

## *Strength Training*

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Meditation is a skill, something you work at, something you master. And as you approach it, it's a good idea to reflect back on what skills you've already mastered in life, to see what lessons, what wisdom, you already have that you've already picked up from those skills that you can apply to the meditation.

If your basic skill is strength training, there are a lot of parallels.

The Buddha talks of the path as a path of strength, and the strengths of the mind are conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The Buddha has one way of formulating the path in these five terms. He himself often compares the path of practice to various skills, and some of them have to do with strength. The skillful meditator is one who can control his mind as easily as a strong man can flex and extend his arm. When you need to crush your distracting thoughts, you can crush them in the same way that a strong man crushes down a weaker man. And some of the similes the Buddha gives have to do with strength training. Back in those days, they didn't have strength training the way we do, but they did have archery, which was the basic strength training for noble warriors because the bows were so large and hard to bend. The ability to master your concentration and to develop discernment he compared to the ability to shoot your arrows great distances, to pierce large masses, and shoot in rapid succession, all of which require strength.

So as we're developing strength of mind, what lessons can we pick up from physical strength training?

The first one to remember is that you're in this for the long haul. Training the mind is a long-term project. You have to watch out for quick fixes, and remember that you're not going to develop strength overnight. In the same way that you can't believe those ads in the back of *Popular Science* that tell you to buy our cream and it'll melt all the fat off your stomach, you can't believe the idea that you can simply just let go in your meditation and there you are; there's not much to do, just let go, let go. That doesn't get you anywhere. There is work to be done. After all, as the Buddha said, the four noble truths have four duties. The first one is to comprehend suffering. Then you let go of the cause of suffering, to realize the cessation of suffering, but to do that, you've got to develop the path. That takes work.

So if you're in this for the long haul, this means, one, that you try to set up a regular schedule, that you meditate every day. Don't be weekend warrior, because

you know what happens to weekend warriors. They push themselves too hard. They're not in shape, yet they want to get the results to show that they're just as fit as everybody else—and so they harm themselves. This happens to people who don't meditate much in everyday life and then come on a retreat like this. They push, push, push because they want to gain awakening in two weeks. You have to work in day-to-day increments, so develop a mindset that's willing to work in day-to-day increments. That means having a regular schedule and learning how to pace yourself, because you have to start where you are. You go down to the gym and see everybody else lifting 300-pound weights but you can't lift 300-pound weights, remember that you're not there to compete with them. You're there to strengthen yourself. So keep that in mind. Start out with what you can handle, and then push gradually from there.

This means that you learn how to observe yourself as you practice to see what works and what doesn't work, to know when you're pushing yourself too hard, and when you're not pushing yourself hard enough. Part of this means learning how to read your own pain. There's the pain that tells you that you're over-exerting yourself, and then there's the pain that tells you that you're actually growing. There are going to be difficulties in the meditation. Encountering the difficulties is an important part of learning about the mind. When you have a bad meditation, don't say, "Well, today is a bad day. It's not going to work out, I should do something else." You'll never learn how to handle those states of mind unless you're willing to sit through them to figure them out. So that kind of pain, that kind of hardship, is useful.

But when you're pushing yourself so hard that you start hating the meditation—say you're sitting through pain while you meditate every day, every day—after a while the mind starts associating pain with meditation and it's going to rebel. So you learn how to read that: when you're pushing yourself too hard, when you're not, when the pain is actually a sign of progress.

And you have to learn how to vary your meditation. Ajaan Lee has a good analogy of the good cook who knows not to fix the same thing every day. Sometimes you fix sweet food, sometimes sour food, sometimes salty food. Otherwise, the people you're cooking for get bored.

This means, in terms of the breath, learning how to vary the breath, learning how to experiment with it. Read the body: What does the body need right now? Does it need deep breathing? Does it need shallow breathing? Fast? Slow? Do you want to focus on the in-and-out breath, or more on the still breath energy that fills the body? Learn to read your needs and vary your offerings.

And expand your repertoire. That's another important point. Remember that the Buddha taught lots of different meditation methods. In some cases, it's because different people respond to different methods, but it's also due to the fact that as meditators we need different approaches. If you attack your defilements with only one weapon or only one tool, they're going to learn how to come from another angle. In other words, if the breath is your only topic of meditation, they're going to make it hard to get to the breath. Laziness will come in, discouragement will come in, boredom will come in, and you have to learn how to fight those things off.

This is why the Buddha teaches other meditation techniques, too: Recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The four sublime attitudes. Recollection of death for when you're getting lazy. You don't know when death is going to come. We make plans in our life, we have to make plans in life, but at the same time, we have to realize that those plans could be blown out of the water in the matter of a few seconds. So the question is, are you ready to die right now if it were to happen? The big earthquake that they keep forecasting: What if it hit now? And even though this sala was supposed to be built to code, you never know. It could come crashing down.

So when you find yourself lazy and disinclined to practice, remind yourself, you may not have that much more opportunity to do it. So recollection of death is a good skill to have in your repertoire.

What this means basically is that you learn how to read your own practice, read your own progress, and develop different approaches, to vary your offerings, to vary your training, not only through being sensitive to how things are going in your body, in your mind right now, but—to continue the analogy—you should also read up on anatomy. If you're going to do exercises and want to start varying your exercises, you have to know exactly which muscles you're going to target, and what they do to the body, what movements they control, so that you can start thinking of making those movements and strengthening those movements.

It's the same with the mind. The mind has its anatomy: the way it clings, the way it craves, the way it creates suffering. It's good to understand how these things come about, so you want to read up, not just to master theory for its own sake, but also to get a sense of what the possibilities are, what the problems are, what the underlying structure of this problem of suffering is.

Why do we suffer? The Buddha says it's because we cling to the five aggregates. Okay, learn about the aggregates, learn about clinging. But also remember as he teaches those aggregates that you have to learn how to use the aggregates as your path. So as Ajaan Lee says, be a person with two eyes. See that the problems in the

mind, the factors that can create problems in the mind, can also be used to overcome the problem. You create feelings of ease of the breath, you perceive the breath energy as filling the body, you direct your thoughts and evaluate the breath—that's fabrication—and you're aware of all this. You're taking these five aggregates and turning them into the path. That's what you learn when you start reading the Buddha's teachings. It opens your awareness, it expands your horizons as to what's possible, where the problems are, but also what the potential solutions are.

So you're not going just on your own sense of what's working and what's not. You want to tap into other people's wisdom and learn how to integrate that into your own practice.

Another lesson you pick up, of course, is that when you're developing strength, you don't want to just leave it there at the gym. Otherwise it simply becomes an exercise in vanity. You want to take that strength and put it to use so that you really benefit from it in your daily life and in other sports, because in the course of putting it to use in daily life, you begin to realize that there are still some areas where you're weak and you need practice. You begin to pinpoint exactly where those areas are. We're here to develop concentration, develop discernment not just so that we can have nice experiences as we meditate, but we want to take these skills and use them to solve the problem of suffering in the mind. That way, you begin to understand where you need more work.

Then there's the whole issue of food. In terms of physical strength training, the question is *what* you're eating. In training the mind, the question is *why* you eat. Do you eat just for the taste? Do you eat to play with the idea that you've just eaten this or that fancy food? That's wrong feeding. You have to feed simply for the sake of keeping the body going, to keep it healthy, strong enough so that you can practice—eating enough so that you're not starving but not so much that you overfeed yourself.

And as a practice, it isn't just what you do in the gym, in the same way it isn't just what you do in the meditation hall. It's how you approach your whole life, how you use the skills that you master in the meditation hall, on the cushion, in the course of your life. In this way, the training penetrates your whole life, and it becomes a training that's really worthwhile in and of itself.

This is where the analogy breaks down. Strength training is good because it makes you strong enough to do other things. Not much is accomplished simply by lifting weights or running or whatever. Someone once said that it would be good if they could take all those running machines and hook them up to generators, so that something would be accomplished by all the energy expended.

You take that strength, and you want to apply it. You take the strength of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, and you apply it to this issue: why the mind creates suffering. Even though we all want happiness, we keep doing things over and over again that create suffering for ourselves and other people. And the suffering isn't created only when you're sitting on the cushion, it's created throughout life. So you want to catch yourself in the course of doing that, and learn to bring in the skills you've developed here in terms of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

This is something you can do throughout life. This is another difference. As Ajaan Lee said, we live by strength of body and strength of mind, but when the chips are down, strength of mind can get along without strength of body, if it's been developed. Strength of the body is eventually going to leave us. No matter how well you look after your body, it's going to age, grow ill, and eventually die. Strength of mind, though, doesn't have to go in that direction at all. It can keep growing all away to the deathless. This is why this is a training that's really worth devoting yourself to.

Psychologists have studied the fact that people who develop skills tend to be happier than people don't. But one thing I haven't seen studied is which skills tend to lead to a more lasting happiness. This is where the Buddha really showed his wisdom, in focusing on the skills to strengthen the mind. Those can see you through all kinds of difficulties. Strength of the body can help you through certain difficulties but it can only go so far. And as I said, there becomes a point where no matter how hard you exercise, the body's just not going to get any stronger, and finally you get to point where you can't exercise at all. But the exercise of the mind is something you can take all the way to your final breath, and it'll carry you beyond.

That's why if you have the time and the opportunity to devote to this training, it's really time well spent. This is one of the few things in life that you can really give your whole life to, and it more than repays the effort you put in.