanted to win people over to his side. He gave speeches trying to influence people's opinions, so he wanted to draw on their memory, he wanted to capture their attention, so that they would get their will in alignment with his. Basically this is how you look at the mind when you're trying to persuade it. You have to speak in a way that captures your audience's attention. If you want them on your side, you've got to draw on their memories, things they're fond of, things they believe in, things they hold dear, or fears that you have in common, to get them to focus their will on the direction you want them to go.

So in this way, when you're trying to get the committee of the mind to settle down, you're acting like a lawyer. Try to remind the various members of what's good in life, why the practice is something you really want to develop. You have to catch their attention to remind them, to get them in line with your will, which is to do this well.

A few years back, I was reading an interview of a famous pianist from Austria. He was giving a farewell concert tour here in the States. And in the interview he talked about what it was like to play the piano, what functions were going on in the mind. As it turned out,

they were the same three functions. He was trying to listen carefully to what he was playing as he was playing it: That's alertness. At the same time, he had to remember what he had in mind when he sat down to play the piece. He had to remember what the piece was, and also how he'd been playing it up to that point: That's mindfulness. That was so that the present note would fit in with what he had been playing up to that time. Then the next question is, how to play the next note. How do you want this note to lead into the next note? Do you want to go along with your original intention? Or have you found something better? Is the way you're playing moving in an interesting new direction that you want to explore? Or do you want to keep things in line with the original intention? And whatever your decision, how do you carry it out? This is a function of ardency. This is how the mind functions when you're playing the piano well, and it's all a matter of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency: the same three functions that we're developing right here.

So as you're settling down, think of yourself as being like a lawyer, trying to convince yourself to stay here, remembering your reasons for staying here. Get everybody on board. When the mind finally does stay with the breath and it seems like it's settling down, then you're more like a musician. There's less need to persuade the mind to actually stay here. The use of your memory and your will gets a lot more fine-tuned: Just remembering enough to keep the mind with the breath and willing it just enough to keep it pointed in the right direction. You're getting a higher use out of these three functions of mind, and this way you strengthen your practice again.

This brings you to the strength of concentration. Mindfulness is not a state of mind free of agendas. It has a very strong agenda: You want to move the mind to stillness because you realize that this is an essential part of the path. The function of mindfulness is to remember that, so you don't forget where you are and you don't forget your purpose for being here. You don't forget how to stay here.

So you evaluate how things are going and make adjustments as is necessary. That helps you to settle down. The mind can then move in with the breath, get a sense of unification with it, getting into strong states of concentration. That really strengthens your practice and strengthens your sense of well-being right now.

Then there's the strength of discernment. As you watch what you're doing and you notice what's skillful and unskillful, that use of evaluation and concentration actually becomes an important part of discernment. It's how the two qualities go together. Ajaan Suwat would often speak of this. He'd say, make it your signal in your mind, something that you keep focusing on: Where is the disturbance? Where is there stress? That's something that needs to be looked into. That's where you're going to find ignorance. Where is there anything in the mind that's disturbing your peace? That's the problem. The peace itself is what you rely on so that you can see things clearly.

You need the strength to see them clearly—the strength to want to look at them. If you're not feeling well-nourished by the breath, if your good committee members are feeling weak, you're not going to be willing to look into the mind's problems. You're a lot more likely to want to place the blame on things outside. The mind claims that the reason it's not at peace is because of this or that disturbance from somebody else, something else outside. But as you develop a sense of well-being inside, you see more and more that the real issue is not so much what's happening outside, it's what's happening inside. It's not that you're placing blame inside. You're simply pointing out that this is where your opportunity for solving the problem is.

The other day someone was asking why it is that we keep focusing on the problems inside. Aren't there problems outside? Of course there are problems outside, but the reason why your mind is weighed down is because of the problems inside. And those are problems you can do something about. If you haven't straightened out the problems inside, you probably have a pretty messy idea of how to straighten out things outside. Sometimes, in your efforts to straighten out outside things, you make them worse.

So you want to be confident that you're coming from a good place: a place of strength, a position of strength, a position of well-being. That's why we look inside to see where there's stress and what can be done about it. Then all the good parts of the mind become strong.

Your conviction, your persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment: Keep focusing them inside here. As I said, the weather is helping us tonight. The drizzle outside is like a blanket. It gives you a sense of security, and allows you to focus all your attention inside.