Right Effort & Its Rewards

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One of the Thai terms for meditating is tam kwan phien, which means “to make an effort,” which may sound strange because many times we’re told not to put too much effort into the meditation, let things happen naturally. Sometimes we may even think that meditation is a passive process, just watching with choiceless awareness whatever comes and whatever goes. Choiceless awareness is simply another word for equanimity, which is one of the qualities we have to develop, but we have to work at developing it. It just doesn’t happen on its own. The effort has to be an appropriate effort because there are times, as we all know, when just throwing yourself too hard into the practice becomes one of the obstacles. The effort here is more of a fine-tuning, learning how to watch after the breath, watch after your mind, direct the mind in certain ways, direct it away from certain things, and keep watch over the qualities that are developing there in the mind. There are some that are going to be useful and some that are going to be harmful, some that are skillful and some that are not skillful. How do you know this? Well, you do it the same way the Buddha did. You look at what’s going on in your mind and you look at the results of your mental states. We chanted just now about the Four Noble Truths—suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to the end of suffering. It’s important to realize that it’s not so much forging, different truths, but four different ways of categorizing what’s going on in your mind. It’s basically a problem-solving approach. If things aren’t going the way you want, you look for the causes. Then you change the causes so that things go more in the direction you do want them to. It’s a very simple process. We do this every day, whether you’re cooking, whether you’re making something. Anything that involves a skill has to come down to this. If things aren’t going the way you want them to, you have to figure out, “Okay, what are the causes?” It requires some analysis, but it also requires some observation, watching what’s going on. Then you make adjustments. If the food is not sweet enough, you put a little more sugar in. If it’s not salty enough, you put a little more salt in. What tells you? Well, you develop your taste buds, which in other words is not that your taste buds develop, but you develop your sense of taste. Like when you’re playing the piano, learning how to listen to the music. It’s a skill that you have to develop. In addition to learning how to play the notes, you also have to learn to listen to yourself play the notes. The same holds true with the meditation. We focus on first separating things out into cause and effect. The causes right now are being mindful and being alert. You keep your meditation object in mind, and then you watch. First you watch your meditation object, like the breath. Watch it coming in. Watch it going out. Is it comfortable? Is it not? Does it feel appropriate for right now? Because sometimes what may feel nice, like a good long, deep, in-and-out breath, may not be actually what you need right now in case the mind is sleepy. You have to figure out what rhythm of breathing, what texture of breathing is right for the body and mind. So your attention is directed first at the breath, but after all you begin to get a sense of what kind of breathing is good for the mind as well. You develop this sense just by watching, trying to get a sense of which are the causes and which are the effects. Which effects are things that are really good for the practice? Because sometimes when things get a little bit too comfortable, you fall asleep. So what do you do then? It’s not the case that you want to make it less comfortable, but you realize that there’s more work to be done than simply finding a nice relaxing state. Once it’s comfortable, then you learn to use that sense of comfort as a foundation for the next step, which is to take that sense of comfort and let it spread throughout the body. Say you’ve got a nice, good rhythm going, and it feels good right around the chest area. Well, first you learn how to make that sense of comfort in the chest stay there by adjusting your breath to maintain that sensation. Once the sensation is there, then think about it spreading throughout the different parts of the body. You might go through the body step by step, as is described in the books. Up from the abdomen, up the front, down to the chest, up over the head, then down the back and at the legs. Or you might want to start at the back of the neck. Wherever you start is up to you, but you want to be able to systematically cover the whole body. Wherever there’s any sense of tension or tightness that seems to be related to the way you breathe, okay, let it relax and then move on to the next step and the next step. So you’ve got the whole body covered. Then you focus your attention in one spot and then think of that comfortable sensation spreading throughout the whole body as you let your awareness spread throughout the whole body at the same time. And then you try to maintain that state, both the sense of comfort and ease and the breadth of your awareness. So there’s work to be done. It’s not that we sit here and watch the breath and put ourselves to sleep. We just simply relax. You use the relaxation for the sake of getting the mind to settle down. This is what right effort means. Learning to use whatever is skillful. Having a sense of cause and effect and realizing, okay, once you get the effects from getting the breath comfortable, okay, that becomes the cause of the foundation for the next step. So the effort here is the fine-tuned effort. It’s not just passive watching or choiceless awareness. You do have some choices. You can breathe comfortably or you can breathe uncomfortably. Who would want to breathe uncomfortably when you have a choice? Once the breath is comfortable, okay, you have another choice. Let yourself fall asleep or keep breathing. Keep yourself alert and awake. And there are the various approaches for keeping yourself awake. And so on down the line. Realize that every step along the way you have a choice. Try to make good choices, which depends on your sense of cause and effect and on your sensitivity and judging effects. Seeing how they’re connected to the causes and making the proper adjustments. It was this kind of approach that made the Buddha realize the Four Noble Truths to begin with. Looking for skillful mental states or learning how to sort out skillful and unskillful mental states. Watching the results of both and then doing what he could to encourage the skillful ones and put aside the unskillful ones. And then he realized the essence of what he was doing. It’s all down to four things. There are unskillful causes that give painful results, and there are skillful causes that give pleasant results. That’s the framework for the Four Noble Truths. And then he just followed it to see how far it would go. Someone once said that the genius was taking one particular set of ideas and then just holding onto it like a dog holding onto something that’s biting, not willing to let go at all, just grabbing onto it and seeing how far it takes you. Most people grab onto an approach and then they just kind of drop it for something else and drop it for something else, and as a result never really follow things through. But the Buddha was the sort of person, once he’d found an approach that worked, he followed it to see how far it would go. He realized the importance of the states of his mind. That they really did have an impact on whether he was going to experience pleasure or experience pain. So he followed through on that insight. But if you really consciously focused on your states of mind, got a sense of what was skillful, what was unskillful, and were learning how to master the skillful ones, master the skill of encouraging the skillful ones, then you found that it brought him to a state of concentration, good solid concentration. Okay, what do you do with the concentration next? Again, you look at the skillful and unskillful uses of that concentration. You can just sit there and wallow in the comfort of the concentration, or you can use it as a basis for digging deeper into the mind. In other words, you take the results of your skillful states and you turn them into the path and see how much further you can take them. That was the essence of a lot of the Buddhist insights. They talk about how people and teachers in his time, before his awakening, had been able to master many of these states of concentration, but then they just stayed there. The Buddha realized that concentration itself could be made into a path. That’s the difference between people who finally reach a path and then lie down and sleep on that path, and those who get to the path and follow it to the end. So that’s what we’re working at here, trying to get more and more skillful with our minds, and then seeing how far that skill can take us. What we find in the end is that it takes us to places we couldn’t have imagined. Things open up in the mind in a way that you can’t have any preconceived notion for. But fortunately, you don’t have to have a preconceived notion for it. Just follow the basic approach, getting a sense of cause and effect in the mind, which causes are skillful, which ones are unskillful, and find skillful ways to encourage the skillful ones. In other words, the ones that bring a sense of ease, bring a sense of well-being. Then you take that sense of well-being and see what you do with that to get an even deeper sense of well-being, more and more solid. You strip away all the things that you find are inconstant, impermanent, stressful. Ultimately, you find something that’s not caused at all. You take the process of cause and effect beyond cause and effect. That’s when the effort ends. But until then, you try to apply all the qualities that are needed for skill. The desire to stick with it, persistence, paying attention, using your ingenuity to get the most out of the potentials that you have. That’s what’s here in the mind. Don’t have too many preconceived notions about what the word “most” can mean. It means an awful lot. But the people who follow this path all the way to the end say that whatever work is involved, whatever effort, whatever difficulties, they’re all more than compensated. When you finally arrive.

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