Five Strengths

October 4, 2014

There are two kinds of strength. There are two kinds of strength—strength of body and strength of mind. And what we’re working on as we meditate is strength of mind. Strength of body, of course, can be helped by the meditation. When you breathe well and the mind calms down, it’s good for your health. But even then, the strength of the body’s going to have to deteriorate. It doesn’t ask your permission. The things it used to be able to do, suddenly you find you can’t do anymore. You can use it, but it doesn’t repair itself quickly. Then it wears down, wears down, wears down. Finally it wears out, and you can’t use this body anymore. But strength of mind doesn’t have to be that way. It can grow. Even as strength of the body begins to deteriorate, your strength of mind can continue to advance. And that’s the more important of the two. So that’s what we’re working on as we meditate—developing the strength of our minds, developing the strength of our determination. Because what does it mean to have a strong mind? It means a mind that’s not overcome by pain, it’s not overcome by disappointment. It can maintain an inner sense of well-being regardless of what’s happening to the body, what’s happening to the world. That’s a kind of mind that can depend on itself. And then other people can come to depend on it as well. The Buddha talks about five qualities that create strength of mind. They’re kind of like food for your strength. The very first one is conviction. In the text, they say conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. But what does that mean for you? It means that it’s possible for a human being, through human effort, to find true happiness. The Buddha did it, and as he said, the qualities that he developed were not specifically just his. They’re qualities that every human being has in a potential form, and we can all develop if we set our minds to it. So having conviction in the Buddha’s awakening means you’re having conviction in the power of your own action. Action, of course, doesn’t mean just actions of the body. It means primarily, actually, actions of the mind. That what you do think about and what you focus on and how you think about it really does make a difference. Like right now, you’re focusing on the breath for the purpose of giving rise to concentration. You have to believe that this is going to accomplish something good. For the meditation to have any strength and for it to really nourish the mind. And it makes sense. Where do your intentions come from? They happen here in the present moment. How are you going to know where they come from unless you dig down into the present moment and watch? When an intention comes up, why? What sparked it? What gives it its force? What’s going to go in a skillful direction or an unskillful direction? If it’s going to go in an unskillful direction, can you stop it? These are the things you really want to know. The Buddha’s answer is yes, you can stop unskillful thoughts, unskillful intentions. Like right now, you’re going to get practice in that. Focus on the breath. And part of the mind is with the program, and another part is someplace else, hoping to go someplace else. And it’s going to wait its chance. As soon as it’s a lapse in your mindfulness, in other words, when you forget to stay with the breath, it’s off. So if you have conviction in what you’re doing, it means you’re going to really try to apply yourself here. That leads to the second strength, which is persistence. You want to stick with it, stick with it. Even if other thoughts come in, you come right back. As soon as you catch yourself wandering away, you come back. You maintain your desire to stay here. We sometimes hear that the Buddha said that desire was the cause of suffering. Well, that’s one of the roles of certain kinds of desire. There are other desires that actually lead you to awakening. Those are the desires you want to foster. And it’s through fostering those desires that you are able to stick with things. You make up your mind you’re going to stay here for an hour. Well, you can stick with it. And if the mind slips off, you just come right back. Come right back. Come right back. And you remember to keep coming back. That’s what mindfulness is. And that’s the third strength of the mind. Because you can know all kinds of good things, but if you forget them, they’re no use to you at all. You can know that meditation is good. You can know that it’s good to stay with the breath. But if there’s a lapse in your memory, even while your body’s sitting here in meditation, you can forget. And you suddenly find yourself off someplace else, planning for tomorrow, remembering yesterday or remembering the day before, fantasizing about all kinds of things, picking up old narratives in the mind and running them through again, none of which really accomplishes anything much. You’re here to stay with the breath, and you want to remember this is what you’re here for. So there are no gaps that allow you to go running off someplace else. And it’s your ability to stay here continually, this breath, and then this breath, and then this breath, that gives you the fourth strength, which is concentration, the ability to stay with something continually. Not just momentarily, but you continually. You stay with many breaths consecutively, and there’s a sense of settling in and not really wanting to go someplace else. Because when concentration is done well, it gives rise to a sense of rapture and ease. Rapture meaning refreshment. It feels nourishing just to be here with the breath coming in and going out. You allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels really good. And if it doesn’t find a rhythm on its own, you can nudge it and give it a little help. Make it longer and see if that would feel better. Think of going deep down through your torso, all the way down to your feet, nourishing every little part of the body. That sense of well-being that comes when you can settle in and stay with the breath continually, feed off of it. That’s your genuine food in the practice. That’s food for the mind. It nourishes it, gives it the strength it’s going to need to deal with whatever comes up. But concentration on its own is not enough. You’ve got to develop discernment as well. That’s the fifth strength. In the Buddha’s image, the other strengths are a little wobbly until discernment comes in, like the rafters of when you’re building a house. You put up the rafters for the roof and the ridgepole is not yet there to hold them all together. They can be there in place, but they’re not really solid. But once the ridgepole is in place, that solidifies everything below it. That’s the same with your discernment. Because when you see things clearly going on in the mind, that strengthens your conviction and strengthens your persistence and mindfulness and concentration altogether. Because your discernment sees what the mind is doing that’s causing itself unnecessary suffering. And when you see that and when you see that you don’t have to do that, you can stop. You can let it go. As the Buddha says, discernment comes from seeing things going on in the mind as something separate. There’s the awareness, but there’s the thought, and they’re two separate things. Ordinarily we don’t see them as separate. We just kind of glom everything together. You’re in, you’re in the world of your thought, and you go with it wherever it goes. And then you get dropped off wherever it drops you off, and then you have to find your way back. But if you don’t go with it, you see the thought go out, but you’re not going out with the thought. You realize the awareness is one thing, but the thinking is something else. And just because the thought goes out doesn’t mean that you have to hitch a ride. That way, you get to see these intentions as separate acts. And this is how you begin to see how your intentions shape your experience of things on a very basic level, how you can do it more skillfully. Now, if you’re really skillful, you can drop all your intentions and see what happens then. What happens is the mind opens to another dimension that’s not physical. It’s not fabricated, it’s not put together, it’s not made up. It’s something totally independent of these things. And that’s when you can confirm your confidence in the Bodhisattva. This is what the Buddha found. And as he said, human beings can find this. It’s not just princes born in India 2,500 years ago. Anybody who develops his strengths in the mind can find that same dimension that he did. That’s what gives the mind genuine strength, because it’s something unconditioned. It doesn’t have to be fed, it doesn’t have to be cared for. It’s just there. And from the perspective of that, you look back at everything else in the mind and you realize, even though the way the mind shapes things and fabricates things through its intentions, sometimes it can do it relatively skillfully. But as long as there’s fabrication going on, there’s going to be stress. There’s going to be a burden in the mind. And then you get that much more careful about what you do and say and think. So as long as you’re fabricating things, you do them with an intention of doing them as skillfully as possible. And when you’re not weighing yourself carefully enough down with a lot of unnecessary clingings and attachments, you can use the strength of your mind for all kinds of good things. In places and areas where you didn’t have the strength before, you suddenly find you do have the strength because you’re not carrying unnecessary burdens around. It’s like someone who’s been carrying weights around, a weight of iron in one pocket and iron in another pocket. They’re hanging down from their knees, hanging down from their shoulders, hanging down from their hands. They can walk and they can move around, but it’s a lot easier when you take the weights off. So these are the ways in which we develop skill in looking after the mind and how we develop strength in the mind. So when strength of the body wears out, we’re not left at a loss. We’ve got something else we can depend on, something else that can see us through.

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