Building on Your Strengths

July 4, 2010

Chanmahambhuva has a Dhamma talk where he has some sharp things to say about people who come to him and ask for an easy way to overcome laziness. He says, “Using laziness to overcome laziness doesn’t work.” And the same principle applies to impatience. Lots of people want a quick way to overcome impatience. It doesn’t work that way. But this doesn’t mean that you simply have to grit your teeth and just bear with it. In both cases, you learn how to look for your strengths and maximize them. How do you give rise to energy? What sources of energy do you already have? It’s not that you can create it out of nothing. But there are ways of thinking, ways of breathing, that do give rise to energy. And you want to learn to recognize them, take advantage of them. In the same way as when there’s pain in the body, the breath energy seems to get tight in some areas, often the best way to deal with it is not to focus on the tightness but to focus on the areas where the breath energy does flow well. Focus your attention there and allow it to spread into the other areas. So you want to build from your strengths. And when the mind isn’t quiet, when it’s still thinking, you want to learn how to use your thinking to help. As the Buddha says, when the mind is one mind, willing to settle down, you want to think about things that are inspiring. That’s one of the meanings of the word pasada, is having a sense of inspiration. Which, together with sanghvega, is one of the two essential emotions that you want to bring to the practice. Sanghvega is when you gain a sense of how meaningless life ordinarily is. People are just born for a while, fool around for a bit, and then die and suffer a lot in the meantime. It doesn’t seem to go anywhere. When you realize that if you don’t give direction to life, it doesn’t have a direction. The Buddha has the image of throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on the middle of the stick, sometimes it lands on one end, sometimes it lands on the other. But there’s no real pattern unless you give it a pattern. You get really good at throwing up the stick, like baton twirlers. You throw it up and you catch it. You do something with it. That’s pasada. You have the inspiration that your actions will make a difference, and the effort that’s put into developing skill is really worthwhile. This is why thinking about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, is a good way of giving rise to inspiration. But again, of course, it means thinking about these things in a helpful way. If there’s anything in the Buddha that you can identify with, you look for that. Anything in the stories of the noble Sangha, either the monks and nuns from the time of the Buddha, or more recent stories of the Ajahns and the nuns from Thailand. If there’s something in their lives that you can identify with, you look for that. Take that as your inspiration. As for the Dhamma, there’s lots in the Dhamma to be inspired by. Realizing that it’s not just a truth about things, but it’s also a quality of truth in the individual. It was through the Buddha’s being true, through his search for a totally harmless, totally reliable and safe happiness, that’s what enabled him to find the truth. That kind of truth is special. Truths in science, anybody can memorize them, regardless of whether they’re moral or not, whether they have integrity or not. But you can’t really know the Dhamma unless you develop integrity in your own. The Buddha makes this point in talking about people he’s willing to discuss with, i.e., engage in arguments. It’s basically, as he says, if you stand on the truth and are consistent in your statements. If the opponent says something that doesn’t make sense to you, ask them first before you attack it. In other words, you show that you’re earnest, you’re sincere. And it’s in being earnest and sincere that those qualities of the person can help an argument actually arrive at the truth. So this Dhamma is something special. So you want to take inspiration in it. Other times, the inspiration you need has to come from your own sense that you’re up to this. This is where the Buddha has you reflect on the virtue you’ve shown in the past. The times when you could have harmed somebody, but you didn’t. Or your generosity. The times when you didn’t really have to help somebody else, but you did. Both those things can give you a sense of worth. There are other qualities as well. In addition to generosity and virtue, there’s the learning you’ve developed, your sense of shame and compunction, realizing that certain actions are simply beneath you and that you wouldn’t want to cause harm. All these things are things to be proud of, to have a sense of self-esteem, that you are worthy of this practice, capable of following it through. And the discernment, even though you may not feel that you’re particularly intelligent. Discernment is not so much a case of intelligence, but it’s just being willing to observe, to make distinctions, to be willing to learn from your past mistakes. Because we all make mistakes. The difference is that some people are willing to learn from them and others are not. And the intelligence comes in your willingness to learn. So those are ways in which you can take inspiration. It gives you energy on the path so that you are building from your strengths. As for the issue of patience, you have to remember that progress doesn’t always come from pushing things. Sometimes you have to allow things to develop. It means giving them space, giving them some time, with the confidence that, yes, they will develop. And again, here you learn from the stories of the people who’ve practiced in the path. John Tate has a good image. He says, “It’s like planting rice. When the rice comes up, it’s originally just little tiny plants. It just looks like grass.” And if you get impatient, you say, “This is too short. It’s not going to give rice until it’s quite a bit taller than this.” And so you pull on it to make it longer. Well, what happens, of course, is you pull it out of the ground. The plant dies. Or, as I said earlier this afternoon, it’s like you have a baby, but this baby cries. Piss and shit, other things you don’t like. So you throw it away. You say, “I don’t want a child like that. I want a child who can speak and help around the house.” Well, you’re not going to get the child who can speak and help around the house until you care for the baby, give it a chance to grow. Sometimes concentration, when it’s going to appear in the mind, starts out as just little tiny, tiny bits of concentration. The sense of ease and well-being that come when the breath is flowing well. At first it’s just ordinarily okay. Nothing really special, nothing really outstanding. But it’s comfortable enough. And then you just allow it to stay that way. And in the allowing, you begin to realize how much you squeeze things and kill off any potential for continual happiness, like squeezing out the end of a breath or pulling in the breath so that it’s too long. That puts a squeeze on things. So you ask yourself, is it possible to breathe in and breathe out without squeezing the ends, allowing just that sense of ordinary well-being to grow more continuous? And as it has a chance to be more continuous, it’s going to grow. So it’s not that you have to conjure something up, your effort out of nothing or your patience out of nothing. You’ve got the potentials already. It’s just a learning how to recognize them, how to build on them, how to allow them to grow. Like little seeds. Some really huge plants. The redwoods come from little tiny seeds. Oaks come from little tiny acorns. If you step on the seed, it has no chance to become a great tree. It can’t give you shade, can’t give you flowers, can’t give you fruit. It’s when you plant the seed, this little tiny, tiny seed, and you care for it. You’ve got the soil, you’ve got the water. Just learn how to recognize exactly where they are, what they are. Then you begin to realize that the ability to put continual effort into the practice is not beyond you. The ability to develop patience is not beyond you. The potentials are there. It’s simply a matter of allowing them to develop. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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