Right Effort

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One of the Thai idioms for meditating is, literally, “making an effort.” “Kam kwam pien.” And oftentimes here in the West, we don’t like the idea of effort in meditation. In fact, there’s a verb, they’ve turned it into a verb, “efforting” is a bad thing. What that’s referring to is, “unskillful effort,” where you throw a lot of energy and not a lot of discernment into what you’re doing. When you look at the definition of right effort, it has to include discernment as well. The discernment of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, what qualities in the mind lead to happiness and pleasure, and which ones lead to suffering and pain. Not only that, but skillful and unskillful ways of dealing with these qualities can help you get rid of anger in very unskillful ways, and you can try to give rise to concentration in unskillful ways. So it’s the way you approach what’s going on in your mind that’s really important. And this is where the effort is very important. Once you can start making that distinction, you have a clearer and clearer idea of exactly what this effort means. When we start out in the practice, the distinction is not all that clear. We have to learn from practice. For some of us it comes easily, and for a lot of us it doesn’t come easily. In a country where our educational system tends to channel us into areas where we’re already talented, we don’t have much practice in developing skills in areas where we’re not already talented, where we have to put in effort. We have to learn from our mistakes, and sometimes make some pretty big mistakes, and learn how to read our mistakes as well. Our tendency is, when we make a mistake in one direction, to go 180 degrees in the other direction, from one extreme to the other. We have to keep remembering that the Buddhist path is a middle path. The lessons that we learn in the meditation can’t be one-sided lessons. There are gradations in the amount of effort, gradations in the amount of stillness, gradations in the amount of active analysis that you have to do in order to figure things out. There are no easy, soundbite instructions for how to master this practice, how to master this skill. It has to come with trial and effort. We have to learn how to read our mistakes. When you make a mistake, say, in putting too much physical energy in, how do you step back so you don’t make the mistake of putting no energy in whatsoever? It would be a good thing if we could give you some practical advice on that, but the only practical advice is this warning that you shouldn’t swing from one extreme to the other. You have to find a middle ground. Also, realize that the middle ground is not always the same in all situations. Some issues in the mind require a lot of energy, a lot of time, sitting for long periods of time and really doing your best to keep as alert as possible and not let the slightest bit of distraction seep in. Other times the effort doesn’t have to be so great. It’s a lot more subtle. The Buddha talks about the effort in two ways. One is active fabrication, he calls it, when you’re really actively analyzing what’s going on, trying to figure out what’s happening. Say you’re settling down with a breath and it’s just not willing to settle down. So you have to step back and analyze what’s happening. You have to look for a while and get a sense of what the signs in the body or the signs in the mind might be that tell you whether it’s a lack of energy or simply breathing in an uncomfortable way or focusing the mind in the wrong way. Where there are issues left over from the day that are getting in the way, making you lead towards anger or lead towards laziness or whatever. You have to read the signs and then actively do something to counteract the imbalance. There are various ways of thinking that are actually meditation topics. Recollection of the Buddha, recollection of death, recollection of the unattractiveness of the body, metta meditation, that are good for specific imbalances in the mind. If you find you’re getting lazy, think about death for a while, realizing it could come at any time. And you’ve got all this unfinished business inside the mind. What are you going to do? Well, you can’t be lazy. You’ve got to put some effort in. If you find that you’re getting discouraged and seem to run into a block, you can think about the Sangha. In other words, think about all the Buddha’s noble disciples who went through lots and lots of problems in order to reach awakening, but they were able to do it. They were human beings. You’re a human being. They could do it. You can. Give yourself encouragement. And if you think in these ways long enough, you find that you can bring the mind back to concentration or bring the mind up to a state where it’s ready for concentration. Then you can settle down with the breath and you find it goes a lot more easily. Other times, the Buddha recommends not so much an active analysis, but just simply watching. Because there are some unskillful qualities in the mind that don’t require a lot of analysis or a lot of work. You simply watch and they go away. When the mind settles down, you don’t have to do a lot of continual active work on it. You just simply watch it once it’s settled down. It’s a different kind of effort. Bringing the mind to concentration and then keeping it there are two different processes. The right effort can range anything from a very active effort to simply watching as consistently as possible. Again, there are no hard and fast rules about which technique applies at which time. You simply have to learn from experience. But it’s good to know that there are these range of approaches so you don’t just get stuck in one approach. Or one level of effort. The middle way doesn’t mean that you put in a mediocre effort. It means that you put in an effort that’s appropriate for the situation. And its appropriateness can be learned only through trial and error. Nobody likes to make an error. Many times our initial reaction is to cover it up and pretend that it didn’t happen. Well, that’s precisely the quality that we’ve got to get rid of, that we’ve got to learn how to outgrow. We’re not little children. We have to be mature enough to see our errors and also to read them. We have to read in our mistakes where we went wrong so we can turn around and do it right the next time. So when you think about right effort or the middle way, don’t think about simply a middling effort. It’s an effort that’s just right. Appropriate for the circumstances. And you have lots of different approaches. Or you should be developing lots of different approaches in your meditation to deal with whatever comes up.

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