

Strength in Humor

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One of the reasons we meditate is because we have to strengthen the mind. If we don't strengthen the mind, it gets wounded—and not just wounded. When it's wounded by the pains of aging, illness, death, separation, meeting up with things we don't like, being separated from things and people we do like, then we end up doing really harmful things and just making the situation worse. Which means that we're not only victims of suffering, but also perpetrators of suffering, because of our weakness. So, we have to strengthen the mind so that, on the one hand, we know how to live in the world and not get in the line of fire, and, on the other, so that when we're dealing with other people and we're we in the position of being the actor, rather than the recipient of other people's actions, we can act wisely, with compassion. In the midst of a difficult situation, if the mind is strong, it's much more likely to see the skillful thing to do, to say, or to think—and to be able to do it.

It's not just for our own protection that we try to strengthen the mind; it's also for the protection of the people around us. The Buddha talks about five strengths that we develop in the practice. He says the development of these strengths comes from heedfulness—in other words, realizing that our actions really do make a difference, and if we're not skillful, we can cause a lot of harm. But if we try to develop skill, we can avoid that harm. The principle of heedfulness builds on the realization that our actions are important, and they really do have consequences. This is the beginning of right view, right there.

So, from that principle comes the conviction that we really do have to pay careful attention to our actions, but it's going to pay off. Sometimes it seems really difficult to do the skillful thing. There are so many other things we'd rather do. The impulses come up and say, "I want to say this," or "I want to think that," or "I want to do this," but you have to quiz those impulses, examine them before you act on them. As Ajaan Fuang once said, "It's a lot better to think first before you say something than to have to think hard about it after you've said it."

Once you have the conviction that the effort to be skillful really is important, it's a lot easier to stick with this project. This is why from conviction comes persistence: the arousing of desire to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones—or, once you've got something skillful going, the desire to maintain it, realizing that this is the important thing to do and the important thing to focus on—and finding the energy and the ability to stick with it.

That requires reminding yourself again and again of how important this is. This is where mindfulness comes in, along with the need for concentration. Mindfulness and concentration are also strengths to nurture you and to give you a sense of well-being in the midst of difficult situations. If you feel nourished inside, it's a lot easier to deal with the craziness in the world. You don't get sucked into it out of weakness or out of the sense that "things aren't going the way I want, so I'm just going to lash out and give up." That kind of attitude accomplishes nothing. But if you don't have a sense of inner well-being or a sense of inner nourishment, it's hard to stick with the skillful path.

This is why right concentration is such an important factor in the path. The Buddha's analogy is of a fortress. You've got soldiers as your persistence and mindfulness as your gatekeeper to keep out all the enemies, letting in only the friends—i.e., skillful qualities. Conviction is the foundation post. Concentration is the food. It's what keeps everybody going. We keep coming back to this sense of nourishment that can come from having that center inside, staying centered inside, maintaining it, and realizing how important this is. You need this kind of food. You can't go just on willpower alone. There has to be a sense of well-being that you can tap into.

So, try to find it in the breath. Where is there a sense of fullness in the breath? When you breathe out, do you squeeze at the breath energy? If so, there you are: You're destroying the potential for fullness.

One good exercise is to focus on your hands. Try to relax all the muscles in your hands and keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out-. Notice if there's any slight tensing as you breathe out. Watch for that. Think of the hands being filled with all the blood that's flowing through them, and you're not going to try to squeeze it at all. Develop a sense of fullness; then, you allow that fullness to seep up your arms. Do the same with your feet. Start with the feet, allow the fullness to seep up your legs and come up the body so that you maintain this sense of fullness as you breathe in and as you breathe out. It can induce a very pleasant sense of well-being and nourishment. This is the food that we feed on, as in the verse in the Dhammapada: "We feed on rapture like the radiant gods."

When you can feed on that, then you have the strength to deal with all kinds of situations. You can make your strength more efficient by using discernment; in other words, realizing which things you have to carry, which things you can let go of, which things you have to take on as responsibilities, and which things you don't.

An important part of discernment is having a sense of humor. Even in bleak

situations, it's important to find the humor that allows you to step out of ideas and worldviews that are unnecessarily oppressive, that weigh you down to no purpose at all. What humor is, is an ability to see something incongruous and, as a result, to distance yourself from it. If you find yourself in a bad state of becoming, humor can pull you out. You can step out of it a bit. This is your survival technique. You need this.

Look at all the great ajaans. One of things that they all have in common is they all had good senses of humor. They're able to laugh at themselves. It's not so much laughing at other people, they laughed at themselves. When they saw, "I got myself tied up in this and I was really stupid," instead of getting all worked up and angry at themselves, they just shrugged it off with a laugh: not a careless, irresponsible laugh, but just a recognition that "This is a silly habit that I picked up and it's not helping anything at all." That kind of good-natured laugh is the best way to drop things.

We talk about the release that comes with humor. Well, it's no coincidence that we practice for release from suffering. Again, you're able to step out of unskillful mind states, step out of unskillful states of becoming, unskillful identities, unskillful views about the world. You see the incongruities and you can drop them. After all, why do you create these identities? Why do you create these worldviews? You want happiness and yet here you've created something that's making you miserable. It's not doing what you wanted it to do. So, why allow yourself to be burdened with it?

The purpose of this approach is to shed anything that's creating an unnecessary weight on the mind so that you can focus on things that really are important.

The Buddha said that one of the signs of wisdom is your ability to see what is your duty and what's not your duty, where you can make a difference and where you can't make a difference. Then, let go of all the things that you don't have to take on as duties so that you can really focus on what's necessary. In other words, an important part of wisdom is the sense of perspective, and that's very closely related to the sense of humor. People without a sense of humor have no perspective on things.

There are some things that you really have to take seriously, such as the sense that you're responsible. This is what heedfulness is all about. You're responsible for your actions, and your actions can have some pretty serious consequences. But in order to deal effectively with that realization, you also have to have a sense of humor that allows you to drop the things that really aren't important, to pull out of them with a minimum amount of entanglement. It's in these ways that we strengthen the mind.

It's interesting that the Buddha's teachings on the five strengths correspond to what psychologists talk about as healthy ego functioning. Heedfulness, of course, corresponds to anticipation, the realization that there are dangers down the road, so you have to be careful in how you act. This underlies all the strengths, but conviction and mindfulness in particular.

An important part of persistence is what they call suppression, i.e., restraint: knowing that if something is unskillful, you develop the desire not to do it. Restraint also connects with mindfulness: You restrain your thoughts from leaving your safe territory, the breath in and of itself.

Then there's compassion, which corresponds to altruism. This sense of compassion is closely related to discernment. You really do want to find a type of happiness that doesn't harm yourself and doesn't harm others. If it harms yourself or others, what good is it? You put all that effort into it, yet it turns on you. If you're harming others in your search for happiness, they're not going to be happy with your search for happiness. That makes it even more difficult. That's why altruism and compassion are wise.

Sublimation, here, is the sense of well-being that comes with the concentration. You've got a good form of well-being that you can tap into at anytime. It's a lot more skillful than other ways of searching for happiness.

Then, of course, there's that ability to step back and drop the things that are causing you unnecessary suffering. That's more discernment, and that's what humor does.

So we've got anticipation, sublimation, suppression, altruism, and then humor. These things strengthen the mind. You find them as dimensions of the Buddha's teachings on strength. So whichever lens you find convenient to look at a situation, remember it's all there. You strengthen yourself, one, so that you can be resilient to all the things that the world throws at you, and two, you have to be very careful at what you're throwing back. When the mind is strong, you don't have to throw things back at all. Bad things come at you, but you just let them fall at your feet. You don't have to pick them up and throw them back because you've got something better to do. You can look after the state of the mind, which rewards you by giving you the sense of inner well-being that allows you to do what you know should be done. It helps clear the air so that if you *don't* know what should be done, you can watch for a while and get a perspective on things, come up with ideas you might not have thought of before.

So, the process of developing strength of the mind is a gift both to yourself and to the people around you. That means that it's something that you can stay focused on at all times, and nobody gets harmed or hurt. It doesn't mean that every-

thing in the world is going to suddenly go the way you want it to. But you do find that you're not causing any unnecessary suffering and you're actually helping the situation around you as much as you can.

Now, you realize that there are limits to what you can do, because there's that thing called karma. There's not just present karma; there's past karma as well, and past karma can't be changed. Some things are beyond you, either in terms of what you can do, of what other people can accept, or of what help other people can accept from you. Your discernment allows you to see that, accept the situation, drop the things that create unnecessary suffering, and focus on the areas where you can make a difference.

That's all that can be asked of anybody. But it turns out that it can accomplish a lot, particularly inside the mind. At the very least, you're not weighing yourself down with unnecessary suffering. You're like a person who's been carrying huge burdens but then puts them down.

There's a phrase they have in Thai, "The old woman who's carrying around a load of hay." She knows that someday she's going to need hay, so she carries hay with her everywhere she goes. This means that she can't carry anything else around with her, anything better that's lying on the road or that anybody offers her. She can't pick it up. She runs into someone else carrying a heavy burden, but she's in no position to help them carry the burden because she's all bent over with all this hay on her back.

The role of discernment is to put down the hay. You find that there are better things to pick up. You have the strength and you've got room on your shoulders. You can shoulder other people's burdens a lot more easily as well.

So, these strengths are good all around, and when you have something that's good all around like this, you want to take care of it as best as you can. Devote yourself to it with as much focus as you can muster, because this goodness spreads out in all directions.