Finding Your Strength

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Some parts of the practice are easy, because they go in line with what we already like—things we like to do, things that give good results. Those are the parts that are not hard. The hard parts are the things that we find difficult to do, even though we know they give good results, either because we don’t like the particular action or because we don’t have enough energy. This is where learning how to stir up your energy is an important skill. If you can find where you have strength and learn to build on that, and learn how to divert it into the area where it’s difficult to practice, then you’ve got an advantage. There’s always that irony that sitting and meditating sometimes can seem really long and tedious, but you can sit and watch a movie for a couple hours and it doesn’t seem tedious at all. Yet when you sit to watch your breath, it seems like an awfully long time. A whole hour seems like an eternity. So the question is, where did you get the strength to sit and watch the movie? How can you tap on that strength to watch your breath? So it’s not like you’re trying to create energy where there is no energy at all. You have to stir up the willingness to apply the energy, and then find where you already have some pockets of energy or resources of energy that you can draw on. And this is something that’s going to be different for each person. You may find this while you’re doing walking meditation and walking back and forth. Just half an hour seems like a long time. And yet if you were to go hiking, you could probably hike for a couple hours with no problem. So what’s the difference? It’s not in the amount of energy you have. It’s in the entertainment you find in the hike, the variety, the sense of accomplishing something. Walking back and forth doesn’t seem to go anywhere, and it literally doesn’t go anywhere. It just goes back and forth. So there are days when walking meditation seems tedious, we’ll go out and walk around the roads, around the monastery. And you may find that after a lot of ups and downs, up the hill and down the hill again, you actually prefer being on your path, where it’s nice and shady. We’ll go back to the path then. The important thing with a meditation is not so much where you’re doing it, it’s the quality of your mind as you’re doing it. Can you maintain the focus that you would have on walking meditation while you walk around the monastery? If you can, there’s no problem. If you can’t, well, train yourself. Learn how to do it bit by bit, because this is one of the reasons why we’re doing walking meditation, is to learn how to take the sense of stillness you can get with sitting meditation and bring it in to the part of your life where the body’s moving around, where it’s doing other tasks. So it’s not just a break from the sitting, but it’s actually a specific kind of training. How to maintain your center in the midst of other activities. And you notice that your attention tends to go back and forth. It’s with the center in your body, but there’s also an awareness of things outside, because after all, you have to learn now not to run into things. You have to watch where you’re stepping. So there are a few other activities to keep you occupied. And sometimes it’s in the switching back and forth that you learn interesting things about the mind, seeing how it moves, how there’s a mental current that goes flowing out, and you have the choice of whether to flow with it or not. And once you realize there’s something interesting to watch for here, then the meditation gets a lot easier. This is an important principle in concentration. Whether you’re sitting or walking, pose questions in the mind. You realize there are lots of things going on here, and yet you’re not seeing anything. There’s physical fabrication, and there’s verbal fabrication, and there’s mental fabrication. And usually you’re inside these things, and so you don’t really notice them. You’re with the breathing, or you’re with the thinking about something, or having perceptions about something. And you’re so in the activities that you don’t get a perspective on them. You want to learn how to bring them to something skillful, like the breath. And step back a bit and say, “Let’s watch these things.” How does a mind-state develop? You know there’s going to be a distraction at some point, so don’t pretend that it’s not going to happen. Just be watchful for the beginning signs. And this way you give yourself something to do, something interesting to learn about, the workings of your own mind. If you find this interesting, you’re really ahead of the game. Because that’s what we’re here for, is to figure out how the mind creates different states of becoming for itself, a particular identity, how it creates its sense of the world, and how it changes these things. And why? Why does it do this? There’s a lot going on here. And the reason we’re looking into this, of course, is because it’s causing suffering. We want to learn how to pull out from it so we don’t have to keep creating suffering of one kind or another. So this is one way of energizing yourself with the practice, is realizing that there’s a lot of interesting things going on right now. Right here, in front of your eyes, and yet you’re missing them. And only if you could look carefully, you’d take a lot of burdens off the mind. So having this sense of interest makes a lot of difference in the practice. And that’s related to your ability to ask yourself good questions. There are questions that sap your strength. The ones that say, “What am I doing this for? This is crazy. Watching breath. There are other things I could be doing right now. Why am I not doing that?” Well, you want to have good answers for those questions, so you can put them aside. Then you can start probing into your own mind, what it’s doing right now, and learn how to ask questions about that. Learning to watch for the process of how the mind creates a distraction, how it blanks out for a bit and finds itself in another world, and which part of the mind is lying to which part of the mind in order to do this. Isn’t that something you want to know? Because if your mind is lying to itself, you’ve got a lot of potential dangers in here. And if there’s the part of the mind that says, “I don’t want to meditate because I’ve been meditating for all this time and nothing seems to be happening,” then again, it’s an issue of looking back at how you’re approaching the meditation, what you’re expecting out of it. If you expect things just to kind of come, you read the books and it’s all these wonderful powers are going to come and all this bliss and rapture, and I don’t see any bliss and rapture, what’s wrong? You have to turn around and look at yourself, what you’re doing. Are you really paying attention to the breath? Because a lot of it has to do with learning how to focus strictly on the breath. And let the causes do the work, rather than trying to use your anticipations to push things. I mean, we do want things to happen, but if the causes aren’t right, nothing’s going to happen, no matter how much you want them to happen. If the causes aren’t right, they’re just not going to happen. Once in a while there may be a fluke. But the meditation is not here for flukes. You’re here to learn a skill, to try to develop the qualities that a craftsman has, if you have a craft. Think about all the qualities you brought to developing that craft, the interest, your ability to observe, your ability to see. Your ability to judge skillfully, judging in a way that’s helpful. In other words, if something’s coming out not quite right, you can ask yourself, “Why is it not quite right? What could I change?” Your mind really does have to be active in looking at what you’re doing, looking at the results. And if things are going well, how do you keep them going well? If they’re not going well, what do you do to move them in the right direction? These are the basic qualities in any skill, and these are the qualities you need to bring to the breath. And when there are days when you don’t feel up to it, what can you do to talk yourself into feeling up to it? And again, you have to learn how to feel up to it. Persuade your mind. Figure out what in the mind makes your mind tick. What kind of things do you like to do? What kind of things do you find easy to do? And learn to develop that same attitude about the meditation. Sometimes you can talk yourself into doing things because there’s a sense of pride involved. Sometimes there’s a sense of curiosity. Sometimes there’s a sense of heedfulness, in other words, realizing there are dangers if you don’t do this. Learn how to draw on those various motivations to see which one will work right here, right now. And then you’ll find you have the sources of strength that you can draw on. So that when we arouse persistence, as the texts say, you’re not trying to make it appear out of nothing. You’re trying to tap into something that’s already there, and directing it to something that’s really useful.

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