Strength in Humor

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One of the reasons we meditate is because we have to strengthen the mind. If we don’t strengthen the mind, it gets wounded—and not just wounded, when it’s wounded by the pains of aging, illness and death, of separation, of meeting up with things that we don’t like, being separated from things and people we do like. We end up doing really harmful things that just make the situation worse. Which means that we’re not only victims of suffering, but we’re also perpetrators of suffering because of our weakness. And so we have to strengthen the mind. So on the one hand, we know how to live in the world and not get in a line of fire. And so that when we’re dealing with other people, when we’re in the position of being the actor rather than the recipient of other people’s actions, that we can act wisely, with compassion. In the midst of a difficult situation, if the mind is strong, it’s much more likely to see the skillful thing to do, the skillful thing to say, to think. So it’s not just for our own protection that we try to strengthen the mind. It’s for the protection of the people around us. The Buddha talks about five strengths that we develop in the practice. And he says that the development of these strengths comes from heedfulness. In other words, realizing that our actions really do make a difference. And if we’re not skillful, we can cause a lot of harm. But if we try to develop skill, we can avoid that harm. In other words, the principle of heedfulness builds on the realization that our actions are important and they really do have consequences. This is the beginning of Right View, right there. And so from that principle comes conviction, that we really do have to pay careful attention to our actions, but it’s going to pay off. Sometimes it seems really difficult to do the skillful thing. There are so many other things we would rather do. The impulses that come up and say, “I want to say this,” or “I want to think that,” or “I want to do this.” But you have to quiz those impulses, examine them before you act on them. As the Chan Furu once said, it’s a lot better to think first before you say something, rather than have to think hard about it afterwards, after you’ve said it. But once you have the conviction that this really is important, it’s a lot easier to stick with this project, because from conviction comes persistence. In other words, the arousing of desire to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. Once you’ve got something skillful going, you want to maintain it, realizing that this is the important thing to do, the important thing to focus on, and finding the energy and the ability to stick with it. That means, on the one hand, reminding yourself of how important this is. This is where mindfulness comes in and why mindfulness is also a strength. Then there’s the need for concentration in order to nurture you, to give you a sense of well-being in the midst of difficult situations. Because if you feel nourished inside, it’s a lot easier to deal with the craziness in the world. You don’t get that sucked into it out of weakness, out of the sense of, “Well, things aren’t going the way I want, so I’m just going to lash out. I’m just going to give up.” That kind of attitude accomplishes nothing. But if you don’t have a sense of inner well-being, a sense of inner nourishment, it’s hard to stick with a skillful path. This is why right concentration is such an important part of the path. In the Buddha’s analogy of the fortress, where you’ve got the soldiers as your persistence, mindfulness as your gatekeeper to keep out all the enemies and to let in only the friends, conviction as the foundation post, concentration as the food. It’s what keeps everybody going. You want to keep coming back to this sense of nourishment that can come, staying centered inside and having that center, maintaining it, realizing how important this is. You need this kind of food. You can’t just go on willpower alone. There has to be a sense of well-being that you can tap into. So try to find that in the breath. Where is the sense of fullness in the breath? When you breathe out, do you squeeze out the breath energy? Well, there you are. You’re destroying the potential for fullness. One good exercise is just to focus on your hands. Try to relax all the muscles in your hands and keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Notice if there’s any slight tensing as you breathe out. Watch out for that. Think of the hands being filled with all the blood that’s flowing through them, and you’re not trying to squeeze it out at all. They develop a sense of fullness, and then you allow that fullness to seep up your arms. You can do the same with your feet. Start with the feet and allow the fullness to seep up your legs and come up the body. Find the sense of fullness as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And it can induce a very pleasant sense of well-being, a sense of nourishment. This is the food that we feed on, the verse in the Dhammapada. We feed on rapture like the radiant gods. You can feed on that, then you find you have the strength to deal with all kinds of situations. And you can make your strength more efficient by using discernment. In other words, realizing what things you have to carry and what things you can let go. What things you have to take on as responsibilities and what things you don’t. An important part of discernment is having a sense of humor. Even in bleak situations, it’s important to find the humor that allows you to step out of ideas, worldviews, that are unnecessarily oppressive, that weigh you down for no purpose at all. Because what humor is, is that it’s an ability to see something incongruous and, as a result, distance yourself. You find yourself in a bad state of becoming, and it’s through the humor that you can pull out. You can step out of it a bit. This is your survival technique. You need this. You look at all the greater Jhansas, and one of the things that they all had in common is that they all had good senses of humor. They were able to laugh at themselves. It’s not so much laughing at other people. They laugh at themselves when they see, “I got myself tied up in this and it was really stupid.” Instead of getting all worked up and angry at themselves, they just shrug it off with a laugh. Not a careless, irresponsible laugh, but just a recognition, “Oh, this is a silly habit that I picked up and it’s not helping anything at all.” And that kind of good-natured laugh is the best way to drop things. We talk about the release that comes with humor. No coincidence that the word for release also has to do with release from suffering. Because again, you’re able to step out of unskillful mind states, step out of unskillful states of becoming, unskillful identities, unskillful views about the world. You just see the incongruity and you can drop them. Because after all, why do you create these identities? Why do you create these worldviews? You want happiness, and yet here you have created something that’s really miserable. It’s not doing what you wanted it to do. So why allow yourself to be burdened with it? The purpose of this is to shed anything that’s creating an unnecessary weight on the mind so that you can focus on the things that really are important. As the Buddha said, one of the signs of wisdom is your ability to see what is your duty and what’s not your duty, where you can make a difference and where you can’t make a difference. Let go of all the things that you don’t have to take on as duties so you can really focus on what is necessary. In other words, an important part of wisdom is the sense of perspective, and that’s very closely related to the sense of humor. People without a sense of humor have no perspective on things. But there are some things that you really have to take seriously. In other words, the sense that you are responsible. This is what heedfulness is all about. You are responsible for your actions, and your actions can have some pretty serious consequences. But in order to deal effectively with that realization, you also have to have the sense of humor that allows you to drop the things that really are not important. And to pull out of them with a minimum amount of entanglement. So it’s in these ways that we strengthen the mind. It’s interesting that the Buddha’s teachings on the five strengths correspond to what psychologists talk about healthy ego functioning. Heedfulness, of course, corresponds to anticipation, the realization that there are dangers down the road. An important part of persistence is suppression, i.e., restraint, knowing that if something is unskillful, you just develop the desire not to do it. And then there’s compassion that allows you to see that you really do want to be helpful. You really do want to find a type of happiness that doesn’t harm yourself and doesn’t harm others. Because if it harms yourself or others, what good is it? You put all that effort into it, and yet it turns on you. And if you’re harming others in your search for happiness, they’re not going to be happy with their search for happiness. It makes it even more difficult. That’s why the qualities of wisdom and compassion are so closely related. And then, of course, there’s that ability to step back and drop the things that are causing you unnecessary suffering. That’s what the humor does. So you’ve got anticipation, suppression, sublimation. Sublimation here is the sense of well-being that comes from the concentration. You’ve got a good form of well-being that you can tap into at any time. It’s a lot more skillful than other ways of searching for happiness. So, anticipation, sublimation, suppression. Altruism, which is the compassion and the humor. These things strengthen the mind. And you find them as dimensions of the Buddhist teachings on strength. So whichever lens you find convenient to look at a situation, remember it’s all there. You strengthen yourself, one, so you can be resilient to all the things that the world throws at you. And two, you have to be very careful about what you’re throwing back. The stronger the mind is, you don’t have to throw things back. Bad things come at you and you just let them fall at your feet. You don’t have to pick them up and throw them back, because you’ve got something better to do. You can look after the state of the mind, which rewards you by giving you this sense of inner well-being that allows you to do what you know should be done. It helps clear the air so that if you don’t know what should be done, you can look at it for a while. Then get respective on things. Come up with ideas you might not have thought of before. So the process of developing strength for the mind is a gift, both to yourself and to the people around you, which means that it’s something that you should do. You can stay focused on it at all times, and nobody gets harmed, nobody gets hurt. It doesn’t mean that everything in the world is going to suddenly go the way you want it to. But you find that you’re not causing any unnecessary suffering, and you’re actually helping the situation around you as much as you can. Now you realize that there are limits to what you can do, because there is that thing called karma. It’s not just present karma. There is past karma as well. Some things are beyond you, either in terms of what you can do or in terms of what other people can accept, or the help they can accept from you. So your discernment allows you to see that and accept the situation. Drop the things that create unnecessary suffering and focus on the area where you can make a difference. That’s all that can be asked of anybody. But it turns out that it can accomplish a lot, particularly inside the mind. So at the very least, you’re not weighing yourself down with unnecessary suffering. It’s like a person who’s no longer carrying huge burdens. There’s a phrase they have in Thai, the old woman who’s carrying around a load of hay. She knows that some day she’s going to need hay, so she carries the hay with her everywhere she goes. Which means that she can’t carry anything else around with her, anything better that’s lying on the road, or anything better that anybody offers her. She can’t pick it up. She runs into someone else carrying a heavy burden, and she’s in no position to help them carry the burden because she’s got all this hay on her back. So one of the roles of discernment is to put down the hay. You find there are better things to pick up, and you have the strength and you’ve got room on your shoulder. You can shoulder other people’s burdens a lot more easily as well. So it’s good all around. And when you have something that’s good all around like this, you want to take care of it as best you can. Devote yourself to it with as much focus as you can. Because this goodness spreads out in all directions.

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