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Stengthening our Inherent Traits

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The comprehensive understanding and diligent application of any spiritual path or tradition results in the awakening and strengthening of traits that all human beings already possess.

Teachings make us more mindful of what these traits are, and through the application of the teachings, these traits are strengthened.

This strengthening is a source of joy to oneself, so that we are less dependent on our desires, expectations and sensual experiences as a means to enjoy or get satisfaction from life.

We strengthen our inherent traits through a number of ways.

One of the most challenging and difficult ways is to recognize that others have the same traits.

In order to do this, we have to realize that we are not superior, or more intelligent or more enlightened than others.

We may have to work against some of our conditioned tendencies such as selfishness, and lack of understanding and compassion.

Frequently, I see among some individuals who embrace a new way, a tendency to still be critical or judgmental of others, those who are working a different path, or those who are not working any path at all.

This tendency to criticize or judge is a reflection of one's own lack of wisdom and mindfulness that still has to be cultivated.

The Buddha teaches that there is suffering in life, and we all experience it.

It may be subtle and internal, and may be overt and external.

The wealthy can suffer, the poor can suffer.

With this understanding, we start to see the fact that since all people suffer, all people desire happiness, and that all people are basically the same.

We all desire comfort, love, sex, recognition, acceptance, food, and time alone, among other things.

We all desire to have our needs met and be loved and accepted, unconditionally, as we are.

We all desire to maintain those material and mental states of mind that bring us a degree of satisfaction and fulfillment.

But all of these things, except for what are the basic necessities in life to keep us alive, are based on attachment, to be loved, to be noticed, to be respected.

They all have their place in a person's life experience and perhaps need to be accessed and experienced before moving onto to something else.

What are some of the inherent traits that we all have as human beings?

Faith, perseverance, concentration, mindfulness and wisdom.

These traits become dulled and sluggish, not something that is part of our being, because of our conditioning and our habits and behaviors, which are often rooted in our conditioning.

The man who habitually drinks himself to sleep each night in front of the television is not accessing and cultivating these states.

The man who needs drugs to get through the day is not accessing and cultivating these states.

The man who overeats, oversleeps, and shops for pleasure only is not accessing or cultivating these states.

Anyone who has addictions, large or small, that overwhelm his or her senses and he or she becomes obsessive about, is not accessing and cultivating these states.

But it does not mean that they are not there, shining through occasionally, and it does not mean that they can not be accessed, cultivated and maintained.

How to do it?

As mentioned above, a good starting point, but a difficult one, is to see that they are in all of us.

For many, this realization starts to come only when they have strengthened them within and they have become part of one's consciousness. Until then, they will continue to see themselves as being special and unique in their identity and behavior.

This is understandable, as when we make changes in our being, there are a lot of things to work through.

What else can be done?

A good starting point and a difficult one, is to be sober and clean, living a life free from drug use or alcohol.

For many, those who are addicted and ensnared by this habit, this can be an almost insurmountable obstacle to deal with.

They do not recognize this as being a problem because it makes them "relaxed" and "it feels good", thinking that feeling good through drugs or drink is a birthright.

If they do not perceive their drink or drug habit as interfering with their life responsibilities, they will not see the need for a change.

At the same time, they may not be mindful enough to see the mood changes, the energy swings or lack of energy, and the inability to concentrate or be mindful about many of the activities and experiences that they have during their waking hours.

They may have poor sleep habits or sleep disorders.

There may be other subtle psychological and physiological problems developing such as being impatient, getting angry easily, and being cynical and pessimistic about the life experience and other people.

Just to recognize this as a problem and make the effort to deal with it, requires mindfulness, discipline and effort.

Two things that I have noticed over the years in sharing these practices and disciplines with others stand out.

One is the amount of people who do realize that something is missing in their lives and are willing to make an effort to bring something into their lives that will give it more meaning.

The other, is the number of people who feel that they can continue to maintain a lifestyle that includes the usage, and some cases addictive and overindulgence use of drugs or alcohol, and still pursue a spiritual path and practice that will be fruitful.

In addition to the emphasis on sobriety and being clean, and freedom from the use of drugs, is the understanding of what we might term as skillful guidelines or boundaries to build the life experience around.

This can include concepts, behaviors and mental and physical actions such as non-violence, honesty, contentment, non-greed, and wholesome, gentle and nurturing speech, among others.

Though most can see the value and wisdom in these mental and physical actions, they are hard to implement if one is coming from a state where they have not been mindful of them or made any attempt to implement them.

So, after sobriety and freedom from drugs, where should one start?

Yoga suggests through that aspect of our being that is most pronounced and the determining factor in many of our mental states.

The body.

It is the body, in its desire to feel good, and be held and seduced and experience pleasure that fuels the fires, anxieties, apprehensions, conflicting emotions and feelings, and intentions behind many of our states of consciousness.

It is the body, in its gross aspects, its size, its accumulation of matter and energy, and how that matter and energy becomes stagnant, that needs to be worked on.

Hatha Yoga is an extremely effective way to lessen the imbalances in the body that manifest themselves as hindrances on the consciousness and its cultivation.

Its practice requires discipline and effort.

Its practice can be done alone or in a group.

Some of its postures can be done before lunch at work, during free time before dinner, and early in the morning.

What we need is to be aware of our bodies, and that we realize that we can take care of it simply by doing some of the postures on a daily basis.

With this kind of practice, we strengthen the body, lessen physical and mental tension in it, and release a new energy which is balanced and wholesome.

This affects the consciousness in positive ways, strengthening those traits within us, and leading to the maturation of other traits associated with them, these being compassion, equanimity and tranquility, among others.

This practice is a lifelong discipline, but it does get easier with practice and time.

With these traits within us strengthened, we can move onto other things, such as skillful action in our daily activities and meditation.

The starting point is to understand that these traits are within us all, and that we, as individuals can cultivate them.

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