

A Warrior's Strengths

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Ajaan Lee tells a story of one time of when he was out in the forest, going on alms round with a couple of other monks and a few young boys tagging along behind, and a wild chicken saw the monks coming and let a warning cry to all her chicks. The chicks scurried around and ran into a pile of leaves. As an experiment, Ajaan Lee had some of the boys who were tagging along take some sticks and stir the pile of leaves to see if they could get the chicks to come out. But they couldn't. The chicks just lay there very still. So he commented on how smart the chicks were, knowing that there was no way they could fight this obvious danger, so they learned how to avoid the danger by hiding out.

He said that this is an important lesson for meditators. A lot of times, you just have to hide out. Even as a meditator warrior, one of the first lessons you have to learn is when it's wise to fight and when it's wise to make yourself scarce, to avoid the fight, to get out of the dangerous situation. Other people may think you're a coward, but that's their business. As he said, in effect, discretion is the better part of valor. You have to know when a fight is worth fighting, and you also have to know how to get out of a fight when you see it's going poorly.

This applies to disturbances in your environment—today we were talking about getting away from noisy places when you're trying to meditate—and of course it also applies to the inner fight with your defilements. The Buddha talks about how these things come in and take over the mind. He says it starts out with simple contact at the senses and then there's feeling and then from feeling there's the person who feels, the person who puts a label on these things. Then from labeling you start thinking about them, and then the thinking turns into obsessive thinking—the Pali term is *papañca*. It can mean proliferation, complication. He says these turn around and they bite you, they attack you. You're attacked by your own thoughts.

Sometimes you may wonder how your actions through the principle of karma can come back at you. Well, it happens in your mind all the time. You start thinking in the terms and categories of the obsessive thinking, which starts with the thought that "I am the thinker," and then whatever comes up in your mind, you're suddenly responsible for it. When you're responsible for it, your thoughts turn around and bite you on the hand. Or worse than that: They grab you by the throat. That's the internal battle. So as a warrior, a meditative warrior, you have to know when to take on your enemies, and when to hide out.

There's another famous story in the Canon where a young monk who's been very delicately brought up is pushing himself to do walking meditation to the point where his feet are all bloody. He begins to get discouraged and says to himself, "Well, maybe I should just go back, be a lay person, and make merit. That's all I seem to be capable of. The practice isn't getting the results I wanted." So the Buddha comes to him. He actually disappears from where he was on Vulture's Peak and reappears right in front of the monk. He asks him, "When you were a lay person, did you play the lute?" Yes. "Were you skillful at it?" Yes. "What happens when the strings were too tight?" They snapped, they didn't sound good. "What happened when they were too loose?" Again, they didn't sound right, you have to get the strings tuned just right.

Then the Buddha says, "In the same way, you have to tune your persistence, and from that you tune the other faculties to it." It's like tuning a guitar. You tune one string on the guitar to get it in tune, and then you tune the other strings to that first one. In this case, the Buddha is referring to all the five faculties, all the five strengths that you need in your meditation—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration and discernment. Your persistence, your energy, the amount of effort you can put into the practice, is the first string you tune.

In other words, you look at what your strength is, what can you handle, which is something we have to learn through experience: what we can and can't handle. Some people tend to underestimate the amount of strength they have, other people tend to overestimate. But the sign of a good warrior is that you're willing to learn from your mistakes. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, if you don't put up a fight at all, how can you say that you even lose? You lie down and let your defilements trample all over you. He says that at least you should try to put up a fight. Then you say that someone has won, someone has lost. It's better to fight and lose than not try to fight at all, in the sense of not trying out anything at all.

Over time, if you're a smart warrior, you you can begin to read what your strength is, what you're capable of. Sometimes you have to push yourself too hard; other times try relaxing and see what happens there, and then you can see where the middle zone is, where your effort is just right. From that, you build your other strengths, particularly concentration, because concentration is a really good protection to have. It's a good place to hide out when you need it.

Like that story of the martial arts expert: His students tried all their different skills on a donkey that was by the side of the road. The first student gets kicked across the road, the second student gets kicked across the road, they all get kicked across the road, no matter what stance they try. They realize that the martial arts expert hasn't taught them everything. So they hide off the side of the road to see

what the martial arts expert will do, what stance he'll take against the donkey. Well, the martial arts expert finally comes around, he sees a donkey, he walks way around the donkey, stays away from it.

You need concentration as that ability to walk your way around things. When the storms in your mind are blowing and they seem really strong, just say, "I'm going to stay right here with the breath and focus on that and not get involved in anything else." As soon as you have the complicating thought or the proliferating thought that "I am the thinker," then the thoughts become *your* thoughts and you've got to deal with them.

So you drop that assumption for the time being. If anything, "I'm a meditator, I'm the person focusing on the breath," but these other thoughts are something else. Learn not to identify with them. When they're too strong to deal with, you just let them go, let them go, let them go. No matter how enticing they may be seem, how real or important they may seem, you have to put up resistance. And sometimes the best resistance is to lie low. So you stay with the breath, stay with the physical sensations in the body. You can pretend that you don't understand the English language or whatever language these thoughts are talking in. But when you find that you do with the strength to take on the thoughts, then by all means, try to figure out which of these thoughts are skillful and which ones are not, which ones can you believe, which ones you should put a big question mark next to.

A lot of the training lies in learning how to figure out what kind of thinking is skillful and what's not, because you've got to use your thoughts. Meditation is not a process of stopping your thinking and becoming a zombie. If your discernment is going to have any strength, it has to learn how to think and question, see connections between cause and effect. So when you think of doing something, ask yourself, "If I do this, what are the results going to be? Will they be skillful or not?" Sometimes you can reflect from experience and realize, "The last time I acted like that, I got into big trouble, or I didn't get into *big* trouble, but whatever it was, it wasn't really worth it." Okay, you can drop that thought. Or at least, you can try to drop the thought. Give yourself good reasons for dropping it. Give yourself better ways of thinking about the issue, whatever it is. Make alternative plans for action. Your old habitual way of doing things might put up a resistance, but again, why should you be afraid of that resistance? You can put up a resistance, too. The new thoughts can put up a resistance, too. At least give them a try. You're creating new ruts in the mind. Your old ruts are obviously unskillful, so let's create some new ones. That's going to take some time. Remember that the old ruts are also the product of conditions. They aren't innate in the mind. You

have the choice of creating new habits or falling with your old habits. If you don't like the results of your old habits, try something new.

In this way, your discernment becomes strong because you exercise it. But as with any strength training, you have to realize what your strength is. If it comes to a point where you can't think your way around a particular problem, just do your best if it's an issue where you have to act. If it's not an issue where you have to act, just lie low and say, "I'm not going to getting involved here." Other people may say, "Make this your practice," with the insinuation that you're less than a true meditator if you don't take on every difficulty all the time. But that's not how a true warrior acts. It's the people who feel the need to prove that they're warriors who take on every battle. The experienced ones know which battles are worth taking on and which ones are not.

The same with issues outside: People will often say that lay life is better than the monastic life because you're dealing with real problems, you're not running away. Actually, you can't really run away from your problems, but you *can* run away from circumstances that make it difficult to practice. Before you're able to develop a true wilderness mind, you have to go into places where you're alone and are away from a lot of outside influences, so that you really can look at your mind and build a solid foundation of concentration.

Again, it's a matter of looking at what you're capable of, what your strength is, and if you find that the confusing environment or loud environment or difficult environment is just too much for you, get out of it as much as you can. Find some solitude; find some seclusion.

Over time, that physical seclusion will develop into mental seclusion, as the description of the first jhāna says: the mind secluded from unskillful qualities. You've built up a strong resistance to them, or at least *some* resistance to them. That's the beginning of a wilderness mind. Then you try to see the extent to which you can carry that wilderness mind into more complicated situations. There'll be a back-and-forth. Sometimes you find it just disappearing right in front of your eyes, so you'll have to go back and build it back up again. But as long as you work at it, the time will come when you can maintain this sense of the wilderness mind, the mind that's separate from things that are coming in, the mind doesn't go out and lay claim to things outside.

That's a lot of the problem right there. Things come up to us. They, on their own, would just pass by, pass by, but we pull them in. When you can see that tendency in the mind and learn how to thwart it, learn how to sidestep it, then you're ready for more difficult circumstances.

So it all comes back to that old principle of the warrior. Know your strength. Know what you can do. Know your enemies. And when you see there's a possibility of taking on your enemies, take them on. If you're not ready yet, you know where you can sidestep the dangers they pose.

This is called warrior knowledge. Back in ancient civilizations, they made a distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribe knowledge is all in words, definitions, doctrinaire statements: "This must be true, everything else is false." Whereas a warrior has to learn from experience, what works and what doesn't work. And a good warrior learns not to be doctrinaire, to figure out when certain maxims really apply and when they have to be put aside.

They talk about people going out into the wilderness up in Alaska. The doctrinaire ones who've read a lot of books and have a lot of very strong ideas about how a true wilderness person should live: Those are the ones who tend to last only a few weeks. The ones who are willing to adapt and to learn to use the conveniences of modern civilization when they work and to pick up skills from the wilderness when those are needed—in other words, you learn from what works, you learn from what doesn't work: Those are the ones who can survive.

So to be a good warrior in your meditation, you've got learn the skills of a warrior. Put down the easy doctrinaire statements, learn from what works, what doesn't work. The Buddha gives lots of examples and basic principles. You don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel all the time. But as for the particulars, those you have learn on your own. And you have to be willing to learn in this way, because that's where your discernment develops. Discernment comes in seeing cause and effect, and if you don't see it on your own, the discernment never comes. Other people may admire you for your bravery or dismiss you for your cowardliness, but that's not the issue. The issue is finding which battles you're up for taking on, which battles you feel you can handle, and have an exit strategy when you discover you're taking on more than you can handle.

This is it. The exit strategy is learning how to get the mind concentrated, get it still, and learn enough discernment so that you don't get involved in the proliferation that comes from "I am the thinker," where all of a sudden the thoughts turn around and attack you. If you don't lay claim to them, they don't attack you. And even when it is time to take them up, make sure that you've got your weapons sharp, so that when they attack, you know how to parry, you know how to sidestep, so that they don't do you any damage.