The Five Other Strengths

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I have a student who’s read through all four major nikayas, cover to cover, twice. And the second time he went through, he decided to make a list of all the lists and to see how many times different lists were mentioned in the nikayas. He came across a list that’s not very well known, but was mentioned many times. It’s called the Five Strengths. But they’re not the five strengths that we usually think of. They’re five qualities that are said to be the strengths of someone in training. In other words, someone who’s attained stream entry. These are qualities they automatically have as a result of stream entry. But they’re also mentioned as qualities that should be used by anybody to get rid of unskillful qualities in the mind and to develop skillful qualities in their place. The first of the five is conviction. You’re convinced in the Buddha’s awakening. You’re convinced both in terms of what he awakened to and how he did it. The “what” was the discovery that the suffering that we experience comes from inside. It’s our clinging. And it comes from our craving. But we can change our actions. We have it within our power to develop qualities of mind that can get rid of the craving and the clinging. And we can put an end to suffering. That’s the “what” that the Buddha awakened to. The “how,” of course, is that he did it through his own efforts. How he did it was proof of the discoveries he made. And the implication there is that he did it using ordinary human qualities that were then developed to a high pitch. And that’s something we can do, too. And he changed his habits. Anything he saw that was getting in the way of finding the deathless, which is the end of suffering, he would put aside. Anything that would be conducive, he would learn how to train himself in that quality, whether he wanted to or not. There’s a passage where he talks about how he realizes he’s going to have to give up sensuality. And as he says, his mind did not leap at the idea. So he’d have to reason with himself. He’s seeing the allure in the sensuality and how it really wasn’t worth all the drawbacks he entailed. And so finally he’d made a decision that he would have to do this, and he did it. So it’s not that it was easy for him and it’s hard for us. There were parts of the path that were hard for him, too. But he didn’t let himself get discouraged. So we take him as an example. We adopt what he learned in his awakening as our working hypothesis that we do have freedom of choice to some extent. And we can take advantage of that freedom to choose actions that will put an end to suffering. It’s within our power. And we take how he went about it also as inspiration. And we can apply that to any unskillful qualities that come up. Realizing that these were unskillful qualities that he was able to get past, if he can do it, we can do it, too. And it’s going to be worthwhile doing it. So that’s how conviction motivates you to develop what you know is skillful and to abandon what you know is unskillful. The next two qualities go together—shame and compunction. And the shame here, of course, is the healthy sense of shame. That’s the opposite of shamelessness. In other words, you realize there are good people in this world. And the way you behave, you want it to look good in their eyes. You respect their opinion. Of course, for a stream-enterer who’s seen the Deathless, he realizes that the Buddha really was extremely compassionate and extremely wise. He was somebody you really can trust. This sense of shame comes automatically. For people who haven’t had that experience yet, you have to take it on trust that there are good people in the world and their opinion matters. And you’d be ashamed to stoop to the kind of behavior that they would find disappointing. Compunction is the realization that, given that your actions have results, you pull back from the idea of doing anything that would give bad results. This is the opposite of apathy. Apathy says, “I don’t care.” It’s also the opposite of callousness, another reason for not caring. “I’m just going to do what I want. I don’t care what people say. I don’t care what’s going to happen down the line.” Compunction says, “I care.” And so you look at your actions. What can you let go of? What should you be letting go of if you really care about not wanting to suffer down in the future? The next strength is persistence. Once you realize that something is unskillful, you do your best to keep it from arising. You do whatever you can to motivate yourself. You use not only the sense of conviction, shame, compunction, but any other good qualities that make you want to prevent unskillful qualities from arising and want to get skillful ones to arise in their place. Because you realize that there are some things that you like doing, but they’re going to be giving bad results down the line. And you want to be able to talk yourself out of doing them. Other things that you don’t like doing but you know that they will be good for you down the line, you have to learn how to talk yourself into doing them. The Buddha gives you the general outlines here, and it’s up to you to psych yourself out. John Fuhrman reports that one time he was listening to a John Munz saying that we people are all alike, but we’re all very different. But when you come down to it, we’re all alike. And John Fuhrman said he took that and thought about it for a long time. Our basic defilements are all the same, but the particulars of the defilements are going to be different. We all have greed, aversion, and delusion. They’re all parts of our minds that are sneaky, the parts of our minds that lie to us. But the lies they tell us are going to vary from person to person. So the details of how you apply this principle of looking at the results of your actions and then trying to make up your mind whether to do the action or not based on what the results are going to be, the details of the actions that are going to come up in your mind for you to decide on, are going to vary from person to person. And even within one person will vary from day to day, hour to hour. But the Buddha was sharp enough to see the basic outlines. This is the basic principle that we all have to deal with. We have to learn how to motivate ourselves to do what’s skillful. And once we’re doing something skillful, how to motivate ourselves to keep with it. I was talking with someone today saying that she tends to meditate best in times of trouble in her life. And then when things get easy, the meditation falls off. It’s because when there’s trouble, she has a very active sense that the meditation is her lifeline. But when things are going well, she doesn’t feel the need for the lifeline. This is where you have to develop your sense of heedfulness and your sense of compunction. If you start getting lazy, the results cannot be good, even though things seem to be coasting along fairly well. You never know how things are going to change. And it’s not the case that once you’ve learned how to meditate, you always know how to meditate. That was a question that came up in Brazil. One of the retreatants was saying that he’d gotten away from meditation for about a year and was coming back. And after a day or two, he finally clicked. He was back where he had been before he stopped meditating. So he asked, “Is meditation like riding a bicycle?” I said, “I’ve learned it. You don’t have to keep practicing it all the time. You can pick it up when you need it.” And he said, “No. I’ve known a lot of people whose meditation crashed and then stayed crashed after it had gone very well.” He was lucky that he was able to pick things up again. So you have to teach yourself to be not complacent. So when the skillful qualities aren’t going in the mind, you keep at them, keep at them, keep at them. Maintain them and develop them. The fifth strength is discernment. This is when you look more carefully into when an unskillful quality arises in the mind. What originates it? What sparks it? And when it goes, why does it go? The ability to discern is the first strength. To see these things go away is an important skill, because we may have some unskillful habits, self-destructive habits, self-destructive ways of thinking. And we seem to fall into them again and again and again, to the point where we think that they’re deeply ingrained, a permanent part of the mind. But you have to learn to see them coming as a result of specific causes. And when the causes run out, the habit goes away, at least for the time being. It helps you realize that it’s not such a monolithic problem as you might have thought it was. And the next time when you pick it up, you ask yourself, “Why? If I don’t have to do it, why am I doing it? What’s the allure?” Here again, this is an area where the mind tends to lie to itself. But you’re going to learn the allure not by thinking about things so much after the fact, but you want to see it right at the moment when you pick it up again. Why? Challenge it. And sometimes when you challenge it, it’ll shrink for a bit, and then when it sees that you’re not paying attention anymore, it’ll go for it again. It’s like playing cat and mouse. But after a while, you begin to realize, “Oh, it was this. I thought I was getting x out of it. A little hit of pleasure, a little hit of power, whatever.” When you can see the allure, then you can compare it with the drawbacks, with that background realization that you do have the choice. You can go for it if you want to, but you don’t have to. When you realize you don’t have to, you don’t have to do it. It’s got all those drawbacks. You don’t have to tell the mind to let it go. You don’t have to talk about inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Insight, basically, is the value of judgment. This is not worth doing. And you let it go. If it comes back again and you find yourself falling for it again, it’s a sign that you didn’t fully understand the allure. There’s still something in there you’ve got to dig up. But you’ve got the frame of questions that the Buddha provided for you. Look for the origination. Look for the disbanding. Look for the allure. Look for the drawbacks. And then there will come a point when you see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure, and you develop dispassion. You see, there’s no reason to want to do that anymore. That’s when you let go. That’s when you get freed. So whatever the particulars of your defilements, this is the basic structure of how you deal with them. And you notice, it’s not a North Indian structure. It’s a structure that deals with how the human mind is built in every case where it does something. It’s made a choice. And part of the mind at least realizes, “Okay, this is not a skillful choice. I’ve got to do something about it.” This is why the Buddhist teachings were the very first world religion. In other words, it wasn’t simply a religion of tribal customs. It was a religion that got down to the basic structure of how the mind creates suffering and the basic structure of how it can put an end to suffering. And for all our differences, that’s what we are all alike. One of the key parts of that structure is how you stop doing things that are unskillful, how you start doing things that are more skillful, and how you keep at them, the skillful ones, until they yield something that’s really worthwhile and opening to the end of suffering entirely. These five strengths are one of the Buddha’s ways of laying out the ground rules. It’s up to you to fill in the details. But having the ground rules is a large part of solving the problem right there.

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