

Strength from the Basics

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When your energy is limited, either through aging or illness, you want to be able to make the most of the strength you still have. Remember that as long as you've got breath, you've got some strength someplace. And if you haven't yet reached the point where you're feeling limited by aging or illness, you've got to prepare yourself—because the time will come.

There are two things to keep in mind. One is that you want to keep your priorities straight: Focus on the basics, focus on the really important issues in life. Then, if there's something you can't manage, let that be in the area that's not important. And notice that, after Ajaan Suwat had his accident, he suffered some brain damage and didn't have much energy to give Dhamma talks, but when he *did* give a Dhamma talk, it would always be on the topic of the Triple Refuge: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is the basic teaching.

Thinking about the Buddha reminds us of what can be done with a human life—and gives us good examples. I was talking with someone yesterday who was explaining why she wanted to go to Ajaan Maha Boowa's funeral. She said it was his example of always being willing to fight that kept her going during the difficult parts of her practice. So it's good that we have these examples—people who've kept up the good fight, put forth the effort to do something really good with their lives—to remind us that that's where the value of human life lies.

If you don't put up the good fight, what have you got? It's hard to say that you've lost, because you haven't even fought. At the very least when you find yourself facing limitations, push against the limitations. Don't let them make you collapse.

So it's always good to remember the Buddha.

Of course, then there's the Dhamma, the teaching he gave. Remind yourself of how valuable this is: that we have a teaching like this. It's not going to be around all the time, but we've got it now. Learn about it; think about it; put it into practice. It's available all the time right now, which will not always be the case.

And here again it's good to remember what the basics are: generosity, virtue, and meditation; or virtue, concentration, and discernment. Keep focusing on the basics, even when they seem awfully simple.

Virtue, for instance, consists of the intention to hold by the precepts, to hold by the rules. It may not feel very creative to hold to rules rather than expressing yourself, but then again there are parts of life where self-expression and creativity are not what the situation needs. You need to bring a willingness to train, a willingness to cut off some old patterns of behavior that you may have liked, and to see what happens when you try to be as harmless as possible.

The same with concentration: You train the mind to focus just on one thing, the breath. How many thousands and thousands of people have been focusing on the breath? Millions of people have been focusing on the breath over the past centuries, and you're willing to follow their example.

This is where the Sangha comes in as another example. This is for people who are willing to say, "Maybe we don't have to forge a new path. We can simply follow that path the Buddha left behind him." There may be some weeds overgrowing it right now, but you'll do your best to clear away the weeds.

Try this ancient path. The Buddha himself said it was already an ancient path when he discovered it. The analogy he gave was of someone who had gone into the jungle and found an old road, an old path, now way overgrown but he was able to slash his way through and find a beautiful city, again in ruins, but that had obviously been prosperous at one time.

That's what the Buddha did. He rediscovered a path that was already there. It may not be all that creative, it may not give you that much opportunity to put a new stamp on the world, but the fact that it has been followed—and followed to such good effect—by many, many people, should give you a clue that it's something worth tailoring your activities to, rather than your trying to tailor it to your preferences.

So try to keep the basics in mind: virtue, concentration, discernment; the example of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Never lose sight of the basics. As they say in Pali, "Give them weight." The Pali word for "respect" is related to the word for "weight." In other words, in your consideration of what you want to do and say and think, you may be weighing different options. Give a lot of weight to the options that have proven themselves in the past, that are worthy of respect—and often they're very simple things.

In this practice we have a period of chanting every night. This is a tradition that goes way, way back. You might think of lot of other creative things you might want to do in the evening but then you remind yourself that there is a purpose to this: to get certain ideas repeated over and over and over again. Certain phrases, certain passages get repeated again and again, and they really get into your bloodstream. They get into the rhythm of your body. You find when you're walking that you carry the rhythm of the chant in your walk. It's good to have it there.

And what's going to be there if you don't? Well, there are commercial jingles and pop songs and who knows what other garbage we've picked up from the past that's embedded itself in our bodies and our minds. So the simple act of repeating the chants helps embed good things in us so that we can draw on them when we need them—because it's not the case that our strength will always be up. When it's down, it's good to have some good things built in. Certain qualities, certain approaches, certain ideas, certain values: They can be your strength when you need them. It's like squirrels who cache away some nuts for the winter. You want to remind yourself: virtue, generosity, meditation are really important things, and you want to have them always at hand.

When your strength is down as you're getting sick, you remind yourself: Stay with the breath. The breath is always there to help you. If you find yourself getting into an unhealthy breathing rhythm, where can you focus to get out of it? Focus your attention on the areas that are far, far away from the unskillful patterns. This may involve going into your hands and your feet, and just being conscious of what it feels like from the inside to have a hand, what it feels like from the inside to have a foot. Just stay with that sensation.

Learn where your strengths are and keep your priorities as clear as possible. Soon the time will come when you have to pare things down. Make sure they get pared down to the essentials, the actual essentials, so that you don't find yourself throwing away your map or your essential food as you have to strip down what you can carry.

So we chant about the Triple Gem every night. This is important. Remember the example of Ajaan Suwat after his brain was damaged. He focused on the Triple Gem. He had been chanting about it every day, every day, every day for who knows how many years, and it gave him the strength he needed when his body was damaged. He had worked on his really basic skills in the meditation: how to stay with the breath where to focus in the body, the different places where you can focus. When you've got the strength, explore all the possibilities of the breath, so that when you need them, the very strong spots will be there. When some of your physical abilities get impaired, remember that there are other places where you still have abilities. Make the most of them.

There was a woman, a student of Ajaan Maha Boowa, who was a retired doctor. She had a friend who had cancer, and when the friend wanted to go and stay with Ajaan Maha Boowa, the old woman who was a doctor said, "I've got this knowledge of medicine, so I'll go along and be of help." Ajaan Maha Boowa gave talks almost every night for the three months the two women were there at his monastery. The friend died a couple of months after the visit, and the doctor discovered that the friend had been taping all the talks

and had given them titles. She decided that she wanted to do something in commemoration of her friend so she transcribed the talks. She was over 80 years old and her vision was failing, but she still had enough vision left to listen to the taped talks and type them out. So that's what she did. She said that she took strength from something Ajaan Maha Boowa had told her: that as you get old, try to squeeze as much goodness out of the body as you can before you have to throw it away. She made the most of her remaining abilities, and as a result we now have two very important Dhamma books on how to deal with illness and approaching death.

This shows what can be done even when your strengths are impaired. Even when illness is moving in, when aging is moving in, think of the areas where you still have strength, where you still have abilities, and make the most of them. Remember the Buddha's teaching on the reasons for being lazy and the reasons for being diligent: In both cases, the outside circumstances are the same. It's your attitude that makes all the difference as to whether or not you're capable of putting in the effort. So work on your attitude: always to find the opportunity to do something good in any situation.

As the Buddha once said, suppose you were having your last meal. The person who really understood the virtue of sharing wouldn't eat that last meal until he'd shared it with someone else, as long as there was someone there to share it with. So take the same attitude to all the varieties of goodness. They may seem commonplace and ordinary, but the commonplace and ordinary things are often the most important, so give them weight. Give them respect, because they are valuable. Those are the three different meanings of the word *garu* in Pali: "you give respect," "something is weighty," and "it's valuable."

Try to see all the basics in that light, the light of respect, so that they can show their value when you really need them.