

## *A Legacy of Strengths*

*October 6, 2018*

Our two last chants just now say a lot about the human condition. We're all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. Yet at the same time we want happiness for ourselves, we want happiness for others.

It's learning how to find happiness in the midst of the fact that our lives are so short, and the amount of time is so unpredictable: That's why there's that added part to those five contemplations, "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." That's the way out of this problem. In other words, we look to our actions for our happiness, and given that we don't know how much longer we have, we want to make sure that we do the good things we need to do *now*.

This is why we're meditating, to strengthen the mind right now for all the work it has to do. Doing the right thing is not always easy. Often we have to make sacrifices and we have to pair off our different priorities to rank them. Some things have to get down at the bottom of the list. Even though we may like them, we have to realize that they're not as important as some of the things further up. So there's always a trade-off. Life is never perfect.

So we need strength. The Buddha says there are five kinds of strength that keep us going. One is conviction: conviction in the Buddha's awakening, which translates into conviction in the power of action. Human beings *can* find true happiness, and it's done through the power of their actions. No matter how unskillfully you've been behaving in the past, you can change your ways. The way the Buddha teaches karma is not deterministic. He talks about tendencies that come in from the past, potentials that come in from the past. And these are actualized by your present karma, which is another reason why we focus in the present moment. Not only is this the best time to do what needs to be done, but this is the place where the work gets done. So we're convinced in the fact that our actions do matter. And where do our actions come from? They come from the mind, so we've got to train the mind. That's our working hypothesis.

Then, based on that, we make an effort. That's the second strength, persistence. It's not just sticking with things. It's realizing there are unskillful things that could come up in the mind so you do your best to prevent them. If they're there already, you do your best to let go of them. As for skillful qualities, those potentials are also there, so you want to actualize them. Once they're there, you want to maintain them and keep them going. This is our important work right now. We can think of all the other things we need to do for other people, but the best thing we can do oftentimes is setting a good example, so we make ourself the kind of person who can always act on skillful motives rather than giving into unskillful ones. That can be a gift for the people around us.

In order to keep good persistence going, you need mindfulness. That's the third strength. Whatever lessons you've learned about what's skillful and what's not, you try to remember them. These are lessons you might have learned from other people or lessons you've learned from your own actions. Which is why mindfulness has to go together with alertness. You watch what's actually happening, what you're actually doing, and what's coming about as a result. When you come up with some ideas as to what to do, and then you test them again and again and again. When they pass the test, okay, remember them.

This is another reason why we meditate: We need to strengthen our mindfulness. This exercise of remembering to stay with the breath is what strengthens mindfulness.

You want to keep with the breath as consistently as you can, so that you don't forget why you're here. It all too often happens that you look at the breath for a little bit and then the mind wants to wander off someplace else—and then someplace else again and someplace else again. And it's like a hobo hopping from train to train to train, and you end up in Saskatchewan someplace and you wonder how you got there. It's because of a lapse of mindfulness. You realize that getting the mind trained, developing skillful qualities like mindfulness and alertness, is something that will be good for you and for the people around you. You want to remember that so that you can stay here. This will then help you with any task you have. We have to keep things in mind to do any task well.

But as you stay with the breath, mindfulness doesn't just remind you of what's right and what's wrong and what's skillful and what's not. As it gets more established, it turns into concentration, which is the fourth strength. This is when you gain a real sense of nourishment, a sense of ease, of well-being. Again, you don't create the ease and well-being directly. You work on their causes. In fact, the causes are your work right now. There's directed thought, where you keep reminding yourself to stick with the breath. And then evaluation: You ask yourself, "Does the breath feel good? If not, what can I do to make it feel better?" You can change the rhythm of the breath or the texture of the breath. Or you can change the image you have in mind about what the breath is doing in the body.

When we speak about "breath" here, it's not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It's a sense of energy flow in the body that allows the air to come in and go out. You can ask yourself, where does that energy flow begin? Ajaan Lee identifies some resting spots for the breath as he calls them: right above the navel, the base of the throat, the tip of the breastbone, the middle of the head, top of the head. Think of breath energy emanating from any one of those spots, and if anything seems to be getting in the way of its spreading, let it dissolve away so that the breath energy flows smoothly throughout the entire body: That's your work. And the work gives rise to the results: a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment.

That sense of well-being helps you an awful lot, because it makes it easier to do the right thing. When you have a sense of well-being you can tap into at any time, you're not so hungry to go after unskillful ideas or unskillful motives or impulses. The reason we go after unskillful

things is because part of the mind demands a hit of pleasure right away. So you try to feed that demand in a more skillful way, just by the way you breathe.

This is a huge area of our awareness that most of us don't take advantage of. When the body feels uncomfortable, we just accept the fact that it's uncomfortable and we look outside for some ease to distract ourselves. But many times that lack of comfort can be changed simply by the way you breathe. So here's free medicine. Take advantage of it. It doesn't cost anything and it can prevent you from doing a lot of unskillful things, as you find that this sense of well-being makes unskillful things seem unattractive.

That's one of the ways in which concentration gives rise to the fifth strength, which is discernment. You have a very clear idea of how you create suffering for yourself and how it's unnecessary. All too often, we don't even see that suffering, all we're concerned about is the suffering caused by situations around us. But it was the Buddha's discovery—it was an important part of his awakening—that the mind doesn't have to suffer from aging, illness, death, or separation. It can find a sense of well-being inside. It's suffering from those things because it's attached to the things that age, grow ill, die, and get separated. It tries to feed off them to find its sense of well-being. But if you can find a well-being inside, a lot of things outside you can let go of. And even if you can't fully let go of them, they don't tear so much at the heart.

There's a case in the Canon where Venerable Sariputta passes away. And Venerable Ananda's really upset. He goes to see the Buddha. He says he's lost his sense of direction. The Buddha says, "Why? Did Sariputta take virtue with him? Did he take concentration? Discernment? Release? Knowledge and vision of release?" "Well, no." "Then the good things of life are still there."

That's something we have to remember and something we have to pass on to the next generation: that loss in terms of health, wealth, or even relatives is not nearly as serious as loss of your virtue or loss of your right view. As you lose your virtue, you lose your right view, you can create a lot of trouble, not only in this lifetime but for many lifetimes down the line. Even when the people we love and respect are no longer there, the good things in life are still here. That's also a lesson that we want to pass on.

One of the best ways of doing that is to set a good example. And because the good example requires strength, we need to train ourselves with these five strengths, developing them inside so that they sustain us and also provide a good example for the people who come in our wake. We've been the beneficiaries of many generations of people who've developed these strengths within themselves, set a good example for us, and passed along the teachings.

I remember one day commenting to Ajaan Fuang that I really admired his discernment. He said, "It's not like I started out with it," he said, "I owe that to the practice." That's why he wanted to pass the practice on. Because no matter what you start out with, here was a practice

that allows you to develop these strengths, so that you do have something good to pass on. It may not necessarily be what you tell other people but your example is a good legacy.

This is how we do good. This is how we find happiness in the midst of all this aging, illness, death, and separation, realizing that ultimately each of us has to be responsible for his or her own happiness, but we can set good examples for one another as we try to find happiness in a heedful way. You look at the Buddha: He developed qualities of wisdom, compassion, discernment, and it was all through his heedful search for true happiness. The search for true happiness is not a selfish thing, because it develops these good qualities of mind when you do it rightly.

So we take strength from our conviction that the good that's done doesn't get erased. It may get hidden for a while, but its power is always there and it's something we can keep tapping into. And in so doing, we make it stronger and make it more available to ourselves and other people. Just make sure that *that's* what you're developing. All too often, we develop other qualities like laziness or fear. We don't think we're *developing* them, but the fact that we keep going back to them again and again—apathy, things like this: The fact that we keep going back to them again and again, means that we're developing them.

So ask yourself, what are you developing as you go through life?

That question, "Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I becoming right now?" Well, the kind of person you're becoming depends on what you're doing, what you do again and again. That's your becoming and it's also your legacy. So act in such a way that if the Buddha were to ask you, "What are you becoming right now?" you'd be proud to give him the answer. And it's an answer that can keep your goodness going.