

A Gift of Strength

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One of the most valuable things in the modern world is time. So many toys, so little time. So many relationships, so little time. So many desires, so little time. Given that fact, it would seem that the time we take to work on the mind is taking time away from other things, time away from relationships, time away from other duties, but that's not really the case. You have to remember that there are also limitations on your energy. One of the things you do as part of the practice is to increase your energy, increase your strength. So the time you take to meditate is not time taken away from other responsibilities. It's time put to good use.

It's like eating: You have to take time out to eat so that you have strength to do your other activities. In the same way, the mind needs time to be by itself, to have its own sense of its own space, where it can rest, recuperate, and develop its strength. Then you can take that strength and devote it to whatever purpose you want.

If you're living in a family, you can devote it to your family members. If you have work to do, you can devote it to your work. So don't think of your meditation as a selfish activity. And because that space you try to create inside—that space of equanimity or a sense of well-being—is something you can develop from within, it doesn't need to depend on anyone else. It doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else.

That doesn't mean you're not being faithful to other people. There's no human relationship that can carry the weight of providing all your happiness for you. The more you can stand up straight on your own feet, the less you need to lean on other people. The less you lean on them, the more durable the relationship. So it's not a matter of either/or, it's a matter of finding the right balance so that you can have both/and. Looking at yourself in a wise way is a gift to other people, just as being good to other people in a wise way is good for you. The two principles go together.

So take this time to work on the strength of the mind. First there's the strength of conviction: that your actions really are important, the things you do, the things you say and think, really do shape your life. What does that mean? It means you have to look after the source of your actions, which is the mind, the intentions in the mind. In fact, the Buddha actually said at one point that your intention *is* the action. And it stands to reason that if intentions come out of a strong mind—well-balanced, wise, compassionate, mindful—then those

intentions will be a lot more skillful, the life they shape will be a much better life. So the teachings on karma are not irrelevant to the practice of meditation. They point to you why you need to meditate and where you have to focus.

You focus on your intentions, and that leads to persistence, the next strength. The focus of your persistence is trying to develop skillful intentions, to let go of unskillful ones. Learn to look for the mind states that cause unskillful intentions: greed, anger, and delusion. You want to do what you can undercut them. Again, this requires more meditation. In particular, you develop mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, which are the other strengths.

Mindfulness doesn't mean simply being aware of the present moment. It means keeping certain things in mind—and especially, the whole issue why you want to focus on being skillful, where you have to focus your attention, focus your energy, looking at the way your intentions take shape. Where do they take shape? They take shape right here.

That's why alertness is often paired with mindfulness, seeing exactly what the mind is doing and then looking at the results so that you get a clearer idea of the connection between your intentions and the actual happiness or pain they cause, so that you can learn how to refine that as part of your persistence, as part of your right effort.

This leads ultimately to concentration, keeping the mind focused, keeping it intent on one thing for long periods of time. This is nourishment for the mind. Of the various qualities along the path, the one the Buddha consistently compares to food is just this: concentration—staying with one object, like the breath, or whatever object you find comfortable, effective, at any one time, staying with that object until you develop a sense of well-being around it. Remind yourself, you're going to learn how to be friends with your breath, be friends with the way the breath energy permeates the body, so that you can be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Even when the breath is still, you can be with whole body.

That sense of expanded awareness, centered in the present moment but expanded to fill the whole body, is really nourishing for the mind. It gives you a sense that you really can find happiness simply by sitting here breathing. Your happiness doesn't have to depend on things outside being a certain way. You've got this skill inside, and when you try to develop it in a way that you can use it not just when you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you have this sense of occupying your whole body wherever you go, that's nourishing.

For one thing, other people don't come in and occupy your space. You may notice that sometimes, as you deal with certain people, if you're not fully

occupying your body, their energy comes in and takes over. You pick it up, and that can sap you. So try to fully occupy your body throughout the day. Both body and mind will feel stronger.

When you have this sort of solid position in the mind, then the fifth strength, discernment, can really function. You begin to see very clearly where you create unnecessary stress in your life. This is an important distinction. The stresses and strains that are just there come from outside, but then there are the stresses and strains that you add on top. The ones you add are totally unnecessary. You weaken yourself by adding them. Deluded expectations, greedy expectations, angry impulses: These are just a few of the things that add unnecessary stress and suffering.

When the mind is well fed, well nourished through the concentration, then it can see these things for what they are. If it isn't, you tend to identify with them, and if someone tells you to let them go, you say, "I can't let them go. That's me. I need these things." It's like criticizing someone who's hungry. They don't want to hear any of it. But if you get them well rested, well fed, then you can talk to them, and they're in a much better mood to listen. The mind is the same way. There's a lot of stuff that discernment shows you about your own mind that you'd rather not see. When you train the mind to be with a sense of oneness, a sense of ease from the concentration, it's more willing to listen, and it's in a better position to see. The less stress you add to the present moment, the more you can see the times when you do add stress, even in subtle ways.

This way, you become more solid inside. And of course, you're not the only person who benefits. The people around you who have been subject to your greed, anger, and delusion, subject your need to depend on them for your happiness, sense that you're much less of a burden now.

So think of this time—the time you meditate, the time you focus inside—not as something that you're taking away from the people around you, but as a positive addition. It's a gift not only to yourself but to them as well. And as in any relationship, there will come a time when the relationship ends, and then you look back on it. If you can look back on a relationship in which you were strong and giving, the memories cause you a lot less pain. So do your best to work on this gift, because it is one of the best gifts you can give to anybody: yourself and the people around you. It's a heartfelt gift: You feel it in your heart; the people around you will feel in theirs.