

Five Spiritual Strengths

Now I will discuss a point from the Buddha's teachings for you to listen to briefly as a means of fostering strength of body and strength of mind. All of us live in dependence on strength of body and strength of mind. Without these two things, life couldn't last.

Strength of body, no matter how much we may foster it with the four necessities and with worldly wealth, can't help but waste away and vanish by its very nature. It can't escape from aging, illness, and death. And for strength of body to exist, it needs help from strength of mind. But strength of mind doesn't need to depend on the four necessities or worldly wealth; and it doesn't need to depend on strength of body at all. It can get along solely on 'noble wealth.' So strength of mind is more important than strength of body.

People who don't have enough strength of their own have to start out by hoping to depend on others until they reach the point where they can stand on their own. In depending on others, we have to be careful in choosing a good mainstay, in line with the Pali phrase, *asevana ca balanam panditanañca sevana*: We have to choose good people to associate with. If we associate with wise people and sages, they'll teach us to be good. If we associate with fools, we'll suffer for it.

So searching for a mainstay of this sort doesn't rank as being really good, because it's like shooting a bird: We might hit it on the wing or on the tail. If we really want to be right on target, we have to depend on another sort of mainstay: *atta hi attano natho*, we have to depend on ourselves. This sort of mainstay the Lord Buddha praised as being the highest because it will teach us to have a sense of our own good and bad actions—'*kammassako'mhi*'—and we won't need to go pinning our hopes on other people any more.

To create this sort of mainstay, we have to develop five qualities—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—which are called *bala*, or strengths, that will help give us the strength of mind to stride toward the good. All five of these qualities can be gathered under the headings of virtue, concentration, and discernment. Conviction comes under virtue; persistence, mindfulness, and concentration come under concentration; and discernment is discernment.

To have conviction is tantamount to having wealth. Virtue is like a white cloth that enwraps the body and makes it beautiful, just as the petals of a lotus enwrap the scent of its pollen. Virtue is the act of abandoning that cuts away evil and corruption from our deeds so that our deeds will be honest and upright. This is virtue, but it's not the ultimate good. When our body has virtue, our mind needs rectitude to go with it.

Persistence means diligence, determination, perseverance, being audacious and unrelenting in what we do, so as to be strong in progressing toward what is good.

Mindfulness means care and restraint to make sure that our thoughts, words, and deeds don't go off the mark; being conscious of good and evil so that our behavior doesn't fall into ways that are bad and unwise.

Concentration means keeping the mind firmly centered in a single object—the direct path (*ekayana-magga*)—not letting it tip, lean, or waver under the influence of its preoccupations, whether good or bad, past or future; keeping the mind honest and upright.

All three of these qualities form the rectitude of the mind that abstains from thoughts of sensuality, ill-will, and harm. This is termed the resolve of renunciation (*nekkhama-sankappo*): The mind isn't pleased or displeased with sensual moods or sensual objects, whether good or bad. This is a mind gone forth from the home life. Whether or not we ordain, whether we live at home or in a monastery, we're classed as having gone forth.

The next quality, which the Buddha classed as the highest good, is discernment. Once we have virtue and concentration, discernment will arise from the mind in the first, second, third, and fourth levels of *jhana*. This is the light of discernment that enables us to see the Dhamma both within us and without. We can see ourselves from both sides. We can see that the aspect that takes birth, takes birth; and that there is also an aspect that doesn't take birth. The aspect that ages, ages; and there is also an aspect that doesn't age. The aspect that's ill, is ill; and there is also an aspect that isn't ill. The aspect that dies, dies; and the aspect that doesn't die, doesn't die. This is change-of-lineage knowledge (*gotarabhūñāna*), which sees both sides, like having two eyes. Whichever side we look at, we can see, but we aren't stuck on either side. We simply know things in line with their nature as fabrications, that they have to take birth, age, grow ill, and die. These four facts have made arahants of the many people who have contemplated them and seen their true nature clearly to the point of working free from unawareness.

The nature of the body is that it flows in one direction—toward decay—but the mind won't flow along with it. The mind is sure to progress in line with its strength. Whoever has a lot of strength will go far. Whoever gets stuck on birth will have to take birth. Whoever gets stuck on aging will have to age. Whoever gets stuck on illness will have to be ill. Whoever gets stuck on dying will have to die. But whoever isn't stuck on birth, aging, illness, and death is bound for a state that doesn't take birth, doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, and doesn't die.

When we can do this, we're said to have found a hunk of noble wealth in birth, aging, illness, and death. We needn't fear poverty. Even though the body may age, our mind doesn't age. If the body is going to grow ill and die, let it grow ill and die, but our mind doesn't grow ill, our mind doesn't die. The mind of an arahant is such that, even if someone were to break his head open, his mind wouldn't be pained.

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When the mind is involved with the world, it's bound to meet with collisions; and once it collides, it will be shaken and roll back and forth, just as round stones in a large pile roll back and forth. So no matter how good or bad other people may be, we don't store it up in our mind to give rise to feelings of like or dislike. Dismiss it completely as being their business and none of ours.

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The five hindrances are five diseases that fasten on and eat into the mind, leaving it thin and famished. Whoever has concentration reaching deep into the heart will be able to kill off all five of these diseases. Such a person is sure to be full in body and mind—free from hunger, poverty and want—and won't have to go asking for goodness from anyone.

The results we'll receive are: (1) We'll make ourselves rich in noble wealth. (2) If the Buddha were still alive, he'd be sure to be pleased, just as a parent whose child is wealthy and self-sufficient can stop being anxious and thus sleep in peace.

To summarize: Worldly wealth is what fosters strength of body; noble wealth is what fosters strength of mind. So I ask that we all put this teaching into practice, training ourselves and polishing our thoughts, words and deeds so that they're worthy and pure, reaching the stage of noble wealth, which is the path to the highest happiness: *nibbana*.

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