

## *Balancing Effort & Patience*

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One of the most difficult balancing acts in the practice is to find a balance between effort and patience, because on the one hand we're exhorted to put forth the kind of effort that a person who knows that his head is on fire would have to put forth to put the fire out.

In other words, you can't be lazy; you can't be complacent. Greed comes in, and you can't say, "Well, it's okay this time." Because then the question is, well, when are you going to finally decide that it's not okay? It has to be not okay *now*.

But then there's the skillful patience that has to come into play when the greed won't just go right away. You have to work at it, and sometimes the techniques that work, that actually get rid of the greed, or the anger, or delusion, take time.

It's easy enough to give similes for this: Proper effort is like when you're growing a plant. On the one hand, you can't just let it fend for itself; you've got to water it, especially in a place like this where it doesn't rain for months at a time. You've got to water it, look after it; you can't just leave it on its own. But at the same time, you can't get impatient about its growing. In other words, you plant it today and can't want to have a tree tomorrow.

I like the story they tell in Thailand of planting rice and when, after a few days, it's only a few inches out of the ground. You know that it's got to be a couple feet tall before it's going to start giving rice, so you get impatient and pull it up to make it several feet tall. Of course, you can't stretch the plant that way. What happens is that the roots come out of the ground, and the plant will die.

So it's easy enough to give images for this that provide an explanation: You work on the causes, you stick with the causes, and you have to be patient about waiting for the results. But finding the proper balance in your actual practice as you're dealing with things as they come up in the mind: That's something you have to learn from your own experience, through trial and error, as to what works and what doesn't work. How much you can expect to clear delusion out of your mind, how much you can expect to clear distraction out of the mind at any given time is something you have to learn by trial and error.

Again, the causes have to be right in all-around sort of way. Remember that the path is a path with eight factors. We tend to forget that. We want to reduce everything to one simple,

little practice: just mindfulness, say, or just concentration, or just discernment, but it doesn't work that way.

If there were any optional or unnecessary factors in the path, the Buddha wouldn't have included them in the path to begin with. There would be no reason for him to include them. As six-factored path would be easier to teach than an eight-factored one. You have to assume that everything there in the path is there for a good reason.

You also have to assume that there's no shortcut around outside the path. Many times we like to figure things out beforehand. We think that maybe if we could just reason our way through the various riddles posed by the mind, that would avoid a lot of the drudgery. For example: Where is the line drawn between the mind and its objects? We'd like to figure it out beforehand. But there's no factor in the path called "right figuring-out-beforehand." There's right view, right resolve, but there's no "right figuring-out-beforehand."

So you look at what the path actually says. Right view starts out with conviction in the principle of karma: that the pleasure and the pain, the happiness and the sorrow you experience, depend on your actions. They come from your actions. Your actions are real. You're the one responsible for doing them, and they give results in line with the intention. That's how much you're asked to believe. Now notice, it's not just a belief system, it's a belief tool: something to work with.

From there you go on to right resolve. Realize that mental states involving sensuality, ill-will, or harmfulness are things you simply don't want. They're bad karma; they're unskillful actions. So you try to promote resolves that lead in the other direction: to renunciation, no ill-will for anyone, to harmlessness. Try to foster those resolves in your mind.

It's on top of that that the precepts are built. It's also on top of that that right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration the willed factors in the meditation can grow.

In other words, instead of trying to figure things out beforehand, you just look: Are there unskillful mental qualities in your mind right now? Pay attention to what's happening right now. When you see anything unskillful arising, you get rid of it, and you try to prevent it from arising again.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: to block these unskillful things from coming into the mind so that you give rise to skillful states in their stead, and then you try to maintain and develop them.

This starts with mindfulness and goes up through the other factors of awakening, which

basically are a recipe for doing concentration practice, getting the mind absorbed: still, alert, and thoroughly absorbed in your sense of full-body awareness. Those are things you can do. So you focus on what you *can* do.

From that point, right view takes on another level: seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, which are not particularly beliefs, but are categories for sorting out your experiences. Which experiences are suffering? Which experiences are the cause of suffering?

Usually we have these things all mixed up. Which things you do are the path? Which things you do are the cause of suffering? They're not just passive experiences, because experience involves intention.

There's a sutta where the Buddha says even in just your basic experience of form, feeling, perception, and the rest of the aggregates, there's an intentional element in all of them. So you've got to learn how to make those intentions skillful. You can do that only by watching what's going on, and experimenting with the way your mind is running. You might ask, "Who's in charge here? Who's giving the orders?" But those kinds of questions can cause all kinds of problems.

A better question is, "Exactly what intention is in charge of your mind right now, and is it skillful or unskillful?" That kind of question can take you someplace. So you have to be clear about the questions you ask yourself.

Try to ask questions in line with the four noble truths; learn how to sort out what's going on right now in those terms, and remember that each truth has a task. The first is to try to comprehend suffering, something that we don't usually try to comprehend. We try to run away from it or push it away. But learn how to watch it, comprehend it. See what else arises every time there's suffering in the mind, every time there's stress in the mind.

You can see this most clearly when the mind is most still. So you try to develop concentration and the other factors of the path. Then watch for suffering until you can see the cause that goes along with it, and then you can abandon the cause.

So there's very little figuring out beforehand, and a lot of effort put into seeing clearly as they're actually happening in the present moment: getting the mind still enough so that it can see clearly, and then learning how to ask the right questions. What happens, as a result, is that things open up in a way that couldn't happen if you tried to organize them or sketch them out beforehand. It's a process of discovery.

The Buddha gives us the tools for discovery: how to look, where to look, and what to do

with what you find. So we have to resist the tendency to want to get it all figured out beforehand, and instead just stick with the process.

This is one area in which patience is very important in the practice, realizing that if there were a quicker way, the Buddha would have taught it. If you could boil it down to just say, being nonreactive, or just being open, or any other of those one-word formulas you often hear, the Buddha would have done it. But it just doesn't work.

If the Buddha had the opportunity to boil it down to one thing, he would have. There'd be a lot less that he would have had to teach. But the truth of the matter is that the practice can't be simplified any more than the Buddha already has presented it. There are no shortcuts.

So you try to develop the mind. You water the qualities of concentration and mindfulness. You water whatever other skillful qualities you can find, and you weed out the unskillful ones. As you're persistent in this, the skillful qualities grow.

Sometimes they grow faster than you might expect, sometimes more slowly, but as long as you're looking after them properly, they'll take care of the rest.