

Conserving Your Strength

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We spend a lot of the day on the receiving end of things: sights, sounds, smells, states, tactile sensations, all kinds of things coming at us. We're constantly bombarded. And the mind spends a lot of time just running around, putting out all the little fires that come up. So it's good to spend some time when you can close off your eyes and ears and all the other senses. Even though your ears don't fall deaf, you don't have to pay attention to anything you hear, even this Dhamma talk. Let it be in the background.

Give the mind something to do that's really good for the mind: Stay with the breath. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in. When it goes out, know it's going out. There's only one thing you have to pay attention to right now: how the breath feels in the body. And think of it being comfortable. Just think that thought, "May the breath be comfortable," and notice what ways you may have of making it uncomfortable. You can just drop them. If you have a tendency to squeeze the breath in too much or out too much, notice that if you run across it and then allow the rhythm of the breath to change in a more easeful direction. Let yourself be totally absorbed just relating to the breath, because this strengthens the mind. It doesn't have to run around so much to lots of different things. Even though there may be some movement as it's evaluating the breath, at least it's moving around one thing.

The image Ajaan Lee gives is of spinning around a post. If you hold on to a post with one hand and spin around and around, it doesn't make you dizzy. But if you just go spinning around on your own, just three or four times without holding on to anything at all, you fall flat on your face. So you've got one thing to hold on to. You look at it, evaluate it, make changes here and there, prod it here and there, until everything seems right.

Then you can stop the evaluation. Abandon that activity and just be with the sensation of the breath. It's all you've got to do. That's your only responsibility right now.

This is an important principle in the practice, learning how to conserve your strength as a way of building up your strength. It's because of strength of mind that we can survive. You've probably seen cases of people horribly maimed, faced with all kinds of difficulties in life, and yet they had the strength of mind, the strength of will to persevere. Other people have everything perfectly fine and yet

they don't have any strength of mind. They make themselves miserable and sometimes end up committing suicide.

So the most important thing we need to survive in life is strength of mind. And the practice of concentration, the practice of mindfulness, is one way of developing that strength.

One of the images the Buddha gives of people who practice is that of warriors. We're doing battle with defilement: greed, anger, and delusion. These are the big problems in life, so we need whatever strength we can muster to deal with them. In fact, all the issues in the practice can be looked at from that point of view of a good warrior. How do good warriors deal with issues? For one thing, they take on only the battles that are really important. They don't squander their strength on unimportant issues.

So when you're practicing the Dhamma, it's not just a matter of learning techniques or listening to wonderful teachings. It's learning to look at your life and realize what's important, what's not. This is not just an issue of looking for our own happiness, but even with the good things we want to do in a more selfless sense, you realize you can manage only so much. If you went around trying to straighten out the whole world, you'd die long before you got finished with the job. And your own issues wouldn't have been dealt with at all.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has only one person for whom we're really responsible. We're responsible for our own actions, our own thoughts, our own words. Other people say and think and do things, but you're not responsible for their choices. You can influence them to some extent, but you're the only person whose thoughts, words, and deeds you can really control. So that's what your first priority should be: making sure that your actions are not done under the influence of the defilement, under the influence of greed or aversion or delusion.

That's where the real battlefield is. So make that your top priority. Some people may say it's selfish, but hey, if you can reduce the amount of greed and aversion and delusion in your actions, that's a real gift to the people around you. To begin with, they're less bombarded by your defilements; and two, it becomes a good example for them. Other people can see that it's possible to live life without giving in to these things and still be happy.

This is what comes down to. We'd like to have happiness in all areas of our lives, but it's impossible. For one reason, certain kinds of happiness get in the way of other, more valuable, kinds of happiness. You have to make a choice. And then there's that question of how much strength you have. We all have a finite amount of strength, a finite number of breaths we're going to breathe in this lifetime. Even though there may seem many, many, many breaths, they're not infinite. There's

going to be a number. You don't know what that number is, and you don't know when your number is up.

So you want to dedicate each breath you have to something good: to an intelligent pursuit of happiness. That means seeing which levels of happiness, which kinds of happiness are really worth pursuing, because all happiness requires effort. But there are only certain kinds of happiness that really are worth the effort.

So the practice of the Dhamma is not just learning to focus your mind or learning to be mindful or seeing things in terms of the three characteristics or whatever. An important part of the practice is getting a sense of priorities: which things are really important in life, which things are less important, which types of happiness are worth the pursuit, which ones are not. This requires reflection. And it also requires strength. Because any effort for happiness takes energy, and your potential for happiness is greater the more mental strength you have.

This is why we work on concentration to build up strength of the mind. The Buddha compares concentration to food for the mind. In other places, he compares it to a home for the mind—in other words, a place where you can rest, gather your strength, and nourish the mind.

But simply having strength is not enough. You have to learn how to use it in a way that's wise. That's where all the other teachings, all those books filled with the teachings of the Buddha, come in. They're not just idle fantasies or speculations. All the Buddha's wisdom is meant to be used. It's meant to give you a sense of priorities as to what's important and what's not, and how you get go about attaining what's important, how to get perspective on the issues that may seem large in your life but really are very minor.

That's why there's the contemplation of death. It's a topic that most people don't like to think about, but you notice what happens when people don't think about it: When it comes, even when illness comes, they feel offended. They feel that something is very wrong here. This is not the way things should be. But as the Buddha reminds you, aging, illness, and death are normal. This is the way of life. So you use that contemplation as a way of reminding yourself of what's important and what's not. We hear of cases of people who learned from a doctor that they've got, say, three months left to live, so they drop all the inessential things in their lives and focus on what's important. It's a good thing they're doing, but it's a shame they had to wait for the last three months. It'd be better to live your whole life focused on what's important.

This is why you should remind yourself of the normalcy of death. It's all around. As Ajaan Lee says, it can hit you at any time. We can die so easily. A little

piece of blood clot starts wandering around your body, gets lodged in your heart, and that's it. One of the vessels in your brain gets overloaded and the blood spills out into the brain, and that's it. All kinds of strange things can happen. You hear of so many freak accidents where people die.

So remind yourself that death has you surrounded on all sides. This is a dying body that you've got here, in a deadly world, so you have only so much time, only so much strength to do what you need to do to get prepared. Try to maximize your strength so that whatever time you do have is well used. Make sure that each breath is well used. That's one of the Buddha's contemplations: Each time you breathe in, breathe out, remind yourself, "I've got this breath. It gives me chance to practice the teachings, gives me a chance to do what's good, what's worthwhile." Remind yourself of that.

We talk about the preciousness of human life. Well, it's precious because it gives us the opportunity to do something good with the energy we've got. So we should maximize our energy by learning how to get the mind concentrated. Focus on a pursuit of happiness that's really worthwhile. That's the Buddha's one assumption about human beings. He doesn't talk about people having Buddha nature or any other kind of nature. He does say, though, that people do pursue happiness, and the issue is whether they pursue it wisely. If you pursue it wisely, you find a happiness that's well worth the effort, a happiness that goes way beyond the ordinary. His teachings are all about that: how best to use the limited time and limited strength we have to ultimately find a happiness that doesn't have any limits. That's why his teaching is so special.

We don't know how much time we have, but we do know that there is a way to increase our strength of mind—and then to use that strength wisely, to give the Buddha's teachings a good try, to see if what was true for him is true for us, that there is a happiness that's totally unlimited, and given our limited resources, we can find a way to parlay them into something really special.