Right Effort

August, 2002

One of the Thai idioms for meditating is “to make an effort.” The words are “tham kvam bhin.” And it’s a side of the meditation we don’t like. We’d rather things that would be effortless. We like to be told that you’ll get a sense that everything just kind of goes with the flow, and you ride with the flow, and it’ll just take you right on to awakening. And it would be nice if it were that way. But if it were that way, everybody would be there already. So we have to look at the effort we’re making here. Because it’s not just brute force that we’re putting in. The Buddha calls it “right effort.” And he talks about the qualities that go into right effort. You have to activate desire, stick with persistence, and uphold your intent. Those are the words he uses. It’s the motivation you give to yourself, the application of the energy. That’s what you start out with. And the desire has to be there. Here the desire is based on conviction. You haven’t seen awakening yet, but you’re convinced that it’s possible. And the conviction here is both in the fact of the possibility of awakening and conviction in your own powers, in your own actions, because it’s through your own actions that you can gain awakening. You have to be convinced of that. Otherwise, you just sort of sit here and wait for it to come to you. But you realize, okay, you’ve got to put something into the process. And you have to desire freedom from suffering. You ask yourself, “Do you really want to be free from suffering?” You think the answer would be an automatic yes, but very few people really answer that way. They say, “Well, I want something else first. I want this first. I want that first.” Then we can think about freedom from suffering. So you have to look at your motivation. What in your motivation is still lacking? This is what it means by activating your desire. Just looking at the suffering that you’re going through now, what you’ve been through in the past, and what you’re going to go through in the future, if you don’t really apply yourself right now. The effort you put into the present moment is much less than the effort that’s going to be called on when you have to face great suffering without the skills that come with meditation. So it’s a good trade, even though the results may seem to come slowly. When they do come slowly, you have to add just that much more in the element of your conviction, reminding yourself of why you’re doing the practice, how the practice is important, and so on. If you don’t want to think all the way to awakening yet, well, think about just the need you have for better mental skills. You can probably think of lots of good examples of where you’ve caused yourself unnecessary suffering, if only you’d been a little bit more attentive, a little bit more mindful, a little bit more observant. Where do those qualities come from? They come from exercise. And although your powers of mindfulness right now may seem meager, where are you going to get more mindfulness unless you exercise the mindfulness you have? So you start where you are. It’s like when you want to be stronger. You start out with a weak body you’ve got, and you exercise it to make it strong. You don’t have to find some other body someplace to make strong. It’s the one you’ve got, and you just put it to use. So you realize that by exercising the good qualities you have right now, the payoff will come for sure. At the very least, you’re not causing any unnecessary suffering for yourself right now, and the payoff will grow. If it’s incremental or fast, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re heading in the right direction. This is just an example of how you might give yourself a pep talk. And then there’s the element of application. You really persist in what you’re doing. Just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, realizing that as you keep at it, the momentum builds up. If your practice goes in fits and starts, the momentum isn’t there, and you begin to want to inhibit practicing all this time. Don’t measure your meditation in terms of time. Measure it in terms of consistency. How long have you been meditating? Have you been consistently mindful? And you might say, “Well, it hasn’t been all that much.” Okay, work on the consistency, because that’s where the power comes. And finally, there’s the element of intentness, which means that you keep trying to be as observant as possible. Because it’s using your powers of observation that bring you to the rest of how the Buddha defines right effort. There’s the effort to give rise to something, the skillful qualities that haven’t arisen yet. Excuse me, let’s start off with the unskillful. The effort to get rid of any unskillful qualities that are there. The effort to, once you’ve gotten rid of them, the effort to prevent them from arising again. And then on the positive side, give rise to skillful qualities that aren’t there, and then once they are there, the effort to maintain them and develop them. And notice the emphasis here on skill. Again, it’s not just brute effort. It’s a skillful effort, which requires discernment. That’s where your powers of observation are so important. Watching what’s going on in the mind to see what kind of effort is appropriate right now. Because there are some negative things in the mind. All you have to do is watch them, and they go away. In other words, if you don’t participate, if you just play the role of the observer, there’s nothing to keep those unskillful states going, and they run out. Other states of mind, though, require an active approach, taking them apart, analyzing them, coming to an understanding before they’ll go away. Because there’s a part of the mind that, even if you’re sitting there trying to play the observer that likes to get attached to certain things, you still fall for certain things, and you want to understand why. Why is it that when certain kinds of anger come, you just can’t help but get involved? What’s the payoff? What cheap thrills do you get out of your anger? This applies for greed, anger, delusion, fear, lust—all the unskillful things that happen in the mind. There’s got to be some sort of immediate payoff, or you wouldn’t bother with these things. So look for it and see exactly how worthwhile it is. Many times you see it’s a pretty miserable little bit of pleasure you get out of these things. Then try to use your imagination to think of other ways of reacting to a particular situation. Oftentimes we react to situations in habitual ways because we can’t think of any other way of doing it. These pathways are well-worn in the mind. So keep following over the old ways over and over again. They talk about deer in the forest in the winter, when the snow gets really deep. If they’ve happened to follow a certain path as the snow was falling, then they keep staying on that same path, just around and around and around the forest. And if snow gets really deep that year, and if it takes a long time for it to melt, what often happens is that they’ve stripped all the bark off the trees near the path. And if there’s no more bark near the path, they just keep following that same path again and again and again, and they die from starvation, even though there’s plenty of bark in the rest of the forest. The implications here for the mind are obvious. We tend to follow certain pathways just over and over and over again, even though there’s a lot of other good pasture for the mind. But we get stuck in our old ways. We can’t imagine any other way of doing it. So this is where the element of imagination comes into the path. We often don’t think about it as a property you use in meditation, but it’s necessary. It’s not just sitting there imagining other things. It’s imagination used as part of developing a skill, thinking of alternative approaches. You notice this with the breath. Sometimes all you have to do is just sit there and watch the breath, and it’ll come down. You just ask yourself, “What’s the most relaxed way of breathing?” And the body will immediately switch into that mode. Sometimes the emphasis is more on finding a center where the breath feels good, and just staying right at that center and thinking, “Okay, wherever it’s going to spread, it’s going to spread from here. I don’t have to work through the body. Just let it spread from this one spot. I’m going to stay right here.” That’s one way of doing it. Other times you have to work through the body. Scan the body from the top of the head down to the feet, or beginning at the navel up, the front of the body down, the back of the body down, the feet down, the shoulders and arms. Working through it systematically. Trying to untie all the knots, open up the channels. The emphasis is different, but the goal is to maximize what’s positive, first starting with the breath so you get used to that, and then working with the mind. You maximize the positive either through really working at developing what’s positive in the mind, or working at getting rid of what’s negative. Both approaches work. Sometimes it’s just a question of looking to see what’s appropriate for any particular state of mind. Do your best to try to be coming from a position of strength. Oftentimes we’re just going to wear ourselves out. Again, the word “effort” starts to sound kind of wearing. Ask yourself, “Okay, where is my strength right now?” At the very least, the strength can be found where the breath is comfortable, where it feels good. Well, hang around there for a while. Learn how to stock up on whatever energy is available and maximize that. Your level of energy is going to determine how the rest of the other factors in your practice go. There’s that famous story of the monk who was trying too hard. He had a very delicately brought up person. They talk about how he even had hair on the bottom of his feet. He was so delicate. Here he was out doing walking meditation on the rough ground, and his feet were bleeding all over the place. He was getting ready to give up. The Buddha came to him and said, “Remember when you were a layperson and used to play the lute? There was one string that you would tune first, and then you would tune all the other strings to that string, and then you could play.” He said, “It’s the same with your meditation. Pick up on what level of energy is appropriate right now, and then tune the rest of your practice to that. What level of energy you can handle.” That doesn’t mean just putting up with whatever you’ve got. It means that you look at where the sources of your energy are, and you try to maximize those as much as you can. Then you tune the rest of your practice to that. So as we’re staying with the breath, try to think of it as a mainspring for the energy that you’re going to be working with. If you breathe in a way that’s wearing to the body, then the effort itself is going to start to get wearing, too. So try to breathe in a way that’s nourishing, that gives energy to you. They talk about feeding on rapture. This is basically the food for meditators, that sense of fullness that comes when you’re breathing in a way that feels good for the body. This sense of just-rightness sets in. And it really is nourishing. You can sit for much longer periods of time than you could otherwise. So when the practice gets dry, just ask yourself, “Okay, where is there a sense of fullness? Where is there a sense of refreshment here?” Because that’s what you’ve got to build on. That’s where the energy for the rest of your meditation has to come from. So whatever thoughts, whatever ways of breathing give you energy, maximize those. And then you’ll find that all the other elements of right effort will gain energy from that. As I mentioned the other day, this is one of the reasons we have the chant for goodwill before each session, to give ourselves the kind of energy that comes from thinking thoughts of goodwill and compassion and pathetic joy. The energy that comes from equanimity, when you realize, “Okay, there’s only so much that you can handle, so let go of the things that are beyond your control. Don’t waste energy there.” Focus your energy on the places where you can make a difference. All of these thoughts are useful in helping to maximize the energy you have in your practice. So when you’re making an effort, it’s not an effort that wears you out. It’s an effort that nourishes you, pays you back more than you put in.

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