Strengths of Mind

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We need strength to make it through life—strength of body, strength of mind. When we focus on the breath, we’re developing strength of body and strength of mind at the same time, especially when you work with the breath. You begin to notice how the normal breathing and the way you breathe is actually reducing your level of strength, your conception of how the breath comes in, how it goes out, where you have to push it, where you have to pull it. That can actually reduce the amount of nourishment you get from the breath. So as we meditate, we’re doing some repair work, repairing our relationship with the breath. So we can use it to increase the strength that we need. In terms of strength of mind, there are traditionally five qualities that help to strengthen you. One is conviction—conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. He really did find an end to suffering, and he really did it through his own efforts. And what he saw, what he taught, was true not only for him, but it’s true for everybody. That’s one of the meanings of the word noble truth. The Buddha contrasted it with what he called partial truths—people who had a partial vision of things. And in line with what they had seen, what they taught was true, but their vision was limited. So it may have been true for a few examples or a few situations. It’s not true for everybody. But the Buddha’s vision was a lot larger, longer term. So we can take what he taught about suffering and the causes of suffering and how to put an end to suffering. And apply it to our own lives. One of the most important parts of that is his understanding of karma. Karma explains both how he gained awakening and what he awakened to. It’s the power of human action. That’s the part of conviction that really gives you strength. The energy you focus on your actions and doing them well, doing them carefully, is not wasted. So the doubts that might eat away, you can put aside. After all, we are testing something here. The Buddha never asked the kind of conviction or faith that was blind and totally unquestioning. But we’re asking a question about something worthwhile. If you look at the Buddha’s own life, there are lots of different approaches. One he never tested was the idea that human action is totally vain, totally illusory. Because, on the one hand, how are you going to test that? And two, what would you gain by trying to prove that? What he wanted to test was how far can human action go? And the night of his awakening, he found how far it could go. Very far. He found that it takes you to something that’s not fabricated and is not another form of action. It lies outside the realm of action. Your actions take you there, but then it’s like that image of going to the Grand Canyon. The road to the Grand Canyon doesn’t cause the Grand Canyon, but you follow the road and go beyond the road into the Grand Canyon. You’re off the road entirely. That’s why the image of the arahants is being like birds flying through space. You can’t trace their path at all. It’s like driving down that road to the Grand Canyon and just zooming off the edge. It gives you strength. However you think about the Buddha’s life, however you think about his awakening, it gives you strength to make your life a more awakened life. That’s what gives you strength and strength in the right direction. From there you develop persistence. You keep at it. For most of us, keeping at something wears us out, so you’ve got to learn how to nourish yourself along the way. This is where the practice of mindfulness and concentration comes in. Concentration particularly is the factor of the path that’s most often compared to food. Food nourishes your persistence. The image the Buddha gives is of a fortress. You’ve got soldiers and you’ve got a gatekeeper. The soldiers are the ones who fight off the enemy. The gatekeeper is the one who makes sure the enemy doesn’t sneak in through the gate. And both of those need food. So we work on staying with the breath, getting a sense of refreshment with the breath. If you notice that the way you’re breathing doesn’t feel refreshing, ask yourself, “Well, what’s wrong about the way I’m breathing?” All too often we have cartoon ideas about what sensations have to go with the in-breath, what sensations have to go with the out-breath, and so we recreate those and wear ourselves out. Certain muscles do all the work and everybody else just becomes a freeloader. That’s not nourishing. That’s an area where you have to do repair work. So look to your perceptions. Concentration is a perception attainment. You hold a certain perception in mind. So ask yourself, “If your relationship to the breath doesn’t feel nourishing, how can you change your perception, how you can change your mental image of what the breath is doing, how the breath comes in, how it goes out, what you have to do, what you don’t have to do?” Learn to experiment until you find something that really does feel nourishing. The breath can be extremely nourishing. If you give it enough space. You don’t squeeze it too much. Don’t try to force it into a narrow mold. It’s in analyzing things like this that you develop the strength of discernment. This, after all, is how the Buddha developed his discernment, looking at his actions and asking himself, “Why am I not getting the results I want?” He’d use his imagination to think of other things. Other ways that he might approach the way he was practicing. He kept trying things out, trying things out, until he found what worked. That’s how discernment grows, is by asking questions like that. Of course, this is very closely related to your conviction, the conviction you begin with. Your actions really do matter. And you have the potential, by developing your concentration and your mindfulness and your discernment, to take those actions in a really special direction. This gives you the strength to stick with a path. And it’s a very special sort of strength. We look at the world around us and a lot of strong people use their strength to harm other people or just to impress other people, which is really a waste. Strength is there to use in kindness. It’s there to use in compassion and goodwill. That’s when the strength multiplies. So the strength that comes from within, as you stay with the breath and develop these qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, that’s the kind of strength that’s good for everybody around you, in addition to being very good for you. So with this kind of strength, the more the better. As for strength of the body, we all know what happens. It develops for a while and then it begins to waste away. And as you get older, you don’t like getting older, and you try to prove to the fact that you’re not old, you do a lot of damage. That’s something that has to be monitored very carefully. But with strength of mind, especially the strength that comes from these five qualities, the more the better. Each of them is something you want to develop to its absolute culmination, as far as it can go. Sometimes people ask, “Well, how much concentration do I need before I can do discernment practice?” You need all the concentration you can get. You need all the mindfulness you can get. All the right effort, all the discernment, all the conviction. And it’s not that you develop them one at a time. They all help one another. The image the Buddha gives is of a roof. You put up the rafters, and it’s only when all the rafters are in place that they’re all solid. So as we’re practicing right here, we’re trying to develop all these all at once. Particularly as we try to nourish the mind with concentration, that’s the food for all the rest. Of course, without the rest, you can’t do the concentration, so they all support one another. Try to get them all as solid as you can. (crickets chirping)

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