A Gift of Strength

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One of the most valuable things in the modern world is time. So many toys, so little time. So many relationships, so little time. So many desires, so little time. Given that fact, it would seem that the time we take to work on the mind is taking time away from other things, time away from relationships, time away from other duties. But it’s not really that way. You have to remember that there are also limitations on your energy. And one of the things we do as part of the practice is to increase your energy. To increase your strength. So the time that you take to meditate is not time taken away from other responsibilities. It’s time that’s put to good use. It’s like eating. You have to take time out to eat so you have strength to do your other activities. In the same way, the mind needs time to be by itself. To have its own sense of its own space, where it can rest, recuperate, and develop its strength. And then you can take that strength and devote it to whatever purpose you want. If you’re living in a family, you can devote it to your family members. If you have work to do, you can devote it to your work. So don’t think of the meditation as a selfish thing. That space you try to create inside, that space of equanimity, or a sense of well-being that you can develop from within, doesn’t need to depend on anyone else. That doesn’t mean that you’re not being faithful to other people. There’s no human relationship that can carry the weight of providing all your happiness for you. The more you can stand straight on your own feet, the less you need to lean on other people. And the less you lean on them, the more durable the relationship. So it’s not an either/or. It’s a matter of finding the right balance, so you can have a both/and. Looking after yourself in a wise way is a gift to other people, just as being good to other people in a wise way is good for yourself. The two principles go together. So take this time to work on the strength of the mind. First, there’s a strength that can be found in conviction, that your actions really are important. The things you do and the things you say, you think, really do shape your life. What does that mean? It means you have to look at the source of your actions, which is the mind, the intentions of the mind. In fact, the Buddha actually said at one point that your intention is the action. And it stands to reason that if the intentions come out of a strong mind, well-balanced, wise, compassionate, mindful, then those intentions are going to be a lot more skillful. The life they shape is going to be a much better life. So the teachings on karma are not irrelevant to the teachings on meditation. They point you to why you need to meditate and where you have to focus. Focus on your intentions, which leads to persistence, the next strength, and the focus of your persistence, which is trying to develop skillful intentions. Let go of unskillful ones. Learn to look for the mind states that cause unskillful intentions—greed, anger, delusion. Learn to do what you can to undercut them. Again, this is going to require more meditation. Particularly, you develop mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, which are the other strengths. Mindfulness doesn’t mean simply being aware of the present moment. It means keeping certain things in mind, particularly the whole issue of why you want to focus on being skillful, where you have to focus your attention, and focus your energy. Look at the way your intentions take shape. Where do they take shape? They take shape right here. That’s why alertness is often paired with mindfulness—seeing exactly what the mind is doing and then looking at the results. So you get a clear idea of the connection between your intentions and the actual happiness or pain that they cause. You can learn how to refine that as part of your persistence, as part of your right effort. This leads ultimately to concentration, keeping the mind focused, keeping it intent on one thing for long periods of time. This is nourishment for the mind and the various qualities along the path. The one that the Buddha consistently compares to food is just this—concentration. Staying with one object, like the breath, or whatever object you find comfortable, effective, at any one point in time. Staying with that object until you develop a sense of well-being around it. You can be friends with the object. Learn how to be friends with your breath. Be friends with the way the breath energy permeates the body. You can be with the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Even when the breath is still, you can be with the whole body. That sense of expanded awareness, centered in the present moment, but expanded to fill the whole body, is really nourishing for the mind. It gives you that sense that you really can’t find happiness simply by sitting here and breathing. It doesn’t have to depend on things outside being a certain way. You’ve got this skill inside, and you try to develop that in a way that it’s not just while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You have this sense of occupying your whole body wherever you go, and that’s nourishing. For one thing, other people don’t come in and occupy your space. You’ll notice that sometimes you deal with certain people, and if you’re not fully occupying your body, their energy takes over. You pick it up, and that can sap you. You try to fully occupy your body throughout the day. Both body and mind will feel stronger. When you have this sort of solid position in the mind, then the fifth strength, discernment, can really function. You begin to see very clearly where you create unnecessary stress. This is an important distinction. The stresses and strains are just there. They come from outside, and then there are things that you add on top of it. The things you add are totally unnecessary. You weaken yourself by adding them. Deluded expectations, greedy expectations, angry impulses. These are just a few of the things that add unnecessary stress and suffering. The mind is well-fed, well-nourished with the concentration that it can see these things for what they are. If it’s not, you tend to identify with them. If someone tells you to let them go, you say, “I can’t let them go. These are me. I need these things.” It’s like criticizing someone who’s hungry. They don’t want to hear any of it. But if you get them well-rested, well-fed, then you can talk to them, and they’re in a much better mood to listen. The mind is the same way. There’s a lot of stuff that discernment shows you about your own mind that you’d rather not see. What if you could train the mind to be with a sense of oneness, a sense of ease? Through the concentration, it’s more willing to listen, and it’s in a better position to see. In other words, the less stress you add to the present moment, the more you can see at the times when you do add stress, even in subtle ways. That’s why you become more solid inside. Of course, you’re not the only person who benefits. The people around you who are subject to your greed, anger, and delusion, subject to your need to depend on them for your happiness, sense you as much less of a burden now. So think of this time, the time you meditate, the time that you focus inside, not as something that you’re taking away from the people around you. But it’s a positive addition. It’s a gift, not only to yourself, but to them as well. In any relationship, there will come a time when the relationship ends, and then you look back on it. If you can look back on a relationship in which you were giving, the memories cause you a lot less pain. So do your best to work on this gift, because it’s one of the best gifts you can give to anybody, yourself and the people around you. It’s a heartfelt gift. You feel it in your heart. The people around you will feel it in theirs.

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