

The Five Strengths

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When you meditate, you have to tell yourself that you have no other responsibilities right now. You're here to look after the mind. The mind spends its days looking after all kinds of other affairs—your affairs, other people's affairs. Just looking after the body is a major issue—trying to find food, clothing, shelter, or medicine—and that's just the body. Then there are also all the other people around you. So the mind ends up spending its days running around. It's like living in a house with lots of leaks in the roof, and you're running around with pails to catch the water leaking in.

So the mind needs time to rest, to put aside all its other responsibilities, so that it can gain the strength it needs to look after itself as well as looking after its other duties in the course of the day. For right now, just put those other duties aside. You're here just to look after the mind. The mind, like the body, has its food. It needs exercise to make it strong. That's why we meditate. Meditation is both good exercise and good food for the mind. It spends the day usually eating junk food, so it's time to give it some good food: Focus on the breath.

As you breathe in, breathe out, start out by reminding yourself that you're here for true happiness. True happiness is something that's not selfish, because if you're truly happy, your happiness comes from within. That's the only kind of happiness that's really solid. A happiness that comes from within doesn't take anything away from anyone else. You end up actually having more to offer other people when the mind is really strong and healthy. It's like when you're physically strong and healthy. You're not sick, so you're not a burden to the people around you, and you have extra strength to help people with their issues at the right time, at the right place.

So remind yourself of why you're here. That in and of itself is good food for the mind, as you remind yourself that there's a true happiness you can gain through your own efforts, and it's not a selfish happiness. Remember also that such a happiness is possible. That's a good thought to keep in mind, because in a world of zero-sum games, the basic assumption is the more you've got, the less somebody else has. The more they have, the less you have. There's a constant battle back and forth. The usual question is: Are you going to be selfish and work for your own happiness, or are you going to sacrifice yourself for the happiness of others?

But here you don't have to think in those either/or terms. The more happiness you can build inside, the better it is for everybody. That in itself is really

nourishing thought. And it's a wise thought because it reminds you where to look. You look inside.

So try to focus more attention on the breath. Notice how it feels when it comes in, how it feels when it goes out. You can focus your attention on the breath at any spot in the body where it's clear: now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out. Allow that spot to be relaxed and comfortable. Notice what kind of rhythm and texture of breathing helps to keep that spot comfortable, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, so that you're not pulling it in or pushing it out or squeezing it out.

If you find yourself squeezing out the breath energy in the body, stop. Let the breath come back in again. When it starts feeling strained from having too much breath, then let it go out. Experiment to see what's the right rhythm and texture for the breath right now. It'll change over the course of time as the body relaxes and the mind begins to settle in. The needs of the body and mind will change. So try to keep on top of those needs. You have to be constantly alert for how things feel with each breath.

Then ask yourself what kind of sensation of breathing would you like right now? What would feel really gratifying, what would satisfy the body? Does it feel like it needs more breath energy? Okay, give it deeper breathing. If you're feeling tired, you might try long in-breaths, short out-breaths, to give yourself energy. If you're feeling tense, you might think shorter in, longer out, to help you relax.

Remind yourself that the breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the movement of energy throughout the body, through all the nerves, out to the pores of your skin, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Some parts of that energy move, other parts stay still, but it's all energy. When you think of the body in those terms, you find the breath can be even more refreshing. Think of every cell of the body being bathed by the breath. As for any parts the body that feel tense, tight, or constricted, think of relaxing them, so that there's no blockage of the energy anywhere in the body, all the way up to the tips of your fingers, all the way out to your toes.

This is one way of giving the mind good food: a sense of pleasure and well-being that comes from inside, that doesn't have to depend on things outside at all. This is just the beginning of the path of meditation.

If the mind wanders off, bring it back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Don't get frustrated with it. It takes time to get used to looking here and staying here. Each time you bring it back, ask yourself: Where could the breath be more comfortable? Where could it be more satisfying? Learn how to read the needs of the body, read the needs of the mind, in terms of the energy flow that's

happening right now. Explore the potentials of what deeper breathing might do, or more shallow breathing might do—or longer, shorter, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. When you breathe in, think of the breath energy coming in from all directions. That helps to clear away any blockages that might restrict the breathing process.

One way to help with this is to keep reminding yourself to keep your hands totally relaxed, keep your feet totally relaxed, because as they're relaxed, it helps relax other parts of the body as well.

In this way, you're developing important qualities of mind that strengthen the mind and keep it healthy. The first strength is conviction, believing that if you want to be happy in life, it's going to come from your own actions. If you're convinced that your actions really make a difference, that's got you on the right path right there. If you think that your actions make no difference, that things are already set in the stars or that everything is just totally random, that thought weakens your resolve to really do something about it.

Or if you think that everything is determined by past karma, that gets in the way as well. Your present kamma—i.e., what you're doing right now—makes a huge difference in how you experience the world. And it turns out that that's the kamma that really matters; that's the karma that's totally under your control, the kind of kamma you can observe.

As for what happened in the past, you may have some memories of it, but exactly which action of the past connects with what you're experiencing right now is often hard to trace. But when you're focusing on the breath like this, you can see intention, i.e. kamma, in action. The way you intend to deal with the breath, the way you intend to treat the feelings of fullness that may arise, allowing them to stay: That's present kamma. It does make a difference in how it feels to sit here, makes a difference in how you carry the body throughout the day and how you feel about the body. When there's a sense of well-being in the body that comes from the way you breathe, you find that you're a lot more skillful also in the way you interact with other people. You're less desperate for their approval, less desperate for quick fixes of pleasure.

The second strength, on top of conviction, is persistence. You really stick with trying to act skillfully. The more consistently you stick with this, the better it gets and the more it can do for you. If you let the mind settle down only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you get some benefit from it, but then you can totally erase it within a few seconds after you drop it. This is why it's wise to stay with the breathing even as you get up and go about your business in the course of the day. The skills you learn here are not skills just for sitting with your eyes

closed. They're skills for relating well to your body in the course of all your other activities, too. It's simply that when you sit here with your eyes closed, it's easier to focus total attention right here, but then you want to be able to keep that intention, keep that attention focused inside the body all the time.

This requires mindfulness: the third quality that strengthens the mind. In other words, you keep the breath in mind. That's paired with alertness, watching what you're actually doing. If you find yourself forgetting the breath, just remind yourself to come back to the breath. Each time you come back, it strengthens your mindfulness. You want to be alert to what's working and what's not working in the mind, what kind of breathing helps the mind settle down, what kind of breathing disturbs it. What kind of thinking disturbs the breath, what kind of thinking is good for the breath? The breath and the mind interact in this way.

As you keep these decisions in mind, you begin to develop the two other qualities that also help strengthen the mind. There's concentration, the ability to stay with the breath consistently, with this sense of ease and fullness of the body. And there's discernment as you begin to see cause and effect, exactly what you do that creates unnecessary stress, and what you can do to stop that. You see the real causes are right there in the mind. Your craving and clinging add to the stress. As you develop virtue, concentration, and discernment, they help to loosen up that craving and clinging, so that you're no longer so obsessed with it.

This way, the mind gets stronger and stronger because it's placing fewer burdens on itself. It's as if we spent the day carrying huge piles of garbage on our shoulders. When other people ask us for help, we say, "I'm sorry, I've got all this garbage I have to carry around." Or if you find yourself with sudden new duties, there's too much garbage on your shoulders for you to take on those other duties. This means, of course, that all that garbage is limiting you with regard to the good things you can do for other people, and the good things you can do for yourself.

So it's in your interest to let go of as much of that garbage you can. Put it down. How do you know it's garbage? Well, you have to look and watch. See what thoughts you're carrying around that are limiting you, that are sapping your strength, and learn how to question them, until you realize that you don't want to carry those thoughts around anymore, because they're totally useless. Or they may have their uses in certain times and certain places, but not all the time. All too many of our habits are things we picked up randomly. They worked a little bit here and a little bit there, and now we carry them with us wherever you go.

There's the story of the old woman in Thailand who found that she needed some straw one day. So from that point on for the rest of her life, she always carried a big bundle of straw around on her back, in case she might need it

again. This kept her bent down, kept her from being able to carry other better things around with her.

So these are the qualities that strengthen the mind that center around this practice of getting to know the breath energy in the body, because it's right at the breath that the mind and the body meet. When they meet in a comfortable, mutually reinforcing way, they strengthen each other, through conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

So try to bring these qualities to the breath; bring the breath to these qualities. You'll find that the happiness you want—the happiness that comes from within that's really solid, really reliable—becomes more and more a reality. As it does, you come to see that you're not the only one who benefits. The people around you benefit as well. The same as when the body is healthy: You're not a burden on others and you actually have extra strength to help other people with their tasks, too. This is a rare kind of activity, one that causes no harm to anyone. So try to devote as much time and energy to it as you can.