

2016-06-04 Being The Ant Or The Elephant Cultivating The Five Spiritual Strengths

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SPEAKERS

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So mindfulness is a capacity that we have, we have the ability to be mindful. It's a faculty that we possess, that sometimes is operating, and sometimes not sometimes operating in different degrees. We have this wonderful word in English, being mindless, I was mindless, and means there was no self awareness, perhaps no real awareness what was going on, and did things do things carelessly doing things without really understanding what we're doing. And in contrast to being mindless, there's being mindful. And the word fool is a kind of suffix, the fullest kind of a wonderful little word, to be full, with a full mind with a full awareness, with the attention filled with what we're doing what we're present for, and allow ourselves to really be filled by so it's just really there with one thing not distracted, not divided, which is really there. But as a faculty as a capacity that we have, it doesn't operate in isolation. And sometimes, if we're only focusing on trying to be mindful, as if that's the only thing we're supposed to do, we're not taking into account that mindfulness is, works together with other faculties, other capacities of the mind doesn't work alone. And analogy for this is riding a bicycle. If you decide you've never ridden a bicycle before, he has to learn how to ride a bike and you want to go for, you know, 20 mile bike ride up and down the hills, and you've never been on the bike before. You know, you probably lack confidence, and you don't even know how to apply yourself on the bike, and you don't even know what to pay attention to, as you ride the bike. And, and, you know, and, and so it's kind of awkward at first. So you start, you know, the first day you go out and, and it takes you maybe a few days to even learn how to ride the bike. And then slowly, you begin to learn like right down the street now. And then after a while, you'll learn you can go around the block, and you get the basic hang of what it means to ride the bike. And as you keep practicing riding the bike with time, then you after a while you learn you can, you know, you can actually bike around the block and block, you know, 10 times, you can go for a mile and come home. And so slowly over time, now, you're developing a number of different capacities that are needed to ride the bike, you're developing some confidence in your ability to ride the bike, and some confidence and some ability to know how, what kind of effort to make. When you're going up a hill, it requires a different effort than going down the hill, when it's raining different kind of effort than when the roads are dry. And when there's gravel you bike differently than if you do and you know, asphalt. So you get a sense of different kind of effort and energy that's needed in different circumstances. And you learn how to be mindful of you learn that it's good to be mindful of your surroundings what's happening when you're riding a bike, and you learn the consequences of being mindless, which I did when I was 14. And I was riding my bicycle halfway down the road. And I ran into the back of a parked car. There were people parked in the car. So they were kind of surprised. And I was thinking, Well, you know, my first thought was, are they responsible? You know, how could they be parked right there. I just suddenly appear out of nothing nowhere, right? I was just, but I was really completely mindless. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing. And so I learned from that, that

you're supposed to pay attention. And so pay attention as you're right, you know, to learn to be mindful. And then I learned that as opposed to have sustained attention. And stay concentrated. It's one thing to be mind mindful occasionally. But you know, you ride a bike, especially in traffic. And if you want to really keep your attention sharp and really focused in the present moment and be present. not staying in the present moment in a continuous way riding your bike is not good.

And then you want to be happy, become discerning and wise about the things that you see and what you recognize. So you see a steep hill in the distance, you realize, Oh, I think it's good right now to get some momentum going. I think now that's still flat I should bike a bit harder now to get some movement up. Or you see the gravel same time or not. for it, I learned a lot about riding bike. When I was 14, I was going down a hill. And I was gonna make a left turn. And at the bottom of the hill was all this gravel. And so I went down and beautifully made my turn, and ended up on the ground, because the gravel didn't hold the bike up and just slipped away. And so I had no discernment, no wisdom, and understanding what gravel means when you ride a bike. And so I acquired some wisdom about what it means. And so we'd acquire all this understanding and ability to see and be discerning and differentiate, or that's asphalt, that's gravel, that's a steep hill, that's water. All these things that we have to learn. And as we learn all this, then the confidence becomes stronger. And so the confidence as they get stronger, eventually, I might develop the confidence I can now I think I can bike that 20 mile distance, I didn't have the confidence before. And to build that confidence grows and grows. And maybe I'm still training to do the drive the bike, and I start training to travel in when it's raining. And after a while I get confidence. I know I think I know how to drive ride bikes carefully when it's raining. It's icy, really careful. And yeah, so I learned what it takes there. I learned all these different times and circumstances, how to do the bike, I'm tired. How do you ride a bike when you're tired and kind of weary? I think I know how to do it, take it easy paced myself, if I learn all this different stuff, in different circumstances, and at some point, my confidence becomes a strength. And because it becomes an unshakable, or I really know in many different circumstances, I have confidence in myself, that I could apply myself on the bike. And so now I can really do that 20 mile trek, because I know no matter what comes along within reason, I could I have the confidence I can do it, which I didn't have when I started. And with that confidence comes an unshakable persistence. Because to ride a bike 20 miles takes a certain persistence, you might stop and rest. But you have to really kind of stay at it, you know, you can't just kind of pedal two or three times and Coast down the block half a block, and then you know, decide to go home and have lunch and take a nap. Or give up you know, but you have to really, it takes effort. It's persistent effort to ride a bike up and down the hills. And so to have persistence be unshakable. I know how to be persistent, I know how to take care of myself and do it just right. So it's not a sprint, when it needs to be a marathon efforts are slow and steady. I know the kind of effort I need to make. And I know how to be persistent. And we have confidence in this we have we unshakable in our persistence, their strength and their persistence. And then we, the mindfulness itself becomes a strength. It's not a simply a capacity that we have on call that we try to muster up when we need it. But it becomes something that we have confidence in. And we can really apply it and use it. And it becomes unshakable. A big semi truck, you know, players but by and it's it comes too close. And we stay in the field of mindfulness we don't get, we don't get lost in the fear. We don't get lost in anger and resentment. And all these things, preoccupy us. But the mindfulness is so strong, that the mindfulness, kind of like the ballast of a sailboat that keeps the sailboat upright, it doesn't tip over. Mindfulness has become a strength. And then the ability to stay focused and concentrate. Again, same thing is, semis gone by, we're not doing we don't get distracted, we don't get pulled off, we see a beautiful sight on the side of the road. We see you know, and I, you know, I don't know what it would be you seen ice cream store and that's enough to lose your focus, you know, and your persistence, and you're just like, Well, you know, ice cream should count more than riding a bike. And so you get off your bike, and you go to the ice cream store and maybe it takes a few years before you realize that you've tried all the flavors and that you know, you're supposed to be riding

your bike. And so you've lost your focus, your concentration, your engagement. And then, so the concentration and the effort you're making becomes unshakable, very important if you're writing a long distance bike that you really stay focused, because it's so dangerous.

Continuous practice and then the ability to be discerning, you have to while you just you've written your bicycle in many different situations, and many different ways in many different kinds of conditions that you have. And internally, and so you become you have your feelings, your discernment, your wisdom, your understanding feels unshakable. No matter what happens, you feel you can figure out what to do. And so these five capacities we have become strengths. So mindfulness, in terms of riding a bike is important. But that mindfulness doesn't exist alone. It exists together with confidence, persistence, the kind of effort in it also comes together with concentration, and discernment or wisdom or understanding or being able to see clearly. And these are the five called the five faculties. Confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and usually translated as wisdom. And these are not these are ordinary capacities that we all have isn't like these esoteric Buddhist things, or these Buddhists are telling me to, you know, this religious cult like practices and things as opposed to be doing, you know, this, you know, confidence, my God, not again, young. And this an effort, I mean, it is Buddhist coming with their effort thing, you know, like, get off at these, you know, and then wisdom. Well, now, we're talking about esoteric stuff, and I have to read more books. And, you know, it's like, you know, it's just completely ordinary capacities that we're using, probably in almost any endeavor, they were engaged in these five things. And other things are part of the ecology of mental capacities that are operating. In terms of doing Buddhist practice, or doing meditation practice, or what's called mindfulness practice, we're just highlighting ordinary human capacities that are operating in, in conjunction in harmony with, with mindfulness or work together. And so we can recognize them, and know how they mutually supportive. And what I wanted to emphasize today is not the list that's called the five faculties. But the related list, it's called the five strengths. And the five strengths are when the five core faculty just means capacities that may or may not be available. When these capacities faculties have become strong, they're called the five strengths. So just as riding the bicycle on training, and being prepared, these faculties eventually become strengths that we carry with us. And those strengths can can see us through all kinds of challenges in our bike trip, you know, we call them those strengths or strengths are right there. And we just kind of keep going with those strengths, we're not going to stop, we're not going to hesitate in our big bike trip, you know, because we have this inner strength to kind of fortitude to keep going, we're kind of unshakable on, on, discouraged on, you know, flap a ball and kind of persisting and engaging in these ways. And so one of the things we're looking for, or one of the things that's possible, in doing this practice of this practice, is to develop these qualities inside of us, so they become strengths. And that's very helpful. Because if you have, if these qualities are strengths, it's like having strong muscles. And as those muscles as your muscles get strong, you can have more confidence, you can have more continuity, more engagement, you're not so easily pushed around. By things, if you have, you know, if you're strong physically. If you're strong mentally, then you have a lot more ability to be a equanimous is not lost by things not pushed over by things, you're kind of unshakable and unflattering about what goes on, simply because you feel this strength, this that holds you up that keeps you going.

It's kind of like I don't know if it's a good example, but underhook occurs to me right now is a good example. But, you know, I've driven across the Bay Bridge sometimes when it's been really strong wind in really small light cars, and it kind of like, you know, pushes you left and right, and you have to keep really attentive, and I've driven across the bridge and really heavy cars. And it's not budging in the way they just, they're staying and moving. And so to develop the strength gives you this ability to not be swayed and pushed by the winds of life. And so you don't have to negotiate the world so much. You don't have to figure the world out and what to do or, or it's just that the wind doesn't affect you so much

because you're stronger than the wind. And so all kinds of things when you're when these capacities develop inside and become strengths, then all kinds of challenges in ordinary life can come up and we don't have to be so involved in investigating and figuring out and you know, what is where am I attached To what what do I relate to my fear here, and what do I believe, and what's really going on here and all these kinds of issues that come into play, which is a useful thing to do at times.

But it's like, we feel strong. And it's like, not a big deal what's happening. You know, it's, you know, you feel bigger than this, as the as the story in my book, The monastery within says, if a fly at lands in the back of an end, it's probably a big deal for the end. But if the same fly lands on the back of an elephant, it's not a big deal for the elephant. I mean, probably the elephant doesn't even know that's flies there doesn't weigh anything for this space negligible for the elephant. So would you rather go through this life as an ENT or an elephant. And part of the reason I say this is not because of jumbo or something like that, in our culture, but in Indian culture, the elephant is seen as being a very strong, powerful, mighty being, that represents the kind of that's the strong people, people who really develop themselves are considered to be kind of like elephants. The Buddha was like, into an elephant.

So would you rather be an ant or an elephant. And I think becoming an elephant is more to the point in the sense of having this strength, this sense of capacity and, and, and so then, you know, all kinds of things that can happen in your life, not to dismiss them or ignore them, or their importance, but we're not pushed around by them all. I have a flat tire today, that's interesting. And the flat tire, you know, okay, I'll deal with a flat tire, I know what to do. And, and, and there's this confidence of strength, this, that kind of somehow is stronger than the situation. And so it's like, we're not so you know, we have a, we have a resource, we have a refuge, we have a place inside, that is supportive for us, that, you know, helps us be unshakable and confused by what goes on. An example of this, for me was when I was living at Tassajara, the Zen monastery, I had been there for about nine months. And I was then asked to go work in the kitchen. And I ended up working in the kitchen for a year. And I first remember very well, the first day that I went, came into the kitchen to work. And I'd never done any kitchen work before. And so I was kind of intimidated, the kitchen scene, in the play seems really, really big, and I seemed really small. And that seemed like very daunting and all the tasks, I mean, chopping carrots was a mystery to me. And had to be taught what to do. And so then a year passed, and I became kind of the manager of the kitchen during that year. And at some point and so, charge of the crew and everything and, and, and then I remember the last day I was going to be in the kitchen before I was being transferred for different job. And I remember that day I remember what it was like to be in the kitchen the first day where the kitchen was so big and I was so small. And then last day, the kitchen was really small and I was baking. I you know, I don't think they made the kitchen and the bigger direct here.

And I don't think I grew much I was already an adult. It was all in my head, you know, and my perception of things. And so this idea becomes confident and strong and capable and wise but I'll be in the kitchen. And so I had mastery and sort of kind of mastery of being there. And it changed my way in which I was in the kitchen. And so by the last you know by end of the year, if there was a problem in the kitchen, it didn't bother me I just knew how to take care of it and how to fix for it. Number one so we had we I think we did drop the lunch or the floor we burned it or something. And there was you know the whole lunch that we were supposed to serve everyone was disappeared, I think was it was certainly less than 10 minutes before it was due to be served. So what do you do? I knew what to do was not a problem. What you do is not you know in case this happens to you you go get the cabbage And cabbage can be cut and washed really fast. And you so we just find a way to get a team together and we just waited away at the cabbage, and one person that chopped tofu into blocks. And then we threw it into the wok, and cabbage cooks really fast and walk and tofu heats up really fast. And you put in a little bit of soy sauce, and, you know, and it's sesame oil and, and it's like, really good. So, in that time we

had, we just whipped it all up. And as far as anybody else knew that was the menu for today. So this idea of mastery of strength, you know, knowing what to do, knowing how to stay present, knowing, having confidence in oneself, knowing how to have persistence, knowing what to pay attention to, and knowing how to stay focused, these are all things that can grow and develop until they become strengths. So the first of these strengths, is confidence. Confidence is something you can grow and develop. So it becomes strong in you. And so in terms of this practice here, to grow and have it grow in having confidence, in the practice of paying attention, have confidence in your ability to pay attention, to have confidence in the value of paying attention and showing up and being here. And having that become a real string that you carry with you that confidence. So you go about the world with a real sense of confidence in the practice of mindfulness. That confidence is consequential. It's not like a light thing. It's not like you know, in you know, mindfulness was important. Confidence is just you know, who needs confidence. Confidence is a real capacity we have, and they can grow. In terms of mindfulness, that one of the best ways to develop confidence in mindfulness is through experience, by doing it over time, and I know that my confidence in mindfulness, and developed slowly and steadily, sometimes imperceptibly at times, but over the years that I did it, and it wasn't an instantaneous thing. Like suddenly I had lots of competence. There was a use, I applied the practice in many different circumstances in my life. And he said, Oh, this made a difference here. This made a difference here, look at that. I could never figure it out how to solve this problem. But if I was mindful of it, we seem to find our way. Mindfulness, you know, you saw over and over again. So now I would say that maybe I shouldn't make two absolute statement. But I would say that in most circumstances, my confidence in the practice of attention in mindfulness is unshakable, I've complete I've such thorough confidence in the value of staying present and being mindful. And so what is your confidence in the practice? What is your confidence in yourself doing the practice? What is your confidence in the value of doing the practice? How does that work for you? Have you ever thought about it? How strong is your confidence? Is it is it available all the time? Or is it coming go in different circumstances? What situations are you in where your confidence gets challenged, you don't feel so confident? If there are situations where you don't feel confident with the practice? What would it take for you to cultivate and grow confidence in it would require doing in small steps practicing on the edges of what's challenging? Would it take getting more instructions and help have someone explain to you a little bit you know, how the practice can work in challenging situations?

So you get some guidance? Would it help if you failed more often? failure is one of the best ways to learn there's a little cliché, wisdom comes from experience and experience comes from failure. So to learn from our mistakes, learn how you know and learn you know, not give up not not to lose confidence but say okay, given that didn't work so well today. I'm going to try again tomorrow. That was one of the one of the other things I learned so much, being a cook in the monastery. One of the great things about being a cook in the monastery was that every meal you started over you kind of clean slate every day you got a clean slate, so it didn't matter how terrible the meal was before. You could have burned it or failed. It was awful. But the next day you got to try again. This idea I get to try again, I used to be excited, I get to try again. Rather than being weighed down by what happened yesterday, there in the monastery, at least I felt like fresh every day I woke up, oh, well, that was yesterday, but I get to try again. So his confidence, his willingness to try, show up, engage. So, confidence supports a strength in persistence. and persistence is an alternative translation for the second faculty, usually translated into English as effort. But persistence, the word is in Pali, is viriya. Which for better or worse, is a direct cognate, or a direct is the right word, but the way the Indo European languages work is cognate, to the English word, viral. And so, in, in Holly, it's more closely connected to the word being a Harry, a hero, heroes Veera. And so kind of, so we're not talking about just kind of like, oh, I'll make some effort here. The emphasis is something heroic or strong or courageous. And that becomes a strength. So some of you might feel daunted, or discouraged, that I'm referring to languages of strength

here today, so I'll never be strong. You know, it's just too much of a bar, you know, as to have too much to do. And I thought Buddhism was all about just accepting myself for who I am, and being kind and supportive and all that. But it turns out that the practice of acceptance and being kind also operates under the support of the five faculties, you can have confidence in the practice of acceptance, you have confidence in kindness, you can know how to make unshakable effort in it, you can know how to be mindful as you do that practice, you can have persisting and have concentration and doing it. And you can have wisdom, you need a lot of wisdom, if you're gonna practice acceptance, practice, otherwise, even naive practice is not so good. So and there can be strength in having those faculties support, whatever practice you're doing. So, it might seem daunting, but I am confident that every single one of you, with practice and time can become strong. And these in these capacities, they can be real strengths. And those strengths become a resource of support a refuge, those, those strength becomes something that helps you go through your life with much less unshakable it. You're necessarily not caught up in what goes on. And so it's I think, so a lot of I say to be I said it before, but I think it's so important to say it that some of the issues and difficulties and challenges we have in our life are benefited by the fact that we develop these strengths. So almost in some situations, we don't have to solve the problems that we're in. Because we have this strength to keep upright and strong in the midst of we're not shaken so much by it, we're elephants in situation, some flies don't have to be swatted away, which is not just a fly. If you're an elephant, every ant test, if you're an ant, every fly has to be gotten rid of. So it can become strong, there's a lot of things are not such a big deal. Maybe they have to be addressed and dealt with. But we don't feel so discouraged or lost or, you know, troubled by it.

So that's the theme for today is strength. And so what I'm planning to do is for the two other talks today, to continue on this theme, talking about the five strengths, and how they support us in the mindfulness practice. The five the usual way that these are translated into English in our scene is usually first one is called faith. But I'm pretty confident that the way that the Indian word is more appropriately translating to English more often is as confidence. There's no perfect English word to translate the word saddhā, but confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

Five capacities you already have. You don't have to import them. But maybe sometimes they are kind of not used. They're sitting there dormant waiting for you to develop them. So, thank you