Conserving Your Strength

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We spend a lot of the day being on the receiving end of things. Sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, all kinds of things come in at us. We’re constantly bombarded. Your mind spends a lot of time just running around, putting out all the little fires that come up. So it’s good to spend a lot of time when you close off your eyes and ears and all the other senses. Even though your ears don’t fall deaf, you don’t really have to pay attention to anything, even this Dharma talk. Let it be in the background. Give the mind something to do that’s really good for the mind. Stay with the breath. The breath comes in, know it’s going in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. It’s the one thing you have to pay attention to right now, how the breath feels in the body. Think of it being comfortable. Just think that thought, “May the breath be comfortable.” Notice what ways you may have of making it uncomfortable. You could just drop them. You may have a tendency to squeeze the breath in too much or squeeze it out too much. Notice that if you run across it, and then just allow the rhythm of breath to change. But let yourself be totally absorbed in just relating to the breath, because this strengthens the mind. It doesn’t have to run around so much to lots of different things, even though there may be some movement as it evaluates the breath. At least it’s moving around one thing. The image that John Lee gives us of spinning around a post. If you hold onto a post with one hand and just spin around and around, it doesn’t make you dizzy. Just go spinning around on your own, though, just three or four times, and you fall flat on your face. You’ve got one thing to hold onto, and now you evaluate it and look at it, make changes here and there, and prod it here and there until everything seems right. Then you can stop that and abandon that activity and just be with the sensation of the breath. That’s all you’ve got to do. That’s your only responsibility right now. This is an important principle in the practice of learning how to conserve your strength, how to build up your strength, because it’s because of strength of mind that we can survive. You’ve probably seen cases of people horribly maimed, faced with all kinds of difficulties in life, and yet they have the strength of mind, the strength of will to persevere. Other people have everything perfectly fine, and yet they don’t have any strength of mind. They find themselves miserable and sometimes end up committing suicide. So the most important thing we need in order to survive in life is strength of mind. The practice of concentration, the practice of mindfulness, is one way of developing that. It’s an important way of developing that. One of the images the Buddha gives of people who practice this is that we’re warriors. We’re doing battle with defilement. Greed, anger, and delusion are the big problems in life, and so we need whatever strength we can muster to deal with them. In fact, all the issues in the practice can be looked at from that point of view. A good warrior. How do good warriors deal with issues? For one thing, they take on only the battles that are really important. They don’t squander their strength on unimportant issues. So when you’re practicing the Dhamma, it’s not just a matter of learning techniques or listening to wonderful teachings. It’s learning to look at your life and realize what’s important and what’s not. It’s not just an issue of looking for happiness, but even the good things we want to do in a more selfless sense. You realize you can only manage so much. If you go around trying to straighten out the whole world, you would die long before you got finished with the job. And your own issues wouldn’t have been dealt with at all. As Ajaan Sawat used to say, each of us has only one person we’re really responsible for. We’re responsible for our own actions, our own thoughts, our own words. Other people say and think and do things, and you’re not responsible for their choices. You can influence them to some extent, but you’re the only person that you can have real control over what you’re doing and saying and thinking. So that’s where your first priority should be—making sure that those actions are not done under the influence of defilement, under the influence of greed or aversion or delusion. That’s where the real battlefield is. So make that your top priority. Some people may say it’s selfish, but hey, if you can reduce the amount of greed, aversion, and delusion in your actions, that’s a real gift to the people around you. On the one hand, they’re less bombarded by your own defilements, and on the other, it becomes an example. Other people can see that it’s possible to live life without giving in to these things and still be happy. This is what it comes down to. We’d like to have happiness in all areas of our lives, but it’s impossible. For one reason, certain kinds of happiness are not possible. To get in the way of other kinds of happiness, you have to make a choice. And then there’s that question about how much strength you have. We all have a finite amount of strength, a finite number of breaths that we’re going to breathe in this lifetime. Even though there may seem to be many, many, many breaths, they’re not infinite. There’s going to be a number, and you don’t know what that number is. You don’t know when your number is up. So you want to dedicate each breath you have to something good. You want to do an intelligent pursuit of happiness. That means seeing which levels of happiness or which kinds of happiness are really worth pursuing, because all happiness requires effort. But there are only certain kinds of happiness that really are worth the effort. So the practice of the Dhamma is not just learning to focus your mind or learning to be mindful or seeing things in terms of the three characteristics or whatever. An important part of the practice is getting a sense of priorities, which things are really important in life and which things are less important, which types of happiness are worth the pursuit and which ones are not. This requires reflection, and it also requires strength, because any effort for happiness takes energy. And your potential for happiness is greater the more mental strength you have. This is why we work on concentration to build up strength for the mind. The Buddha compares concentration to food for the mind. In other places, he compares it to a home for the mind. In other words, it’s a place where you can rest, gather your strength, and nourish the mind. But simply having strength is not enough. You need to use it in a way that’s wise. That’s where there are all the other teachings, all those books filled with the teachings of the Buddha. They’re not just idle fantasies or speculations. All the Buddha’s wisdom is meant to be used. It’s meant to give you a sense of priorities, what’s important, what’s not, and how you go about attaining what’s important, how to get perspective on the issues that may seem large in your life but really are very minor. That’s why there’s a contemplation of death. It’s a topic that most people don’t like to think about. But you notice what happens when people don’t think about it, when it comes, when illness comes. They feel offended. They feel, “Something is very wrong here. This is not the way things should be.” But, as the Buddha reminds you, aging, illness, and death are normal. This is the way of life. So use that contemplation as a way of reminding yourself what’s important and what’s not. We hear of cases of people who learn from a doctor that they’ve got, say, three months left to live. So they drop all the inessential things in their lives and focus on what’s important. It’s a good thing they’re doing that, but it’s a shame they had to wait for the last three months. It would be better to live your whole life focused on what’s important. This is a way of reminding yourself of the normalcy of death. It’s all around us. As John Lee says, “It can hit you at any time.” We can die so easily. A little piece of blood clot starts wandering around your body and gets lodged in your heart and that’s it. One of the vessels in your brain suddenly gets overloaded and the blood spills out in the brain and that’s it. All kinds of strange things can happen. You hear of all these freak accidents where people die. So remind yourself that death has you surrounded on all sides. This is a dying body that you’ve got here. So you have only so much time, only so much strength. Try to maximize the strength so that whatever time you do have is well used. Make sure that each breath is well used. It’s one of the Buddhist contemplations. Every time you breathe in, breathe out, remind yourself, “I’ve got one more breath. I know I’ve got this breath to live. It gives me a chance to practice the teachings. It gives me a chance to do what’s good, what’s worthwhile.” Remind yourself of that. We talk about the preciousness of human life. It’s precious because it gives us the opportunity to do something good with the energy we’ve got. So we maximize the energy by learning how to get the mind concentrated. You focus on a pursuit of happiness that’s really worthwhile. That’s the Buddha’s one assumption about human beings. He doesn’t talk about people having Buddha nature or any other kind of nature. He says people do pursue happiness, and the issue is whether or not they pursue it wisely. If you pursue it wisely, you find a happiness that’s well worth the effort, a happiness that goes way beyond the ordinary. His teachings are all about that, how best to use the limited time and limited strength we have to find, ultimately, a happiness that doesn’t have any limits. That’s why his teaching is so special. We don’t know how much time we have, but we do know that there is a way to increase our strength of mind. We use that strength to give the Buddha’s teachings a good try, to see if what was true for him is true for us, that there is a happiness that’s totally unlimited. Given our limited resources, we can find a way to parlay them into something really special.

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