Strength through Letting Go

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One of Ajahn Fung’s students was a woman who had cancer in many different parts of her body. I don’t know exactly where all it spread to, but it was being one part, and they’d cut that part out, and then when it moved to another one, they’d cut that one out. There was one point where she had to undergo radiation treatment. She developed an allergy to the anesthesia that they were using. So the doctors were at their wits’ end, and she said, “Well, I’m a meditator. How about doing it without the anesthetic?” They were reluctant to do it, but she said, “Look, I’ll let you know if it gets to be too much.” And so she went through the treatment. And she was able to withstand the pain, but it left her exhausted. Ajahn Fung went to visit her in the hospital afterward, and she told him what had happened. He said, “Well, that’s because you’re using your concentration. How about using your discernment instead?” In other words, you can fight things off simply by meditating. It’s a force of willpower. You can keep the pain at bay, but it takes a lot of energy to use your willpower that way. It’s a lot easier to realize, “Where am I holding on to things that I can let go, holding on to things that are weighing me down?” When you teach the mind how to let go of things like that, then you find the mind has a lot more strength. John Lee said in one of his famous sermons, “We live by strength of body and strength of mind.” But the more important of the two is strength of mind. After all, the body is going to wear out, but you’re going to need that strength of mind as the body is wearing out. And that’s what can keep you going. So think about those five different strengths that the Buddha talked about, starting with conviction, that what you do is going to make all the difference. And what you’ve done in the past you can’t go back and change. You may have some karmic burdens that you’re carrying around, but you don’t have to carry them around now. They may be there. There may be limitations. But you can make a difference by what you’re doing right now. And this is why we try to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. That’s what the strength of persistence is. And mindfulness is what keeps us in mind. The real heart of the strength, of course, is the concentration and the discernment. Because when we talk about abandoning things, it’s not like we’re going to drop the body or drop the pain or whatever else that’s a problem in the body right now. You’re going to drop your attachment, because the body is still going to be here. It’s not going to fall down on the ground when you drop it. It’s simply a matter that the mind is holding on to something there. It’s something it’s thinking about again and again and again. And it may be worried about it, it may be concerned about it, or it’s just complaining about it. And you have to find where is that voice that’s wasting energy? And see where you’ve actually been putting energy into that voice and learn how to stop. That’s how you let go. People keep asking, “How do you let go? How do you let go?” It’s not like your mind is a hand that’s holding on to things, but it’s got these habits that it keeps repeating again and again and again. So you get the mind really, really still so that it can see. As I mentioned the other night, John Lee talks about discernment as being the awareness that’s more still than the movements of the mind. You get it there, of course, through the power of concentration, but also in seeing what you can let go of. There are things that are there, just like there’s the sound of the crickets in the background and the sound of that music down in the valley. Now, if you sit here, you can make yourself miserable for the whole hour thinking about that music. But that’s your choice. You don’t have to do that. You can stay with the breath and the music will be here. It’s not going to go away. But you can learn how not to comment about it and how not to think about it. And we do this all the time. There are certain aspects of awareness that we can’t drop easily, but we do that unconsciously. We want to learn how to bring some more consciousness to this process of dropping, because there are a lot of things that the mind refuses to drop. Unless you can see the advantages that come from dropping, and also see the possibility that it can be dropped. In other words, you can stop repeating that particular action. So when the mind feels worn out, ask yourself, “What am I carrying around that I don’t need to carry around? What am I repeating? What action am I repeating again and again and again? What thought am I repeating? What word? What mental fabrication? Can I see that? Can I drop this tendency to repeat it?” There are two kinds of dropping. One is that you let go of it and it actually stops. The other is that it may go on to its own past momentum, but you’re not getting involved. That’s how discernment is a strength, because it teaches you how to let go of all the unnecessary burdens on the mind. So look inside. Ask yourself, “What thoughts are there in the background? How are you going to see them? Maybe you can make yourself really quiet.” This is why concentration is part of the strength. And see what happens when you notice something that you’ve been repeating to yourself over and over again and never really noticed, just thought it was part of the natural background hum of the mind. And then you can let it go. There are stories about the kubpahajans and their ability to maintain mental strength even when physical strength is down. They wanted to give Ajahn Mahaprabhu a heart test one time. Usually, of course, you put people on a treadmill and try to get them to walk as fast as possible, and they didn’t think that was appropriate in his case. So they just asked him to give a Dhamma talk because they knew that he could get quite worked up in his Dhamma talks. And they hooked him up to the machine, and they saw the machine’s heart was actually skipping beats and missing beats, and sometimes it would stop for quite a bit. But he kept going, going, going. When the doctors commented on this, he said, “Well, there must be something wrong with the machine.” But I think it was more just the power of his mind, the strength of mind, that can come when you’re not carrying unnecessary burdens around. And you can learn how to use the body in ways that you wouldn’t have noticed because you were otherwise too engaged in all your mental stuff. There’s a similar story about Ajahn Lee. He was sick in the hospital with heart problems, and he knew he was going to die. This was a brand new wing of the hospital, and they’d actually opened it especially for him. And he didn’t want to just move into the hospital and die and ruin the reputation of the hospital. So when they were giving him a heart test, he willed his heart to behave properly. So the doctors let him go, and he went back to Watasokanam. Two weeks later, he passed away. And Ajahn Sawat tells a story when he was in his coma. There were times when he had a dream of himself sitting right there at the bed and looking at the numbers on all the machines they had hooked up to him. He said, “Gee, those numbers don’t look good at all. Let’s see if we can change the numbers.” And when he came out of his coma, the doctors commented that, yes, there were times when the numbers looked awfully bad, and all of a sudden they just, of their own, turned into good numbers. There are other ways in which, once the mind has let go of a lot of its burdens, it has the strength to make up for weaknesses in the body. So look at what you’re holding onto, what thoughts you’re repeating to yourself, what concerns. A lot of the unnecessary chatter that just keeps going on and on and on there in the mind. Which voices can you drop? Which voices can you recognize and say, “Oh, this is a separate voice in all that hum of background noise there”? Let that go, and you’ll find that your mind has a lot more strength. It’s able to keep you going, even when the strength of the body seems down.

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