

Strength of Body, Strength of Mind

June 3, 2010

Those passages we chanted just now—contemplation of the body; the five recollections on aging, illness, death, separation, and the fact of karma—are probably the most standard passages you'll hear chanted at Thai Forest monasteries. They provide a background for the meditation, to remind us of where the important things in life really are: in the karma, that very last topic, the things we do. And where do the things we do come from? They come from the mind. So our actions have value and our mind has a value as a result, because the mind has an influence on the pleasure and pain we meet with in life. As for the issues of the body, those have to be secondary. We don't want the body to take too much importance in our lives. If the body becomes a big issue, then you have to worry about its not getting enough food, not getting enough sleep. When you're taking care of it, often you're not willing to sacrifice it for the sake of the practice, for the sake of developing skillful qualities in the mind.

So it's good to get things into proper perspective: that our strength in the practice does come primarily from the mind. The body may play a part, and the Buddha recognizes that fact: He says it's one of the essential elements of being able to really give yourself totally to the practice—that the body's in basic good health—but the standards for basic good health can vary from culture to culture. For him it basically meant that your digestion is okay, that you're strong enough to sit and practice. But even if you're *not* that strong, you can still do the practice and get a lot of good results from it. There's a talk Ajaan Lee gave for an old woman who was dying, and he pointed out that we live through strength of body and strength of mind, but that it's the strength of mind that really matters. So that's what we've got to work on. We can't let the issues of the body get in the way.

There's a humorous passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the different reasons that people give for being lazy or energetic, and the external situations are the same in either case. For example, a person who is about to go on a journey: The lazy person says, "I'm going to go on a journey tomorrow so I'd better rest up today," so he doesn't meditate. As opposed to the person who says, "I have to go on a journey tomorrow, I won't have much time to meditate while I'm on my journey, so I should meditate now." Or if there's not much to eat: The lazy person says, "Well, I didn't get much to eat today, I'm not strong, so I'd better rest a lot." The diligent person says, "I didn't get much to eat today, the body is light, not weighed down, I'm not getting

drowsy from having eaten too much: ideal time to meditate.” And so on down the line.

In other words, the energy that we put into the practice doesn't have to depend on the situation outside, it depends on our attitude. And the attitude has to be fed by heedfulness. One of the situations in that sutta is of a person who's just recovered from an illness: He says to himself, “I'm still not quite well, so I'd better rest,” that's the lazy person. The other person says, “I've just recovered from the illness, I could have a relapse. I've got a little window of time here. I should meditate.” That thought comes from heedfulness: The realization that you don't know how much time you have, you don't know whether your energy tomorrow is going to be good or not, but you *do* have enough energy now to practice, so you should put it into the practice, rather than be overly concerned with the body.

This is a matter of balance, but you look in our culture and the balance tends to go *way* in the direction of the body, keeping it strong. You even hear people talk about how it's important that we embody enlightenment in our practice, that celebrating the body is an important part of a spiritual tradition that's underestimated or undervalued in Buddhism, and it's high time we brought it back in. Well, that's not Buddhism, that's not the Dhamma. It's defilement talking.

Our main source of energy is the realization that our actions are important, the training of the mind is important; and as for the body, you want to use it as a *tool* in the practice. You look after it the way you would with any tool, but you need to have a sense of proportion in how you look after it, what's really necessary to keep the body strong enough to practice. Beyond that, your emphasis should be on developing strength of mind.

It's the same as when you hear some people talking about those who are raised in a bad environment: “They're poor, disadvantaged,” they say, “so no wonder they go in for a life of crime,” or whatever. But it's not poverty that causes crime. Most of the most horrific stealing that goes in our country is done by rich people. There's that story of the person who “earned” four billion dollars last year—and as the reporter said, nobody *earns* four billion dollars a year. They can *take* it, but they can't earn it.

At the same time—talking about people from a poor, disadvantaged background—you look at the Forest tradition: These were mostly peasants' sons. If they had been condemned to a life of poverty or crime by the fact that they were born poor, we never would have had the Forest tradition. They were poor people and they realized, “Okay, here we are, poor, but we do have what is needed for the practice.” This is a point Ajaan Mun made over and over again: You have a human body, you have a human mind, you've got what is needed for the practice, so use it.

It's interesting to note that there were basically two reform movements going on in Thai Buddhism at the time: There was one that was coming from the top down, and another coming from the bottom up. The one from the bottom up was the one that was more in line with the Dhamma. That's the one that Westerners chose when they went over to study in Thailand, because it had more to offer. So the effort, the energy, that you put into the practice, doesn't have to depend on outside circumstances. In fact, you have to *overcome* outside circumstances, and not let them loom large in the mind.

We talked last night about the differences between truths of the observer and truths of the will. Well, the practice is very much a truth of the will, in the sense that if you don't stir up your will—as the Buddha says, generate desire or activate your persistence, or energy, uphold your intent—it's not going to happen. This is something that becomes true because you *will* it to be true. You *will* the path. Each of the factors requires right effort, which requires an element of will, starting from right view and all the way through right concentration. So the strength of your will, the strength of your determination, is what really makes all the difference.

In Ajaan Mun's final sermon, he talked about how every meditator is a warrior who requires discernment, mindfulness, and concentration as his or her support. But who in you is the warrior? The warrior is the determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements. Those are Ajaan Mun's words. To be determined not to come back and suffer over and over again. Because you look at the world, all the different ways that the beings in the world suffer—I mean, it's bad enough being a human being, with all the wars, the conflicts, the insanity that goes on in the human race. But there's the possibility that you might slip down lower than the human level, to the life of a common animal. And common animals live largely in fear. They've no understanding of what's going on. They're just driven by fear all the time.

So as the Buddha said, when you have a sense of heedfulness, this is what enables you to develop all the other skillful qualities. This is the root of what's skillful. And this is the root of your energy: It's a *mental* quality that gives you the energy to practice. The mind is primary; the body's secondary. They should work together, but the mind should always be in charge and should always have top priority, because it's the energy of mind that will see you through. So you want an energy that doesn't have to depend on the body. After all, there will come a time when the body gets too sick, too old, even to sit up, and it's going to *die*. You want to have your mind strong enough so that its strength won't be affected by those events that happen to the body—it has a strength that's independent of the body.

That's what we're looking for. That's what we're working on. And it starts by developing what strength of mind you have now: really taking seriously the

fact that aging, illness, and death come. And as in the conversation between Rattapala and the king: Even a king can't say, "I've got this illness right now, I demand that my courtiers and subjects share out the pain of this illness so that I don't have to feel so much pain." He can't do that. You can't do that. You have to face the pain on your own. So you want to have the qualities of mind that can help you deal with that pain and not get overcome by it—which is why strength of mind always has to come first.