Strong Against Anger & Fear

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One of the lessons I learned from Ajahn Phuong was that it’s possible to be right and wrong at the same time. In some cases it’s a matter of taking a teaching which is usually right and applying it in the wrong way. For example, there’s the teaching on not-self. The right way to apply it is to learn how to dis-identify yourself with things that are unskillful. The wrong way to apply it is to apply it to cases where you really are responsible for something and that you abandon your responsibility. Another way of being right and wrong is to be right about something but be emotionally wrong. Because when you’re angry about something, something really is wrong. People are being treated unjustly, or you’ve been treated unjustly. But if you get angry about it, you’re not going to help the situation. This is where you have to separate the issue from your anger. Because anger is going to tell you that when you’re angry you see things more clearly. Black and white are really sharply defined. But the situation itself may require a more nuanced approach. And you just make it worse. So you have to take the anger apart. Where’s the allure? What do you like about the anger? Usually there’s a sense of self-righteousness that goes with being right. There’s also the sense of power. You break through some of your shame and your compunction. You break through your fear of other people. And you feel that you’re justified in doing things that are really harmful. But as the Buddha points out when he talks about speech, people can say things that are true or untrue, useful or useless. It’s in with a heart of goodwill or a heart of inner hate. It’s when people say hateful things that are untrue. He said it’s nothing out of the ordinary. So you don’t have any extraordinary rights to respond in ways that go against the precepts, that go against the wise application of what’s going to really be helpful. So you have to separate the anger from the situation. You realize if you want to deal with the situation properly, you’ve got to get that anger under control. This is why it’s useful to think about the different kinds of fabrication that go into an emotion. There’s the way you breathe, there’s the way you talk to yourself, the images, the perceptions you hold in mind. You have to realize you can breathe in different ways, you can talk to yourself in different ways, you can hold different perceptions in mind. I was listening to a quote unquote Dharma talk a while back where someone was saying that if a strong emotion comes, you’ve just got to ride with it. You have no choice. But the whole purpose of the Buddhist teachings is to alert you to choices that you didn’t know before, that might not have occurred to you. You can deal effectively with a bad situation, but without anger. In fact, you deal more effectively without the anger. So you have to learn to see through the way the mind talks to itself about how anger is good, gets things done, you show your power, whatever the allure may be, whatever the rationale may be. You’ve got to see through it. The same goes for fear. There are a lot of things to be feared. The world is topsy-turvy right now, and there are people intentionally making it topsy-turvy. So they make you afraid and angry. They do stupid things. You’ve got to realize, again, there are causes for fear, but when has the world ever not been with causes for fear? Think about that image of the Four Mountains. King Vasanidhi comes to the Buddha in the middle of the day. And the Buddha asks him, “Where are you coming from? What have you been doing?” And Vasanidhi, in a very amazing show of frankness, says, “Oh, the typical things of someone who’s mad for power.” And the Buddha says, “I suppose there was someone from the East, someone reliable, come in and say there’s a huge mountain moving in from the East, crushing all living beings in its path. There’s another reliable person coming from the South, saying there’s a mountain moving in from the South, another from the West, another from the North, four mountains moving in, with this horrible destruction of life. What would you do?” The King said, “What else can I do but focus on the Dhamma and practice the Dhamma?” And the Buddha said in the same way, “I tell you, aging, illness, and death are rolling in, crushing all living beings in their wake. What are you going to do? Well, what else can I do but focus on the Dhamma, practice the Dhamma? This is our refuge. It’s called the strength of conviction. Realizing that the most important thing you can focus on is what the Buddha said, is skillful in your thoughts, skillful in your words, skillful in your deeds. You maintain that and you’re safe. That’s your treasure. The virtue you do, the discernment you develop, these are all considered as treasures. The kings can’t take away from you. Dictators can’t take away from you. Fire can’t burn. Water can’t wash away. The only way you can lose these things is if you throw them away yourself. So you have to be hateful. That’s the basis of all the strengths that the Buddha recommended. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, they’re all based on hatefulness. That’s the point that it’s not stressed often enough. We hear so much about interconnectedness and the joys that we should find in being interconnected, that somehow if we appreciate our interconnectedness we will be nicer to one another. But as the Buddha pointed out, the interconnections we have are more like feeding. That was the image he used to introduce the topic of causality. All beings subsist on food. Without the food we couldn’t live. We’re eating all the time. That’s the nature of causality. We’re feeding on one another. It’s the nature of clinging. We’re feeding on one another. So our interconnections are not necessarily all that good. The idea of interconnectedness is not a good guide to what should and shouldn’t be done. Hatefulness is a much better guide because it gives you strength to do the right thing. You realize that what the Buddha said is true in terms of the truth of karma, the truth of rebirth, the truth of how to put an end to suffering. The emphasis is on what you’re developing from within. The media are telling us that the important things that are being done right now is somebody else someplace else. But the Buddha is telling us that the important things are what we’re doing right here, right now. As long as we maintain our virtue, our concentration, discernment, we keep ourselves safe and strong. Again, with King Pasenadi. He came to the Buddha one time. Pasenadi had this habit of, once he had met the Buddha, he started thinking about spiritual things. You get the impression that he wasn’t all that spiritual beforehand. He came and he said,”You know those people who have an army, what they called a four-fold army in those days, cavalry, infantry, I don’t know what the two others are. But if they don’t adhere to the precepts, they’re leaving themselves unprotected. Whereas those who have the precepts hold to the precepts. Even if they don’t have an army, they are protected.” And the Buddha affirmed that, yes, that was right. Our protection is in our good karma. Our protection is in the training of the mind. So don’t lose focus. That’s where your strength is, where your strength can be. You’re thinking about this to give yourself more motivation to develop more of your powers of mindfulness, concentration, discernment. To become strong. So even though there are dangers outside, the typical ways of dealing with those dangers are not the ones that are most effective. The Buddhist approach is counterintuitive in a lot of ways. But it’s counterintuitive to our greed, aversion, and delusion. When you see things clearly, you see that he’s really right. Because if you think that your wealth is in things that people can take away, you’re constantly going to be afraid. And as for fear of death, we’ve got this body that dies. That’s its nature. It could have died as soon as we were born. We’re fortunate that it hasn’t. So even when the body is not yours, the body is not dependable, you’ve really got to learn how to depend on the mind. Make your mind a dependable mind. That way you have a lot less to fear out of the world. Because the body can go at any time. There may be a little clot someplace, and it starts moving around, and it gets lodged in your brain, gets lodged in your heart, gets lodged in your kidneys, and that’s it. John Lee has a nice passage where he talks about how easy it is to die. So when you’re living in this body that’s subject to aging illness and death all the time, you want to keep focusing on what you can do in training the mind so it’s right and uses its rightness in the right way. So anger doesn’t take over, fear doesn’t take over. That you’re strong in your conviction. Because once you’ve got the strength of conviction, the other strengths fall away easily. Without the conviction, the other strengths fall apart. So be convinced in the power of your actions, because that’s what conviction in the Buddha’s awakening really means for us. Our actions have more power than we might have expected. We can use that for good or ill, but the Buddha left behind some good advice on how to use it for our best interests. When you have that conviction, then all the other strengths follow. When you’re strong inside like this, that’s when you have a strength of wealth that’s really yours, even though ultimately you’ll let it go when you get further advanced in the path. Over the time being, don’t apply the concept of not-self to this ability to develop your strengths. These strengths are yours. In other words, you create them and only you can throw them away. Now there is that uncertainty that you might throw them away sometime, so you have to be very careful, very mindful. But as far as safety right now, this is the best you’ve got. So hold on to it as best you can.

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