An Inner Stronghold

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When you meditate, you get a lot of good lessons in karma. Just sitting here watching your mind as you watch the breath, you notice there are some intentions that are really intentional in the fact that you make up your mind very explicitly that you’re going to stay with the breath, or you’re going to focus on the breath at a particular point, or you’re going to work with the breath in a particular way. These are clearly formulated intentions. And there are other intentions that pop up that are not so clear from the fringe groups in the committee. And they see when the original intention starts to get weak. Or blurry. They can move in. There are other things that are happening in the present moment that have nothing to do with your present intentions at all. They just kind of pop up. And you simply have to write these off as past karma. And the trick here is to learn how to figure out which ones are skillful, which ones are not, which ones you’re going to get involved with, and which ones you don’t. Something you don’t want to get involved with, learn how not to be pulled in by it, not to be swayed by it. And part of it, of course, is the problem of the mind’s curiosity. Something stirs in the mind and you want to figure out what it is. What is this over here? It’s like something stirring in the bushes. You want to figure out what kind of animal is it. And in many ways, once your curiosity has gone over to that stirring, it’s already got you. It’s involved you in some new present karma. You’ve dropped your original intention to stay with the breath, and you go over and look at that. And you might say, “Well, you can’t help it, because it’s such an overwhelming thought.” Especially fears, aversions start getting in. They get into your breathing, into your blood, and take over your body and seem really overwhelming. We have to keep remembering that despite the influence of those emotions, the breath in the present moment does have an element of present intention. That’s why it’s called bodily fabrication. There’s an intentional element there. To whatever extent you can calm the body down with the breath, you’re going to do that. I’m putting up with the fact that there may be some things in the body that are not going to be influenced by the breath right away. You’ve got to learn patience. After all, past karma does have an impact, and particularly if it’s the past karma of a few seconds ago. So you have to keep reminding yourself that you want to focus on the areas where you do have some control and you do have a say in how things are going to go, which, depending on your past karma, may be a small area or a large area. But you want to make sure that the decisions that are being made right now are skillful, regardless of how much other emotions are screaming in your ears. You have to have a sense that you have your own place in here, that you’re constantly shaping right now, right now, right now, through your current fabrication. The Buddha talks about the aggregates all being formed through fabrication. There’s an intentional element in how you experience your body right now, the form of your body, as you experience it from within. The feelings you have, the ones that you concentrate on, the ones that you ignore, there’s an intentional element there. The perceptions you’re using as you’re trying to stay with the breath, the way you perceive the breathing process in the body, the way you perceive the process of staying focused, all of these things have their intentional element. Even your consciousness of these things has an intentional element. The things you notice, the things you don’t. So you want to make sure that that current intention, that form, is as skillful as you can make it. And if there seem to be things in the body that you can’t change, well, remember, past karma is now not-self. Jon Swat once commented on that, that we talk about things as being not-self, not-self. Form, feeling, perceptions, consciousness, fabrications are all not-self. He says, “But,” we have that chant, “I am the owner of my actions.” That’s an important distinction, because the concept of not-self has to do with things that you can’t control. Whereas the element of control here is something you really can exert in your present decisions. This is why the Buddhist teaching is not determinism. You do have a role in shaping your experience right now. And that’s something you can learn how to master, a skill that you can learn how to develop. And whether the range of that skill is going to be large or small depends on the decisions you keep making, the choices you keep making from moment to moment to moment. And so as we focus on the breath, we’re trying to give the mind a good foundation where it can stay and not get knocked off balance by whatever winds are blowing through the mind. And even if it’s only a small spot. Remember that story of the monk out in his hut, a little tiny hut, just barely big enough for him to stay in. But the hut is well thatched. So he says, “Go ahead and rain as much as you want. The rain is not going to penetrate the thatch.” So even though storms are blowing, as long as you have at least some spot where you can make sure the rain can’t penetrate, the wind can’t seep in through the cracks in the windows and the doors, there are no cracks, basically, then you’re okay. It may not be as large a hut as you’d like, but it’s better than not having any hut at all. And you have to think strategically here. If you can’t hold off all these reactions to a particular emotion, the chain of thoughts gets stirred up by that emotion. You have to retreat and regroup. Like any military commander, you’ve got a large range that you want to lay claim to, but you find that the enemy forces are invading and you can’t fight them off. So you retreat to your stronghold. It’s a smaller place, it’s more confining, but it’s safe. And then within the stronghold, you can regroup. And when the outside forces lose their strength, they start getting scattered, then you can go out and reclaim whatever you want. So even though we’d like to have a sense of concentration here that totally fills the body with ease and well-being, sometimes something gets stirred up in the mind that seems to take control of your torso, say, or different parts of the body. And that’s just past karma. You can’t get around it. So what you do is you find where you can lay claim as your territory of concentration, a territory that you can make good. John Lee’s images of a house where some of the floorboards are rotten show that you don’t step there, you don’t lie down there. You’d like to have a house where all the boards are good, but it so happens that right now there are some rotten spots in your house. So you learn how to stay just in the areas that still are safe. Make that the range of your concentration. Make that your stronghold. And the activity of maintaining that stronghold, that’s the skillful karma right now. So even though a lot of unskillful things are rushing through the mind, note that they’re there. You don’t deny that they’re there, but you don’t have to pay them much attention. You pay more attention to whatever it is that you can do that is skillful. Mindful, alert, concentrated, discerning. Right here, right now. Learn how to think strategically, and you’ll have a handle on the situation.

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