May 31, 2024

We survive based on two kinds of strength—strength of body and strength of mind. And to maintain both kinds of strength, we feed on things. We feed on physical food. We try to feed on our feelings—feelings of pleasure, either physical pleasure or mental pleasure. These are the things that keep us alive. One of the main points of the Buddhist teachings is that there’s more to life than just brute survival. We can train the mind. We can feed the mind so that it flourishes. This means finding the right food for it. This is why we meditate. In meditation, it’s food for the mind. We create the right mood in the mind. We create the right physical feeling in the body to whatever extent we can. Sometimes you can induce the mind into a state of concentration simply by the way you breathe. Find a nice comfortable rhythm. Focus on a spot in the body where the breath feels good coming in, feels good going out. The stillness of the body can lead to stillness of the mind. But there are times when the body won’t grow still. It has pains here and there. The breath feels funny. It wouldn’t settle down, or at least not quickly enough for us. That’s when you have to turn and put the mind in good shape. Develop the right attitude. John Sawat talked about this often. He would say, “Shape your mind. Dress your mind so that it’s ready to meditate.” Put it in the proper shape. Remind yourself that you’re doing something that is really worthwhile, something that’s totally harmless and full of benefit, and something that requires patience. So try to induce as much patience as you can as you meditate. Even though it may be lacking in strength of body, the feelings in the body may not be comfortable. You can make up for that by having the mind in the right mood. One way of doing this, and John Lee recommends this, is if you can’t make the whole body feel comfortable, find some spot in the body that you can make comfortable. Focus all your attention there and be content to stay right there. As for the rest of the body, remind yourself that often you’re dealing with old karma. If your state of mind depends on everything being just perfectly fine outside, everything in the body being nice, all the situations, the people around you being nice, you’ll die before you get the mind to settle down, because there will always be some disturbance someplace, some issue that you get worked up about. So remind yourself that those things don’t matter. What does matter is keeping the mind calm, keeping the mind still, keeping it clear, so you don’t allow the pains in the body or the disturbances with people outside, or the weather outside, or whatever, to cause you to do unskillful things, because that’s the big issue in life. All your choices are skillful, because that’s what’s going to shape your happiness now and in the future. This is what restraint is all about, things that would normally elicit an unskillful response. You’ve got to learn how to put the brakes on, or at the very least, stop for a second and remind yourself, “Do I really want to do this? Do I really want to go down that road? Is there something better I can focus on right now that’ll strengthen the mind so it can stay calm and at ease and clear?” There’s that image in the canon of a man coming along and finding water in a cow’s footprint, and he’s hot, tired, thirsty. He’s trembling with the heat, trembling with the thirst. He realizes that if he used his hand to scoop up the water in the cow’s footprint, he’d make a lot of money. So he gets down and slurps it up. The image is there to describe the attitude you should have toward a person who’s been bad to you in one way or another, but still has some goodness. You focus on the goodness. But it applies to all different kinds of areas in your life. Like you’re sitting right here right now. There are pains in the body. You don’t have to focus on the pains. Find a little bit of water there in your body someplace. Or if the body seems hard to focus on anywhere, try to find a little bit of water in your own mind. You very carefully slurp that up. That can be your strength. When it’s hot outside, ask yourself, “Is it absolutely too hot to bear?” Well, no, you can bear it. You’re alive. Focus on one part of the body that’s cooler than the rest. Or focus on how, if you calm the mind down, the body cools down. So you’ve got to make everything very, very still in the mind. In other words, you can’t let your mind simply be a mirror of what’s going on inside the body or around you. The mind has to take a more active role in shaping itself, keeping itself clear and steady and calm. And we all do have this water inside us. Sometimes you have to look really hard to find it, but remind yourself there’s always something there that’s calming and gives you a sense of ease. Simply remind yourself that you’re here doing an activity that harms nobody. That in and of itself is quite an accomplishment. Look at all the different jobs there are in the world, all the activities that people get themselves involved in, that can cause so much harm, so much damage. Here we are focused on something that avoids that damage. That in and of itself should give you some energy, should give you some strength. Try to nourish your mind with that. Whether it’s when the situation outside is difficult or when the situation in the body is difficult, learn to look for the nourishment from within the mind. Because that ultimately is what you really have to depend on. After all, the purpose of meditation is to get the mind in a position where, when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, it’s not going to be shaken. That means it requires its own inner resources so that it doesn’t need to depend on health, or youth, or life, or the body. And it’s not going to be the case that you’re going to find that strength only at the end of the path. There are people out there who are not consciously meditating or developing the mind in any particular way, but they do have some of these strengths already. And here we are on the path. We’ve got to have some goodness within us, some nourishment for the mind, nutriment for the mind, to look for it within you. It can simply be a change in your attitude. If you’re sitting in the middle of a hot afternoon and all you can think of is how many more hours you’re going to have to sit through the heat, just stop that thinking and try to see, “Oh, yeah, I’m actually in good shape.” Try to drop whatever form of thinking is oppressive. And if the heat is getting to you, just remind yourself, “Okay, there are other things going on in the body besides just the heat. There are the cooler parts.” Or if you find yourself getting more interested in how the breath is going in the body and what changes you can make in the breath energy, you find yourself forgetting about the heat entirely as you get more absorbed in the other issues in the body, other issues in the mind. So learn how to feed your mind properly. There’s nourishment all around. There’s nourishment inside. It may require that you’re really selective in order to get down. You have to slurp up just a tiny little bit of water in the cow footprint. Okay, well, be selective. Learn how to content yourself with the fact that, “Well, maybe this is all I’ve got right now.” But it’s that little bit of nourishment that can keep you going. And you find that as it strengthens you, you find more nourishment in other places as well. That’s why we learn to be more and more independent, so that regardless of what the weather is like, regardless of what the situation is like in the body, the mind can still find some contentment, can still find a place where it can settle down and be at its ease. We’re going to develop an understanding that its happiness doesn’t have to depend on things outside. It’s got all the potentials it needs inside. It’s simply a matter of developing them.

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