Focus Strengthens the Mind

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One of our problems in life is that our sufferings often seem so big and enormous. And they have a way of coming on us when we feel especially weak and powerless in the face of them. And the purpose of meditation is to change that balance of power, to shift it. Shift it in our direction. First, by gathering strength of our minds. The Buddha’s image for ordinary mind is like a river that splits into five channels. The water goes flowing off, and the water in each channel doesn’t have much strength at all. Or as the John Lee would say, it goes leaking out your eyes and your ears, your nose, your tongue, and your body. Now you pay a little attention here, then you run over and pay a little attention there, and a little attention someplace else. And the lack of focus means that there’s no real strength in whatever direction you turn. So when you run into the mountains of your suffering, water doesn’t have much effect. It blocks the water and nothing much happens. But when you focus the mind in one spot and keep it there consistently, it’s like the way they used to get gold out of the Sierra Mountains. They’d take the water from a river and pump it through a hose and just spray it against the mountain. And because of the concentrated force of the water, the granite, even though it’s been granite, it was forged in the bottom of the sea and pushed up into the mountains. Big slabs of granite. They could reduce it to rubble and then to gravel. And as they took the gravel and went through it, they found the gold. It’s the same with our meditation. As we get the force of the mind concentrated in one spot and start focusing it on the issue of suffering, we can take the tools that the Buddha gives us. We can use that power of the mind to start taking that suffering apart. As the Buddha said, suffering comes down to five types of clinging. And often you’ll find that wherever there’s suffering in the mind, these five types of clinging are there. One may be stronger than the other. You’re either clinging to the form of the body, or you’re clinging to feeling. You’re clinging to perceptions. You’re clinging to the labels the mind gives to things. You’re clinging to thought constructs, the stories you build up around the suffering, or to your consciousness of all these things. The clinging is like the adhesive that holds us all together and makes us seem like one huge, big mountain. It’s both a combination of the strength of your concentration and the precision of your focus. As the Buddha directs you to focus your awareness on just these questions, when you’re suffering, what exactly are you clinging to? That’s why you take that adhesive apart. So the suffering is reduced to rubble. And you begin to see that it’s not so big after all. You can deal with a pile of gravel much better than you can deal with a big slab of rock. You can seep through and come out the other side. Or you can grind it down until it’s dust and it blows away. So the basis of this skill is getting the mind focused, because that’s where the strength comes from. So it means being consistent, staying with a breath. An image that John Fung used to use was of a needle on a record. This was way back in the days before CDs. For those of you who don’t know, they used to have vinyl records, and a needle would ride along the groove. And that’s how it would make music, the vibration of the needle. And the important thing was that the needle stayed in the groove. Otherwise, instead of getting music, you’d get a whole cacophony of screeches and scratches. Or if it were the record of a recorded talk, you couldn’t make any sense of it at all. The sounds wouldn’t even be words. But if you stay in the groove, then you know what’s happening. The music is music. The talk is a talk. It all makes sense because you stick with it continuously. It’s the same with meditation, concentration. It gains its power because you stick with it continuously. And as you stay with it, you begin to see things as they are, instead of just bits and snatches from here and there. So stay right here with the breath. Ride with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Stay with the sensation of what it’s like between the breathing. Don’t let yourself lose focus at that point. If there’s any sense of dis-ease or discomfort in the breath, see if you can work through it without leaving it. You’ll find that the more consistent your focus, the easier it is to work through the jumps and the gaps and the tangles of the breathing, and the tangles of your own mind. You begin to notice the space where the mind takes a pause in its concentration. And try to notice exactly what inspires that. What sensation or what is it that makes the concentration lose its oomph, lose its strength? You have to stop for a second before you can start up again. Why is that? What did you run into? Look into it. And you’ll find as you work through it, it’s like working through that line of the pauses. So it’s one continuous line all the way through the hour. When you do that, you’ll find that the concentration gains a lot of strength. It builds up on momentum. And then you can turn it to dealing with the big issues, problems in life. Up to that point, it’s simply a resting place or an exercise for the mind. But once you get that power, then you can use it for all kinds of things. It’s like developing strength of the body. You could use it for all kinds of things. You could beat people up. But is that what you want to do with it? Wouldn’t it be better to build something really useful? Or to break up something that’s harmful? It’s the same with the concentration. The Buddha noted that there are lots of things that you can apply the power of concentration to. But the most useful thing is to deal with the problem of suffering. So you build the path, and then you take the problem of suffering apart through the strength of your concentration. In this way, you shift that balance of power in your favor. The strength of the mind is gathered and strong. Suffering, which used to seem such a huge monolithic thing, you begin to see it’s just little bits and pieces. And as you take them apart and examine the bits and pieces, you discover that they’re very evanescent. Pain, for instance, it comes and goes, and comes again, and goes again, and moves around. But we turn it into one big block of pain, and then we suffer. But if your concentration is continuous and your focus is sharp, you begin to see that the pain moves around. It’s just little blips, blips, blips here and there. If you stay focused on the present moment, instead of gathering the pain of the past and the pain of the future onto this one little moment in the present, you find that you can stand the pain. It’s a lot easier. A lot of the big problem is that you were clinging to the stories you created around it. You created a story about the past, you created a story about the future, and then used it to weigh down the pain. And no wonder it gives way. You weigh down on the present, and no wonder the present gives way. It becomes hard to bear. So what you’re doing is taking this big block of suffering in your mind and taking it apart into its pieces. That’s why the Buddha talked about aggregates. They’re heaps of things. It seems to be one big mountain. As you take it apart, it turns into rubble. And you find, as you go through the rubble, there’s gold. There’s the gold of another dimension in the mind. But you can’t see it until you take things apart this way. There are basically two stages to the practice, the practice of gathering your strength and then applying it to taking your sufferings apart. It would be nice, of course, if everything were nice and graded like this. First you work on one stage, and then you work on the next stage. And when that’s mastered, then you take on the big issues in life. Well, the big issues keep coming all the time. So you use what strength you have to take on whatever issues you can manage. And you find in that way that your concentration grows stronger, your discernment grows stronger. You don’t wait until everything is ready and then tackle suffering. You tackle suffering to the extent that you can, back and forth like this, then gathering your forces again when the strength of your concentration gets dissipated. But as you work back and forth this way, you begin to find that you really can start wearing through that suffering. It seems like such a huge block. Then the balance gets changed in your direction. Finally, the suffering has no power at all. All the power belongs to the suffering. It belongs to the side of the mind. So stay with your focus, because it’s this practice of keeping the mind focused that forms the foundation for all the skills you’re going to need.

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