

The Wounded Warrior

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The practice of the Dharma is often compared to being a warrior doing battle with your defilements. And it's important to have a realistic view of what it means to be a warrior. The romantic view sees the warrior as someone who is always strong, always ready to take on the enemy no matter what, no matter where, no matter when. But that's not a very realistic view of how warriors operate.

Warriors have to choose their battles. And they also have to know their own strength. If they're wounded, they have to know that they've got to escape someplace where they can rest, recuperate, deal with their wounds. In other words, instead of always taking on the enemy, there are times when you have to run away from the enemy, find a place where you can gather your strength. An intelligent warrior admits his or her weaknesses. When you find that you're weak, you do what you can to make up for it. At the same time, you don't take on more than you can handle.

Ajaan Lee talks about going to the forest for lessons. When people got to be too much for him, he'd go out into the forest to hide out for a while, to rest, recuperate, deal with his wounds. And so even someone like him—with that much strength of concentration, strength of mindfulness—had to run away sometimes. We're not even anywhere near where he was, so we have to find places of rest, too—places of solace where we can work on building our strengths.

One of the lessons he learned one day in the forest came when he and some monks and novices were going on alms round, and they saw a wild hen. The hen saw them coming, made a squawk, and all her little chicks went running into a pile of leaves. So Ajaan Lee had some of the novices go out and stir the pile of leaves around with a stick to see what would happen, if chicks would run out. But they didn't. They all lay there very still. That was their protection.

So learn a lesson from the chicks. Sometimes when issues in life get very difficult, we've got to find some stillness. As you're sitting here meditating, part of you may say, "There are these issues I've got to deal with." So ask yourself: Are you up to it? If you are, go ahead. If not, just stay there in the concentration. Concentration is a form of strength. It's one of five ways the Buddha lists for strengthening the mind.

The first strength is to have conviction, first, in the awakening of the Buddha, that it really did happen, he really did awaken through his own efforts. The message there being that he was a human being. He could do it. And even though he was a special human being, he said that he wasn't using any qualities that other human beings didn't also have the potential for. So we have the potential for awakening within us as well. We've got to hold onto that conviction, whether it seems especially realistic right now in terms of the state of your mind right now. You can take comfort in the fact that you too have those potentials, that you too can develop them through your actions.

Which is the second part of conviction: that your actions really do make a

difference. They are real. And the quality of your intention is what determines the results of the action that you're going to experience in terms of pleasure or pain. The solution to whatever problem there is in life starts primarily with looking at your own mind, admitting the fact you may have acted in unskillful ways in the past, but you can also train the mind to be more skillful now and on into the future. If you find that you're not ready for the other ways of strengthening the mind, you may want to sit around and just think about that for a while, gain a sense of confidence that this is true. And that will energize you.

The second way of strengthening the mind is to develop persistence, the ability to stick with something. It doesn't mean just gritting your teeth and enduring. It means learning, once you've determined what the skillful course is, how you can keep yourself on that course. You learn how to make it more attractive, more pleasant, so it's not just a matter of barreling through, because that kind of energy, that kind of barreling-through persistence wears out pretty quickly.

The Buddha made the analogy of playing a lute. You tune the main string on your lute so that it's not too tight, not too loose. And then you tune the other strings to that first one. In other words, the level of energy you have is the main determinant of what's too tight or too loose at any one time. So you figure out how much strength you have, and then how you can maintain that level of strength.

This is one of the reasons why in the breath meditation we're taught to find as much ease and fullness and energy as we can in the breath, because it's one of our allies for strengthening the mind. When the breath energy feels good in the body, the body gets stronger, and the mind dwelling in a comfortable place finds it easier to stick with the skillful path.

And then there's mindfulness: What things can you keep in mind right now that are healing to the mind? Sometimes simply reflecting on the body: If you start thinking about your emotions about this person or that person or this issue or that issue, it gets you all riled up. Just say, "I'm sitting here with a body breathing, that's all I have to think about. That's the range of my awareness right now: being with a body in and of itself and trying to make the sensation of being with a body as pleasant as possible." Just keep that in mind.

This is what mindfulness means: keeping something in mind. You keep the body in mind. You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any world issues, you just put them aside right now. You don't have to go there. If you go there, Mara will get you.

The Buddha talks about this being your ancestral ground, your safe place, your haven: right here the breath in and of itself. If you go out thinking about this issue or that issue outside, you're leaving your safe place. The Buddha makes two comparisons here. One is of the quail who wanders away from his safe place, a field where clods of dirt and rocks are all turned up by the plow, where he has hiding places. He leaves that and goes out to a more exposed place, where a hawk gets him. And as the hawk is carrying him away, the little quail says, "Gosh, this is my own lack of merit. I shouldn't have wandered away from my safe area. If I had stayed there, you wouldn't have been any match for me."

The hawk, being piqued a bit, says, "Well, what is your safe area?" The quail

says, "It's a field where the stones and clods of earth have been turned up by the plow." So the hawk says, "Okay, I'll let you go. You can go there if you want, but you still won't be able to escape me." And so the quail flies down and gets on top of a rock, taunting, "Okay, now, come get me, you hawk! Come get me you hawk!" And the hawk, without saying anything, folds his wings and dives down after the quail. As soon as the quail sees that the hawk is coming after him in full tilt, he slips behind the rock. The hawk crashes against the rock, and that's the end of him.

In other words, see the body in and of itself as your safe place, where you can escape any issues that otherwise would overwhelm you. Just be very firm: "I'm going to stay right here. I'll try to get as much ease and comfort out of the breath as I can so I can maintain this state. For the time being, I'm not going to go anywhere else."

When you do this, you put the mind into concentration. After all, what they call the foundations of mindfulness, the establishings of mindfulness, or the four frames of reference: These are the themes of Right Concentration. If you stay here consistently enough, it turns into concentration in the mind. Then you can feed off the sense of ease and rapture that comes with the concentration: That's your food for the mind. And the body gets nourished as well, because you let that sense of ease and rapture spread throughout the body.

This provides a basis for discernment to arise: the ability to look at those thoughts that were wounding and hurtful, the issues in the outside world that have you all upset, and to see them simply as thoughts arising and passing away. You have the choice: Do you want to go into that world, or not? If you feel obliged to go into that world, ask yourself why. "Am I ready for that world right now? Can I handle it?" If you're not ready, try dismantling whatever values would lead you there. You're not obliged to think about these things. And if you're not ready to think about them, why burden the mind?

Start questioning all the assumptions that would pull you out there, whether they're pride or whatever. Again, remember you're a warrior. A warrior can't let his or her pride get in the way of the healing process. You may want to look strong, to be strong, but hey, you're not strong right now. You're wounded. You've got to deal with your wounds first. That's the attitude of an intelligent warrior, a warrior who will come out winning in the end—the warrior who knows that you've got to look after yourself. You can't just go squandering your strength, squandering your troops, and think that there's an infinite source of strength someplace. You realize your strength has its limits.

I've told the story before of the Chinese martial arts master whose students were going to have a demonstration of their martial arts skills in a pavilion out in the forest. At one spot along the road through the forest to the pavilion was a donkey, a donkey well known for being very obstreperous, always in a bad mood, always ready to kick anybody who came anywhere near. And so some of the students who were on the way to the pavilion said, "Hey, here's a great chance for us to show off our skills at martial arts. We can deal with this donkey."

And so the star martial arts student goes up first and takes one of his stances, and the donkey just kicks him across the road. The number two student comes up, says, "That's not how you do it." He tries a different stance, but he gets kicked across the road too. And to make a long story short, everybody gets kicked

across the road. So they decide, "Wait, let's see how our master will handle this. Maybe he's got a skill he hasn't taught us yet." So they hide behind bushes on the side of the road to watch. Finally the master comes along, he sees the donkey, and he just walks way around it. Doesn't get anywhere near.

This is part of being an intelligent warrior. You know to choose your battles, which dangers to expose yourself to, which dangers to avoid. The first lesson in Thai boxing is learning how to retreat, how to get out of a difficult situation without exposing yourself to danger. So as a good warrior, you have to know your strength. When you're ready to take on the battle, take it on. If you're wounded or weak, hide out someplace and figure out how to heal your wounds and build up your strength. That's the kind of warrior who comes out winning in the end.