The Strength to Do Good

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To do good—in other words, to do the right thing and to do it well—requires strength. Some strength of body, but especially strength of mind. You come to different situations where people are difficult, your surroundings are difficult, and it’s tempting to shrink away. If you don’t bring strength into the situation, you get overcome. So this is one of the reasons why we meditate, is to develop the strength of mind we need, not only as we’re sitting here facing whatever pain or distraction comes up while we’re sitting here, but also to take that strength into our daily lives. This is where the Buddhist teachings on fabrication come in useful. You look into dependent-core arising. Most people take one look and then they close the book. It’s awfully complex. But there are a few features that jump out right at you, and they’re the important ones. Much goes on before you even have sensory contact. In other words, even before you come into a situation and see things and hear things and smell things and taste things, a lot has already gone on in the mind. This is what you bring to that situation. And it turns out that what you bring makes all the difference as to whether it’s going to cause suffering or not cause suffering. And fabrication is one of those things you bring. The word sankhara in Pali means “putting together.” And in some cases it simply means anything that’s put together, whether it’s conscious or not. But in the context of dependent-core arising, it’s focused mainly on the intentional element that you bring to any situation. There are basically three kinds of intentions by which you shape things. There’s the breath, which shapes your experience of the body. And this has a lot to do with the level of strength you can find in the body. A lot of this, of course, comes from past karma. It comes from what you’ve got right now. But what you make of what you’ve got right now has a lot to do with the way you breathe. That seems very simple, but it can make a huge difference. If the breath feels good, breathe in in a way that feels refreshing. When you breathe out, it still feels refreshing. You’re not squeezing things out. You can come into some very difficult situations and feel that you’ve got at least an ally here in the breath. It’s not sapping your strength. It’s giving your strength. So this is one of the reasons why we focus on it as we meditate, is to get acquainted with the energy that comes from the breathing and how it can be maximized. At the same time, learn how to stay here, be in touch with this all the time, because it’s so easy to slip away from the breath because lots of other things seem more important. What other people are saying, what they’re doing, trying to keep on top of the situation, get a little ahead of the situation. Our attention gets further and further away from the body, further and further away from the breath. We lose our foundation. One of the important lessons you learn is that as you learn how to stay here, how much stronger you are as you stay centered, and how much more you actually see. You start seeing all the little micro-expressions that other people have. Then you feel less threatened by them and in a better position, actually, to do something helpful if you can. That’s bodily fabrication. Then there’s verbal fabrication. It’s essentially the way you talk to yourself, the things you tell yourself about the situation. And a lot of this, of course, gets told before you even enter into the situation. You have a past with different people. In technical terms, this inner chatter is called directed thought and evaluation. It’s the way we make sentences. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic or subject, and they then comment on it, whether it’s good, bad, indifferent, what might be done, what might not be done. So before you go into a difficult situation, ask yourself, “What are you telling yourself about the situation? What things should you keep in mind?” Because especially if you’re going into a situation where you’re dealing with people you have a long history with, it’s all too easy to slip into your old roles and then to suffer the same old way as you’ve been suffering before. So at the very least, remind yourself that you don’t have to fall into unskillful roles, no matter how much other people may be pushing you in that direction. You maintain your own inner center here, and don’t let your space be invaded. This, again, is when the breath can be really helpful. The Buddha makes a comparison to a lump of clay into which you throw a stone. That’s the state of the mind and the body where mindfulness is not filling the body, where alertness is not filling the body. And things outside can make a huge impression, just like a stone thrown into a lump of clay. But it’s where mindfulness fills the body, and you remember to stay that way. The breath energy fills the body. Then he says it’s like throwing a ball of string against a hardwood door. The string doesn’t penetrate at all. So make sure that you occupy your own space, your own territory here. That’s one of the things you have to keep reminding yourself. That’s part of your inner conversation. That your strength lies in staying right here, not in running away. Then finally, there’s mental fabrication. These are thoughts and perceptions. Perceptions are the images and ideas you hold in mind. These are different from your mental chatter. It’s more like the basic building blocks from which you then construct sentences, words, images, the perception you hold in mind. And again, when you enter into a situation where you’ve had negative experiences in the past, you have to learn how to reconfigure your perceptions. On the one hand, you know there are certain things you’ve got to watch out for. You don’t forget them. But if you can perceive yourself as being in a position of strength and that you can direct the situation in a skillful direction, that changes everything. And then there are the feelings that you bring to the situation. If you allow yourself simply to be a victim of whatever comes, you don’t know what’s going to happen, how much you can be scarred. But if you’re carrying the breath in a way that feels comfortable, that feels refreshing, strengthening, energizing, you’ve got an inner source of pleasure. You can feed here instead of having to feed off other people’s words, other people’s actions. So what you’re doing here is bringing some knowledge to this process of fabrication. The reason we suffer is because we fabricate out of ignorance, just through our old habitual ways. You don’t have to know all the different steps in dependent core arising to realize that that can lead to all kinds of suffering. We’ve seen it happen many times before. Now, however, the Buddha says, bring some awareness, bring some knowledge to how you fabricate things, how you’re breathing, how you’re talking to yourself about the situation, both before you enter the situation and while you’re in it. Look at the images you’re holding in mind, the feelings you’re bringing. If you can work with all this, with knowledge, then you don’t have to suffer. For at the very least, you can minimize the suffering, because you’re coming into the situation from strength—the strength of awareness, the strength of alertness, the strength of understanding that comes when you realize how much you can change things, how much you can shape things in the right direction. These are all the skills we’re working on as we meditate. We work on the breath, we work on how we talk to ourselves about the breath, adjust the breath, so we can have the right feelings and perceptions. The perception that you’re working primarily with is the perception of breath filling the body. With that possibility in mind, then you work with it. What parts of the body feel like stagnant energy? Which parts of the body feel like blocked energy? What can you do to clear things out, allow things to flow? So you’re working with all the elements of fabrication here, and you’re bringing knowledge to the process. And with knowledge comes awareness. With awareness comes strength. Make sure you don’t leave the strength here on the meditation cushion. You can carry it with you wherever you go. And it’s through remembering that that you get the most use out of it.

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