The Five Strengths

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It takes strength of will to practice. There’s effort that has to go into it. And sometimes the results don’t appear immediately. They take time. And you may gain doubts, either about the practice or about yourself. But it’s important that you not give in to those doubts. That you work on your strength of will and all the other qualities that go into strength of mind. It’s not that we’re starting at a point zero where we have no strength or we have no abilities. The Buddha’s teaching always starts with things that we already have to some extent. It’s just that we don’t have them fully developed. When he talks about concentration, it’s not something that nobody has or that you start out without having any. The ability to concentrate is just enough to listen to a Dharma talk. Well, there’s some concentration there already. We already have some mindfulness, some discernment. The trick is to learn how to develop these qualities in a way that’s most efficient and gets the best results. When the Buddha talks about strength of mind, there are five qualities that he brings in. First is conviction. Conviction is not just faith in the practice, but it also involves an understanding of karma, what our actions can do, and when we run into difficulties, understanding why there are difficulties so that we don’t give in so easily. Basically, our experience is made up of two kinds of action, two kinds of karma, past karma and present karma. There’s nothing much you can do about past karma, and sometimes that’s precisely what’s getting in the way. Old habits, old actions from who knows when, that are preventing the results from appearing right away. If you understand that and realize that there’s nothing much you can do about the past, but as long as you’re putting good input into the present, it’s bound to pay off at some point, and that the good input you put into the present is not lost. Many people think, “Well, if I’m not seeing results right away, maybe it’s all wrong.” Well, maybe you’re doing the right things. It’s just that you’ve got some past karma that’s preventing the results from arising. So you have to have patience. Stick with it. You realize that even if death comes, nowadays it’s something that’s very prominent in people’s minds. Death, destruction, economic collapse, social collapse, war, all these things can happen. Even if those things happen, the good that we’ve done is not lost. It doesn’t get wiped out. We keep on doing good, knowing that no matter what, we’re all going to have to die at some point. What kind of life do you want to look back on? The kind of life that scrambles with other people and takes advantage of other people and has to get rid of other people so that you can live comfortably, and then you die? What kind of life is that? The life when you keep focused on the path, focused on doing what is good and skillful in your thoughts, words, and deeds, no matter what the situation is around you. That’s the kind of life that, one, you can look back on with pride, and two, you know it’s going to take you in the right direction wherever you end up going next time around. Reflecting on this helps give you strength so that you have the willpower just to keep at the practice and not give up, because that’s the next important quality that develops. Strength in the practice is persistence, just sticking with it day in, day out, day in, day out, not giving up. Arranging your schedule so that you do have time for practice however much the mind needs. It should be your first priority, the state of your mind, because when the body goes, the state of the mind will still be there. What kind of state of mind do you want to be developing as you go through aging, illness, and death? Alert, mindful, concentrated, with discernment, no matter what happens to your other faculties. That kind of mind can be developed only by persistence, sticking with the practice day in, day out, giving it priority, making extra room in your schedule so that you get used to it. Sticking with it no matter what. Because when aging, illness, and death come, there’s a part of the mind that’s always going to say, “Oh, I’m getting sick. I can’t practice.” Or, “I’m getting old. I can’t practice.” Or, “Look, I’m dying. I can’t practice.” Those are precisely the times when you need these qualities of mind the most, because they can be at most help at that time. So you have to find ways of sticking with the practice no matter what, so that it becomes something you just do because it should be done. It’s the best thing to do. There’s a great passage when the Buddha talks about grounds for laziness. It’s things like, “I’ve just eaten a big meal,” or, “I’ve just gone on a journey,” or, “I’m going to go on a journey,” or, “I’ve been sick,” or, “I’m sick right now.” So you can talk yourself into not practicing. Then he talks about grounds for exertion, and it’s the same situations. “I’m sick. I’m gone on a journey. I’m tired. I’m hungry. I’m tired.” Each time you’re making it a grounds for laziness means, “Oh, I’m just so tired from being ill. I’ve just got to rest now.” You make it a grounds for persistence by saying, “Look, I’m ill now. This could get worse. I’d better practice while I’ve got the opportunity.” And so on down the line. In other words, it’s taking that attitude, “Well, you’ve got an opportunity right now. It may not be the best situation, but it’s what you’ve got to make the most of the opportunity.” When you have that attitude, then you find that the practice develops momentum. It builds up strength incrementally over time, day after day after day. That attitude of “Let’s do what’s the most skillful thing right now,” regardless of how tired the body may feel or how lazy or diligent or whatever you may feel, you just do it because it’s the best thing to do. This means that you have to be mindful, watching over your state of mind to make sure that it doesn’t give in. That’s the third strengthening quality for the mind. Often we’re taught that mindfulness means non-reactive awareness or non-judgmental awareness. For the life of me, I can’t find any place where the Buddha taught that. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In other words, keeping in mind what you should be doing. What’s the best thing to do right now? Keeping in mind the attitude that says, “Okay, try to do whatever is most skillful right now.” You don’t let yourself forget that. You can combine that with alertness, watching what you are actually doing, and seeing what seems to make sure that you’re staying on track. John Lee liked to use the word sati-vinaya. It’s an interesting usage. It comes from a passage in the Bodhimukha, which actually means something else, but he takes it as meaning the discipline of mindfulness. Mindfulness is what disciplines us. It keeps us on the right track, reminding us that we really do need to train ourselves if we’re going to find any true happiness in life. If we just let things go, who knows where it’s going to go? Because we don’t know what past karma we’ve got and what direction it’s going to take us in. We do know that we have the opportunity to make choices in the present moment. You want to make the most skillful ones. Keep that power that you have in mind, the power to shape the present moment, to at least some extent. Your power to shape the future. Keep that in mind, and then be alert to make sure that that’s what you’re doing. As you develop this conviction, the principles of your action, persistence, mindfulness, they come together and bring the mind to states of concentration. In other words, you find that’s the most skillful place to put your mind. Give it a good strong focus. We hear the word “discipline,” and often it sounds like it’s going to be a lot of hardship. But the Buddhist discipline is one bringing the mind to a state where it can create a sense of pleasure for itself, a sense of equanimity and ease. What’s required in terms of discipline is sometimes, okay, you don’t see the results yet, but you keep working at it. Once the results come, then they give you the strength that you need in order to continue on the practice. So that you feel nourished, you feel refreshed as you’re practicing. You don’t have to wait for all the results to come at the end of the path. The results are appearing right now, and they give you strength. They give you encouragement. They give the mind a good place to stay. Because it’s not only a resting spot in the path, but once the mind is still like this, it can start seeing things within itself that it couldn’t notice before. Seeing the process of directed thought and evaluation, seeing perceptions and feelings as these things fashion the mind and they fashion the way you think. So you do them, one, you do them more skillfully, and two, you learn how to let go of them in cases where they feel burdensome to the mind. This is where concentration leads into the strongest of the strengths, where most strengthening qualities, which is discernment. Once you really clearly see these things acting in the mind, realizing that the big suffering that you’re having in life is not coming from outside. It’s from what you’re doing right here in an unskillful way, you begin to realize that it’s not necessary. You don’t have to do it. All these choices you’re making in the present moment, you become more and more conscious of them, and you get a better and better sense of which ones are skillful and which ones are not. So instead of focusing on how much you’re suffering from your past actions or the karma that’s getting in the way of the practice or getting in the way of what you want, you begin to realize, “Well, the real suffering is caused by the choices the mind is making right now.” If it learns how to deal skillfully with whatever’s coming in from the past, then it’s not going to suffer. There’s that wonderful story, we mentioned it this morning, about the monk who was going to go off to a wild area of India. The Buddha asked him, “The people there are pretty uncivilized, pretty rough. What are you going to do if they hit you?” The monk said, “I’ll think that they’re civilized and they’re not stoning me.” “Well, what if they stone you?” “I’ll think they’re civilized and they’re not stabbing me.” “What if they stab you?” “I’ll think they’re civilized and they’re not killing me.” “What if they kill you?” He said, “Well, the people have had to die through suicide. At least my death won’t be a suicide.” In other words, he learned how to face whatever situation comes up skillfully in such a way that he can make sure that he suffers the least amount necessary. He doesn’t add suffering to what’s already there. When you’re really skillful in discerning, you realize, “Okay, what happens to the body happens just to the body. It doesn’t have to affect the mind.” You learn how to discern things. You learn how to think, how to look at things in such a way that you’re not carrying around all this suffering. When the mind’s not carrying around a lot of suffering, then it’s naturally going to be strong. It’s not wasting its strength on things that don’t help or don’t serve any purpose at all. So you notice that the quality of discernment here connects with that quality of conviction. In the beginning, it’s just conviction in the principle of karma. With discernment, you see the principle of karma as it’s actually working. As someone once said, there’s a kind of discernment that comes from perceptions, from listening. But the discernment that comes from conviction has a special quality all of its own. If the conviction is focused in the right direction, conviction in the principle of karma, that leads you to a kind of discernment that really is liberating. It’s like when someone is lost in the woods. If you’re not really convinced that you’re going to get out, it’s easy to give up. But if you’re convinced that there’s got to be a way out, I mean, there was a way in, so there’s got to be a way out, the fact that you’re convinced of that way out makes it a lot easier to find it and a lot easier to stick with your search for a way out. So as you’re practicing, try to keep these qualities in mind, no matter what happens around you. Just say, “Well, that’s past karma. As long as my present karma is good, I have nothing to worry about.” Even if aging, illness, and death come, and they’re going to come at some point, they have to come to everybody. But if you’re able to maintain the skillfulness of your mind in the face of whatever happens, okay, there’s nothing to worry about. That’s something you can place your trust in. There’s nothing to fear. As long as you’ve built this refuge of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment within yourself, you’ll be okay. It’s these qualities that make you safe and secure.

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