

Five Strengths

February 20, 2008

Close your eyes, sit up straight, put your hands in your lap. Think thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all the people around you, for all the living beings everywhere. May we all find true happiness. And then focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it's going out. Stay with the sensation of the breathing as consistently as you can all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. Don't let any distractions pull you away. If you find that you are pulled away, just drop whatever the distraction is and come back to the breath. Each time you come back, notice: Is the breath as comfortable as it could be? Could it be more comfortable? Would slower breathing be better, or faster? Deeper or more shallow? Longer or shorter? You can experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now.

You're not just tying the mind down to the present moment. You're exploring the present moment, you're learning about it. Because here it is: this breath. It's been coming in and going out ever since you were born. Have you gotten the most out of it? If it's left unattended, it simply keeps you alive. But if you pay attention to it, you'll find that it's a lot more helpful than you might have imagined. If you breathe in a comfortable way, it helps to erase stress diseases and it's calming to the mind.

More importantly, staying with the breath develops a lot of good and very useful qualities in the mind. And this is important because it's the nature of your mind, that the skills of the mind determine the shape of your life. Essentially we meditate for two reasons: one is to live a better life, and the other is to die a better death. The two go together. We're not just engaging in a little stress reduction here. We're training the mind to deal with the issues of life and death in a much more skillful way.

The strength of your mind lies its conviction in the importance of its own actions, its ability to stick with what it knows is skillful; its qualities of mindfulness, concentration and discernment. These are the qualities of mind that determine how you're going to deal with issues in life as they come up. The more mindful you are, the stronger your concentration, the more likely you are to deal in a skillful way because you're coming from a position of strength. You not only know what the skillful action is, but you're also strong enough to actually do it.

Often we know the right thing to do but we just simply don't have the strength to do it. And if that's the way we live, imagine what it's going to be like when we die. The body will be a lot weaker, the mind will be distracted by all kinds of things—your thoughts of this, you're going to miss this and miss that, you've only a little time left for this or that. The people around you are all in a turmoil. The mind has to be really strong to put up with a situation like that and not buckle under. And the shape of your mind at that point is going to have a huge impact on how you are reborn. The life you've lived is going to have a huge impact as well.

They compare dying to falling asleep and dreaming, except that in this particular case you can't come back to the body anymore. When you fall asleep, a

little dream world will appear in your mind and you go into it: That's your first dream. Now the nature of that dream world could be something realistic or something totally fantastic, pleasant or unpleasant. The nature of the dream world that appears has to do both with your past actions—issues that have been weighing on your mind for a long time—or your current state of mind. The principle that applies as you go to sleep applies at the moment of death as well, except at that point the mind does tend to be a lot weaker, a lot more desperate. It will jump— especially if it's untrained—it'll jump at anything. If you can train the mind to be more mindful and alert to what's going on, then if you see something unpromising coming up, you don't have to jump for it. You realize that you've got the choice, and if you learn how to keep in mind the good things you've done in life, that makes it easier for good dream worlds to appear at the time. But regardless, the important thing is that how you die is determined by how you live. That's the issue right now. And so you need the meditation to develop these five strengths.

The first one, as I said, is conviction: conviction in the principle that what you do is really important, the choices that you make have a big impact on your life. You're free to make those choices. We're not automatons, we're not wired by fate. We always have the opportunity to choose to do the skillful thing in any given situation, and those choices, whether skillful or unskillful, really do shape our lives. If you're convinced of this, you're going to pay a lot more attention to what you do and say and think. It encourages you to be more careful about your choices and at the same time to value your good choices when they come.

So that conviction makes it a lot easier for you to do the right thing, say the right thing, think the right thing. That's a form of strength.

The second form is persistence, as when you're sticking with the breath here. Each time you slip off, you just come right back. Don't let yourself get discouraged, don't get frustrated. Just keep coming back again and again and again. That quality of coming back again and again is going to strengthen all the good qualities of your mind. So when things get difficult, you can still keep on course regardless of distractions, regardless of what other people may say. If you know that something is really right, really skillful, then you stick with it.

The third strength we're developing here is mindfulness: the ability to keep something in mind. It's often paired with alertness, the sharpness of your ability to see what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. These qualities are important because it's so easy for us forget. We make up our minds to do something good, then two minutes later we're off doing precisely what we told ourselves we wouldn't do. That kind of state of forgetfulness just keeps destroying itself, destroying you. But if you can keep remembering that "This is the right thing to do, this is where I want to be right now"—for example, when you decide to stay with the breath—you just keep that in mind, again and again and again. Don't let yourself get dissuaded by anything else. This quality of mindfulness and alertness again will see you through a lot difficult situations and enable you to remember the importance of your actions and the importance of doing what's skillful. It's enable you to remember the skills you've learned from your past experiences.

The fourth strength we're developing here is concentration: the ability to stay with one thing consistently, with a sense of ease, with a sense of well-being—

learning how to settle down with the breath in a way that really does feel gratifying to the mind, feels easeful to the body. Have a sense of being at home. The state of concentration is what gives you the good solid foundation you need for making all those right choices that need to be made.

And finally there's discernment when you begin to detect here on a very basic level what kind of breathing is good for the body, what kind of breathing is good for the mind. Who told you that? Well, you learn from your own powers of observation. You learn the most efficient way of getting the mind to settle down. All of this comes from discernment. This efficiency—the ability to cut right through confusing issues to get to the heart of the issue—is going to see you through a lot of things. Because there will be times, say when you're sick, when you're weak physically, when it'll be difficult to get your powers of concentration as strong as they might be when you're healthy. But if your discernment is sharp, it helps you use whatever strength you do have a lot more efficiently and it's a lot more to the point.

You see right to the issue. And what is the big issue? The fact that the mind is causing itself suffering, keeps creating these new worlds, and each world has its seeds of suffering within it. So you want to comprehend that. How does that happen? Why does that happen? When you trace it down, you see that there's clinging, craving, and ignorance. These are the things that cause us to do things that give us precisely the opposite results of what we want. We want happiness, but we cause suffering. It's because we are ignorant. We crave things that are unskillful, that are not good for us. We cling to things that are not good for us.

When you can see that, then you have to develop the qualities of mind that enable you to let go of that craving and clinging, that can replace that ignorance with knowledge. This is why we have the path. You develop qualities of virtue, concentration, and discernment to give yourself something better to hold onto. As long as the mind is going to hold on, hold onto something good, something that will eventually develop its strengths to the point where it doesn't need to hold on to anything anymore.

When you see that these are the big issues in life, and that this is how to deal with them, that cuts through a lot of the confusion that people bring to their lives, that they bring to every aspect of their being.

So as we meditate we're trying to develop these five strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—because these are the qualities that will enable us to choose what to do and to say and to think so that we will live a better life and, when the time comes, we will die a better death. A life and a death that cut through all the confusing issues that distract us and go right to the point, the point of learning how not to create suffering anymore.

In this way, this path starts from some very basic exercises, some very basic teachings and trainings, but it goes on to accomplish a lot. And as with any large project, it's important that you get the basics right. Once you've got the basics right, then everything else will follow.