The Gift of Strength

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Strength of mind is to some extent like strength of body. It’s something you can exercise, something you can increase by working on it. Traditionally it comes down to five factors—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are both qualities that are strengths in and of themselves, and they strengthen one another. In other words, if you have conviction that your actions really do make a difference, you’ll put more energy into them. And when you realize that your actions have consequence, you’ll make it easier to develop the desire to really do what’s skillful. Because all too often we know what the skillful thing is and we know what’s unskillful, but we have trouble abandoning unskillful habits and working on skillful ones. But when you can remind yourself that these are these habits really do have consequences down the line, it makes it a lot easier to put in the effort. It requires that you be mindful and alert, to remember that this is the big issue in life. It’s what you’re doing right now. Society tells us many other things are important. All they want out of you is your money. And so you realize that you can’t trust their ideas of what’s important. You have to keep watch on your actions, because if you don’t keep watch on your actions, nobody else is going to take care of them for you. So you’ve got to be alert to what you’re doing and keep remembering what you really want to do. And if you know there are situations where you tend to act in an unskillful way, you can prepare yourself ahead of time. And when you can maintain these three strengths, that makes it a lot easier to get the mind into concentration. As the Buddha said, he divided his thoughts into two types. And as he was working on developing skillful thoughts and abandoning unskillful ones, he got to the point where he realized that even skillful thoughts can tire the mind. So you strengthen the mind by bringing it just to one object, like the breath right here, focusing on your sense of the body, inhabiting the body in a way that keeps everything in balance, and realizing that there’s right concentration and right concentration. The right concentration is not too heavy, not too light. It’s kind of like the story of Goldilocks. It’s not too hot, not too cold. It’s just right. If you put too much pressure on the focal point of your concentration, it has a bad effect on the blood circulation. And that’s where you get these feelings of pressure in different parts of the body. Because the mind has this tendency to create a sensation as its marker. You say, “Okay, stay focused right here.” And here’s the marker to remind you of where to stay. And it’s a subconscious process, but it begins having symptoms that you can sense. If there’s a tightness in the chest or a tightness in the head, you’ve got to figure out where you’re putting too much pressure on the system so you can ease up a little bit. And yet, at the same time, maintain your steadiness of focus. There are lots of different issues that have to be brought into balance as you get the mind to concentration. But one of the tests, and one of the things that’s going right, is there’s a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. And that right there is food for the mind, nourishment for the mind. And it puts you in a position of strength where you can then turn around and look at the issue of suffering, the stress that you cause yourself. Because the duties that the Buddha assigns—comprehending the stress, letting go of its cause—you have to come from a position of strength in order to do that. Otherwise, we encounter pain and we either try to push it away or we try to run away. And in either case, are we doing what’s right? When you push it away and run away from it, you’re not going to see the cause. It’s like having a difficult child. You either run the child out of the house or beat it up all the time. That’s not going to make the child behave. You end up having more troubles than you started out with. It’s largely because you feel threatened by the pain. So the concentration is meant to put you in a position of strength so you can look at the pain. Not to get rid of it, but just to understand why it’s there. What is it, this manifestation of pain? And why is it that when there’s physical pain, it makes inroads in on the mind? Those are the things you want to comprehend. Until you see where you’re actually contributing to the pain, especially contributing to the pain in the mind, then when you see that you’re contributing and you don’t have to, that’s when you can let go. You let go of the cause and the suffering disappears. There may still be pain in the body, but the mind is not pained by it. So the concentration is what allows you to perform the duties that are appropriate to the body. So you can bring the mind to a point where it’s not causing itself suffering. Now, the cessation of suffering has many levels. There’s the cessation of a particular pain you’re causing yourself right now. And, of course, then there’s the ultimate, where the mind finally reaches such a thorough understanding of suffering and its causes that it’s never going to have to suffer again. But it’s not suffering simply a matter of waiting here. Someday the suffering is going to fall away. You should be seeing it fall away as you’re practicing. There are different ways that you could cause yourself to suffer. You see them arise and you say, “No, I’m not going to go there.” And it’s important to realize, to stop and think every now and then of the suffering you used to cause yourself that you’re not doing anymore. To remind yourself, yes, you are making progress on the path. Anything from really blatantly unskilled skillful behavior to more subtle things in the mind, old habits, that you begin to realize, you just don’t do that anymore. You’ve outgrown that. And why was it? Well, you saw the dangers. And you saw that it wasn’t necessary. And you saw there was a better alternative. This is how you strengthen the mind. Sometimes the mind gets stronger and you hardly even realize it. It’s like strengthening the body. Something happens gradually, and it’s only when you stop to think. I can now do things I couldn’t. I can walk farther, work longer, sit and meditate longer. But you realize you have been benefiting from the practice, and the mind is carrying around fewer burdens. And this is a gift not only to yourself, but to the people around you, because you’re not leaning on them so much. And you can actually help carry a couple of their burdens that you were unable to carry before. Most people, like someone with a huge burden on his shoulders, you walk around and all you can think about is how heavy, heavy, heavy that burden is. And you look at other people with their heavy burdens and you hardly notice it. You see them, but it doesn’t really register, because your burden is so heavy. But when you can let down some of those burdens and stand a little bit straighter, you begin to notice, “Oh, that person’s carrying a huge burden. Or here’s someone that I used to be leaning on all the time, but look how burdened they are with other things.” And this is when your added strength becomes a gift to other people, either in the simple fact that you’re not leaning on them or that you’re able to look at their sufferings and think about how you can help them. You can help lighten some of their burdens. Because even though we are practicing individually, taking care of our own sufferings, we are part of larger groups—a tendency that tends to get obscured here in the West when people go to meditate in the meditative meditation centers. They live in their individual little bubbles as they go through the center. And then they leave. They think that’s all the Buddha had to teach. Whereas traditionally, meditation was taught in the monasteries. The vinaya is there to remind us that this is a group activity, or there’s a social aspect to what we’re doing here. Going both ways, we interact with other meditators, with other people here at the monastery, and we interact with people at large. So that is one of the benefits that should be coming from the meditation. And your interaction with other people should be nurturing your meditation as well. That phrase we had in the chat just now, “someone who shows respect and welcoming guests,” is one of the factors that puts you near nibbana. And “guests” here can mean anyone, from guests to the monastery. It can mean just a kind of a guest in your life, someone who’s moved in and is playing a role in your life, whether as a colleague at work or someone in your family, or someone you’re just getting involved with in one way or another. You want to respect those people. And part of that is being sensitive to the fact that they’re suffering too. So even though we try to keep our center inside here, it doesn’t mean that we’re oblivious to what’s going on with other people. If we find that we have a particular strength and we have the strength to share, part of our training is learning how to share. In fact, it’s good to look at your own social interactions with other people as an expression of generosity. And many of the same principles apply. In other words, you give what you can. You don’t try to give beyond your means. And you try to give with respect. In other words, you interact with other people, show respect for them. One of the rules for the monks is that even if someone comes up with totally unreasonable demands and totally unreasonable criticisms, you don’t show disrespect for the person. And part of this means allowing yourself not to feel threatened. This is where the strength comes in. You realize, okay, that person is being unreasonable, but their lack of reason is not harming you in any way. In other words, it’s not making you lose your goodness. So if you don’t feel threatened by them, you’re in a much better position to treat them with respect. It doesn’t mean you have to follow what they say, but you don’t insult them. You don’t treat them as if they’re of no worth. It’s just the same way that you would give a gift, as the Buddha says, attentively and not as if you’re throwing it away. You pay attention to your words and how you treat that person, and you’re careful. Another attribute of a well-given gift is that it’s timely. You look and see, what does that person need? In other words, it involves getting yourself out of your narrative and looking at their narrative. In Thailand, I many times would see people come to the monastery and they would give a gift. That had nothing to do with what we needed. Basically, the gift told a lot more about them, what they would like. Particularly when there was an issue of someone who had passed away and they wanted to get some food to that person, they were concerned that that person might be starving in the next life. It was almost like the monks were mailmen. You put the food in the monk’s stomach and that food is supposed to get to the other person. And being the recipient of that kind of gift made me really sensitive to the issue that if you want a gift to be really virtuous, really meritorious, you want to look at what the person needs rather than what you just feel like giving. And so it’s in the same way when you deal with other people. What does that other person need? Yeah, you really look at their needs and provide that, which may or may not have anything to do with what you want to give to that person or to say to that person. Because you’ve got to take yourself out of that narrative and put yourself in the other person’s place. So you want the gift to be timely. You want it to be genuinely helpful. So if you start thinking about your interaction with other people as a gift, that makes the point that you are coming from a position of wealth. The wealth here is basically your inner strength. And sometimes the inner strength may not be there, but if you act as if it’s there, it helps to create it. That’s the same with when you’re giving a gift. You may not feel that you have enough to give, but you look at what you’ve gotten and you realize, well, it really is enough. You do have something to spare. It changes your idea of “enough.” It reminds you that a lot of the wealth comes from being able to give away. So the ability to act as if you’re coming from a position of strength when you’re dealing with other people, even unreasonable people. Just keep reminding yourself that you have that strength. You are not threatened by their unreasonable behavior. That helps to overcome any sense of irritation you might have or feeling of being cornered in a situation. And being in this position of strength is like being an omniscient narrator. In a novel, you either have the first-person narration or the third-person narration. In the old-fashioned novels, they’d have the omniscient narrator who knew everybody’s thoughts and could tell the whole story, get in and out of the different characters. And that style of narration has become a lot less popular nowadays. More people are into the first-person, which tells you a lot about our culture. You want to learn to be able to tell your own life story. You want to be able to tell your own life story as the omniscient narrator, the one who’s looking from outside, who’s not threatened by the events. Then you’re in a much better position to see what really should be done, what really should be said, what really should be thought. Because that omniscient narrator is, one, more reliable, and two, he’s more powerful. We’re in a much greater position of strength, which is what we’re working on here. So it’s not just strength inside us as we deal with our own defilements. We should be the sort of person who has strength to spare. So we’re going to use that position of strength to deal wisely and generously with other people. Generous with our thoughts, generous with our words, generous with our actions, so that our interactions can really be a gift. I was reading a statement by someone who was talking about how they had dealt with a difficult brother over the holidays. The person was saying that she’d learned how to step out of the situation a little bit. Her brother’s actions are a gift quite yet, but she was hoping that someday she should. When someone’s behaving really in an unskillful way, it’s not a gift, because a real gift is something that’s beneficial to both sides. Whereas when a person’s behaving unskillfully, even though it may be an opportunity for you to rise above the situation, it’s still not a gift. It’s just one of the difficulties that we engage in and that we have to deal with. It’s as we negotiate human life. But whether people are giving you genuine gifts in their behavior or not, that’s not the issue. You want to make sure your behavior is a gift. It benefits both you and the people around you. So again, it’s like developing strength in the body. There are some people who go down to the gym and they’re like, “Oh, I can’t do it,” and they get really strong, basically because they want to look good or they want to attract somebody else. And then there are other people who go down and get strong, and they use that strength in ways that are really useful for the people around them. And as a meditator, you want to be the second sort.

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