Strength of Intelligence

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In Thailand, the Ajahns often talk about bringing intelligence to your practice. This doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to be smart in order to practice. You bring whatever intelligence you have, and in bringing intelligence to the practice, you develop it. Now, the Thai word for intelligence is actually a compound of two Pali terms. One is sati, mindfulness. The other is paññā, discernment. You put these two qualities together—you’re mindful and you’re discerning—and that’s when you bring intelligence to the practice. We often think of mindfulness simply as being aware of what’s happening in the present moment. But the basic meaning of mindfulness is the ability to remember. And usually, when you find the word mindfulness alone, it’s meant to be paired with something else—alertness. That’s the awareness part, being aware of not just whatever is happening, but precisely aware of what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. This is listed as one of the strengths. Because often we find ourselves asleep to craving, as they said in the chant we had just now. We leave ourselves exposed. We allow ourselves to forget what we’re doing. We forget what we should be doing. An emotion, a defilement, rises up in our mind. And if we don’t have mindfulness as a strength to protect ourselves from the emotion, it totally takes over. We lose our bearings. We do and say things that we may have made up our minds we’re not going to do or say, because we know they’re unskillful. And when that wave of passion has passed, or that wave of anger has passed, we relax wondering, “Well, how did that happen?” Or maybe you simply decide you’re going to sit here and not move, and then you suddenly find yourself moving. How did that happen? There was a lapse in mindfulness. There was a moment of weakness in the mind where you’d let down your protection. Mindfulness is a strength, specifically when it is coupled with discernment—the discernment of what’s skillful and unskillful. That in and of itself involves two processes. One is seeing distinctions and seeing connections, i.e., the connection between an action and its results. That’s the old Aristotelian definition of intelligence, being able to see connections, to see patterns. You see connections where they hadn’t been pointed out to you. Seeing that if you act on sensual desire, or if you act on ill will, or if you act on the desire to be harmful, it’s going to lead to bad results. You see that connection. You also see the connection that if you act on the principle of renunciation, that you’re going to let go of that sensual attachment, that you’re not going to act on ill will, and you’re not going to act or think thoughts of harmfulness. It leads to good results. You see that connection as well. And you see the distinction between the two sorts. As Ajaan Lee says, if you see the results without seeing the causes, that doesn’t really count as discernment, because everybody sees the results. People know that they’re suffering or they know that they’re happy. But it’s seeing why they’re suffering, why they’re happy, that’s what turns it into discernment. And realizing that it is in their power to create the conditions that would lead to suffering or to lead to happiness. When you can keep that discernment in mind, that’s when you have a strength. You have the strength to resist the power of craving, to resist the power of clinging, all these old habits in the mind that are ingrained because we’ve given in to them for so many lifetimes that it seems second nature. And those impulses like to have their way, which is why they’re going to be resistant to teachings that say, “No, you can’t do that. It’s going to lead to danger down the line.” This is why we have to develop the discernment and mindfulness together, so that you keep remembering the principle of what works and what doesn’t work, what leads to happiness, what leads to suffering. And then you do your practice best to develop skillful states of pleasure, states of pleasure that can actually increase your mindfulness and increase your discernment. This is why we practice concentration. That’s why the Buddha called right concentration the heart of the path. The other factors of the path are its requisites, conditions that help it along. But right concentration was the first factor that the Buddha discovered after practicing austerities all those years. He reflected, “Is there another way?” He remembered when he had been sitting under a tree and his mind had naturally entered a state of right concentration. The question arose, “Could that be the path?” And he knew instinctively, “Yes, that is the path.” It is the path in the sense that it puts the mind in a position where it’s mindful and alert and has a sense of pleasure. Deep sense of pleasure that permeates the body, as the Buddha says. It suffuses and fills this body with a sense of rapture and ease, or refreshment and ease. That’s an important connection to see, because often we associate pleasure with the times when we’re forgetful, when we try to forget the things we don’t like about ourselves or forget the things we don’t like about our life, or forget that we make mistakes. We forget we made a vow not to move, or we forget we made a vow not to act on greed, anger, and delusion. We associate pleasure with forgetfulness, but it’s a very weak form of pleasure, because at some point our memories are bound to come back. The pleasure that can wake us up is the pleasure that can withstand memories of whatever that can hold up to your discernment of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. That kind of pleasure is strong, because it’s not afraid of remembering. It’s not afraid of turning the full light of your discernment on what it’s doing. That’s why right concentration is also listed as a strength, because, as the Buddha said, you might know very well that unskillful behavior leads to bad consequences, especially attachment to sensual pleasure, attachment to sensual desires. But if you don’t have also the pleasure of concentration as your guarantee that there is a pleasure that comes from abandoning sensual desires, you’re not going to be able to let go of sensual desires. No matter how much you’ve read or how much you’ve heard or how much you’ve reasoned it out, if you don’t have this pleasure, the pleasure of concentration, you won’t be able to withstand really strong sensual desires. So all these factors together work as a strength. There’s the discernment as to what’s skillful and what’s not. There’s the kind of concentration that gives rise to a sense of ease and pleasure when you do develop skillful qualities in mind. And then there’s the mindfulness that enables you to get into concentration and keep remembering that the most satisfying, strongest, deepest pleasure comes from being mindful, from being skillful. And if you allow yourself to give in to unskillful behavior, it’s going to destroy that higher kind of pleasure, that deeper kind of pleasure. You can’t have both together. It’s an either/or proposition. That’s a distinction you have to keep in mind. So this is what we’re doing here, as we sit and meditate, is developing these three forms of strength. Together with the other two in the classic list, the conviction that it is possible, through our efforts, to find the lasting happiness that’s even deeper than the pleasure of concentration. And persistence, the willingness to stick with it, the ability to stick with it. Generating the desire to stick with it. Upholding that desire. Holding your intention to stick with it. Persistence doesn’t simply mean just brute effort. It means having the right attitude towards the effort, learning how to cajole yourself into wanting to gain the awakening that the Buddha gained, and wanting to follow all the steps that are required, and then maintaining that intention. All these qualities working together are strength. The strength of intelligence. So we’re not trying to gain power over other people, we’re trying to gain power over our own minds. And the more we can develop this kind of intelligence, the more we can develop the strength of consciousness, the greater that power will be.

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