A Warrior’s Strengths

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Chang-li tells the story when Tommy was out in the forest going on an alms round. A couple of other monks, a few young boys tagging along behind, and a wild chicken saw the monks coming and let out a warning cry to all their chicks. The chicks scurried around and ran into a pile of leaves. As an experiment, John Lee had some of the boys tagging along take some sticks and stir up the pile of leaves to see if they could get the chicks to come out. And they couldn’t. The chicks just lay there very still. We commented on how smart the chicks were, knowing that there was no way they could fight this obvious danger. So they learned how to avoid the danger, how to hide out. We said this is an important lesson for meditators. There are a lot of times when you just have to hide out, even as a meditative warrior. One of the first lessons you have to learn is when it’s wise to fight and when it’s wise to make yourself scarce, to avoid the fight, to get out of the dangerous situation. Other people may think you’re a coward, but that’s their business. As they say, discretion is the better part of valor. You have to know when a fight is worth fighting. And you also know how to get out of a fight when you see that it’s going poorly. This deals with disturbances in your environment. Today we’re talking about tremendously noisy places to try to meditate. And also, of course, the inner fight with your defilements. The Buddha talks about how these things come in and take over the mind. He says, “It starts out with simple contact with the senses, and then there’s feeling. And then from feeling, there’s the person who feels, the person who puts a label on these things. And then from the labeling, you start thinking about them. And then the thinking turns into obsessive thinking.” The Pali term is pabbanca, meaning proliferation, complication. He says, “These turn around and then they bite you. They attack you. You’re attacked by your own thoughts.” Sometimes people wonder how your actions, through the principle of karma, can come back at you. What happens in your mind all the time? You start thinking in the terms and categories, as they say, of obsessive thinking, which starts with the thought that “I am the thinker.” Whatever comes up in your mind, you’re suddenly responsible for it. And when you’re responsible for it, they turn around and they bite you on the hand. Or worse than that, they grab you by the throat. That’s the internal battle. So as a warrior, a meditative warrior, you have to know when to take on your enemies and when to hide out. There’s another famous story in the Canon. There was a young monk who had been very delicately brought up. He’s pushing himself to do walking meditation to the point where his feet are all bloody. He gets discouraged and says, “Well, maybe I should just go back, be a layperson, make merit. That seems to be all I’m capable of, the practices and getting the results I wanted.” So the Buddha comes to him. He actually disappears from where he was and appears right in front of the monk and asks him, back when he was a layperson, “Didn’t you play the lute?” “Yes.” “Were you skillful at it?” “Yes.” “What happens when the strings were too tight?” “Well, they snapped. They didn’t sound good.” “And they were too loose.” “Again, they didn’t sound right. You had to get the strings tuned just right.” The Buddha says, “In the same way, you have to tune your persistence, and from that you tune the other faculties to it.” It’s like tuning a guitar. You tune one string to get that into it, and then you tune the other strings to that first one. In this case, of all the five faculties, all the five strengths that you need in your meditation—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—your persistence, your energy, the amount of effort you can put into the practice, that’s the first string that you tune. In other words, you look at what your strength is. What can you handle? Many of us have to learn, through experience, what we can and can’t handle. Some people tend to underestimate the amount of strength they have. Other people tend to overestimate. But the sign of a good warrior is that you’re willing to learn from your mistakes. As the great Mahabhura once said, “If you don’t put up a fight at all, how can you say that you even lose? You just lie down and let your defilements trample all over you.” He said, “At least when you try to put up a fight, you can say that someone has won, someone has lost.” He said it’s better to fight and lose than not to try to fight at all, in the sense of not trying out anything. But over time, if you’re a smart warrior, you begin to realize, you can begin to read what your strength is, what you’re capable of. Sometimes you have to push yourself too hard. Other times, try relaxing, see what happens there, and see where the middle zone is, where your effort is just right. From that, you build your other strengths, particularly concentration. Concentration is really good protection to have. It’s a good place to hide out when you need it. Like that story of the martial arts expert. His students tried all their different skills on this donkey that was by the side of the road. The first student gets kicked across the road. The second student gets kicked across the road. They all get kicked across the road, no matter what stance they try. So they realize, well, the martial arts expert hasn’t taught them everything. So they hide off at the side of the road to see what the martial arts expert will do, what stance he’ll take against the donkey. Well, the martial arts expert finally comes around, he sees the donkey, and he walks way around the donkey to stay away from it. You need concentration as that ability to walk way around things. When the storm’s in your mind, you’re blowing, and they seem really strong, just say, “I’m going to stay right here with the breath and focus on that and not get involved in anything else.” As soon as you have that complicating thought or that proliferating thought that “I am the thinker,” then the thoughts become your thoughts and you’ve got to deal with them. So you drop that assumption for the time being. If anything, “I am the meditator, I am the person focusing on the breath, but these thoughts are something else,” learn not to identify with them. And if they’re too strong to deal with, you just let them go, let them go, let them go, no matter how enticing they may seem or how real they may seem. You have to put up resistance, and sometimes the best resistance is to lie low. So you stay with the breath, stay with the physical sensations in the body, and pretend like you don’t understand the English language or whatever language these thoughts are talking in. But when you find that you do have the strength to take on the thoughts, by all means, try to figure out which of these thoughts are skillful, which ones are not, which ones can you believe, which ones should you put a big question mark next to. A lot of the training lies in learning how to figure out what kind of thought-thinking is skillful and what’s not, because you’ve got to use your thoughts. Meditation is not a process of stopping your thinking. It’s becoming a zombie. If your discernment is going to have any strength, it has to learn how to think and question, see connections between cause and effect. So when you think of doing something, ask yourself, “If I do this, what are the results going to be? Will they be skillful or not?” Sometimes you can reflect from experience and realize, “Okay, the last time I did that, I got into big trouble. But whatever it was, it wasn’t really worth it.” You can drop that thought. At least you can try to drop the thought. Give yourself good reasons to drop it. Give yourself better ways of thinking about the issue, whatever it is, alternative plans for action. Your old habitual way of doing things might resist, put up resistance, but again, why should you be afraid of that resistance? You can put up resistance, too. The new thoughts can put up resistance, too. At least give them a try. You’re creating new ruts in the mind. Your old ruts are obviously unskillful ones. Let’s create some new ones. It’s going to take some time, and you have to do it again and again and again. But remember, the old ruts are also the product of conditions. They’re not innate in the mind. You have the choice of creating new habits or falling in with your old habits. When you’ve seen the results of your old habits, try something new. In this way, your discernment becomes strong. It becomes strong because you exercise it. But as with any strength training, you have to realize what your strength is. It becomes to the point where you can’t think your way around a particular problem. You just do your best. If it’s an issue where you have to act, if it’s not an issue where you have to act, well, just lie low. Say, “I’m not going to get involved here.” Other people may say, “Well, make this your practice,” with the insinuation that you’re less than a true meditator if you don’t take on every difficulty all the time. But that’s not how a true warrior acts. It’s the people who want to prove that they’re warriors. They’ll take on every battle. The experienced ones know which battles are worth taking on and which ones are not. The same with issues outside. People will often say, “Well, lay life is better than the monastic life because you’re dealing with real problems. You’re not running away.” Well, you can’t really run away from your problems. But you can run away from circumstances that make it difficult to practice. Before you’ve been able to develop a true wilderness mind, you have to go into places where you are alone and you’re away from a lot of outside influences so you really can look at your mind and build a solid foundation of concentration. Again, it’s a matter of looking at what you’re capable of, what your strength is, and if you find that a confusing environment or a loud environment or a difficult environment is just too much for you, get out of it as much as you can. Find some solitude. Find some seclusion. Over time, that physical seclusion will develop into mental seclusion. As we say, the mind is secluded from unskillful qualities. You’ve built up a strong resistance to them, or at least you’ve built up some resistance to them. That’s the beginning of a wilderness mind. And then you try to see the extent to which you can carry that wilderness mind into more complicated situations. And there’ll be a back and forth. Sometimes you’ll find it just disappearing right in front of your eyes. You’ve got to go back and build it back up again. As long as you work at it, the time will come when you find that you can maintain this sense of the wilderness mind, the mind that’s being separate from things that are coming in, the mind that doesn’t go out and lay claim to things outside. That’s a lot of the problem right there. Things come up to us and they, on themselves, would just pass by, pass by, but we pull them in. When you can see that tendency in the mind and learn how to thwart it, learn how to sidestep it, then you’re ready for more difficult circumstances. It all comes back to that old principle of the warrior. Know your strength. Know what you can do. Know your enemy. When you see there’s a possibility of taking on the enemy, take him on. If you’re not ready yet, well, know where you can sidestep the danger from the enemy. This is called warrior knowledge. Back in ancient civilizations, I made a distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribe knowledge is all in words, definitions, doctrinaire statements. This must be true. Everything else is false. A warrior has to learn from experience what works and what doesn’t. A good warrior learns not to be doctrinaire, to figure out when certain maxims really apply and when they have to be put aside. They talk about people going out into the wilderness up in Alaska, the doctrinaire ones who’ve read a lot of books and have a lot of very strong ideas about how a true wilderness person should live. Those are the ones who tend to last only a few weeks, the ones who are willing to adapt and to learn. They use the conveniences of modern civilization when they work and to pick up skills from the wilderness when those are needed. In other words, you learn from what works, you learn from what doesn’t work. Those are the ones who can survive. So to be a good warrior in your meditation, you’ve got to learn the skills of a warrior. Put down the easy doctrinaire statements. Learn from what works, what doesn’t work. The Buddha gives lots of examples, so you don’t have to keep reinventing the Dharma wheel all the time. But as for the particulars, those you have to learn on your own. You have to be willing to learn, because that’s where your discernment develops. Discernment comes from seeing cause and effect, and if you don’t see it on your own, the discernment never comes. So whether people admire you for your bravery or dismiss you for your cowardice, that’s not the issue. The issue is that you find what battles you’re up for taking on, which battles you feel you can handle. That’s the exit strategy for when you discover you’ve taken on more than you can handle. This is it. The exit strategy is learning how to get the mind concentrated, get it still, and learn enough discernment so that you don’t get involved in that proliferation that comes from “I am the thinker.” All of a sudden, the thoughts turn around and they attack you. If you don’t lay claim to them, they don’t attack you. Even when it is time to take them on, make sure that you’ve got your weapons sharp so that when they attack you, you know how to parry, you know how to sidestep, so they don’t do you any damage.

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