Making an Effort

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Practicing the Dhamma takes effort. There’s a phrase in the Pali, vridyena dukkham aceti, which means “suffering and stress are overcome through effort, through persistence.” Sometimes the idea scares us off. But you have to remember, life itself requires effort. Think of the effort involved in simply keeping the body going, making a living. Scrounging around, trying to find some happiness. It all takes effort. It’s simply that some forms of effort are things we’re more used to. They’re more habitual, so they seem easier. When you train the mind, though, to be still for a while and then look at the effort that goes into ordinary, everyday pleasures, you see there’s an awful lot, and the rewards are pretty slim. The kind of happiness that comes through ordinary effort in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. There’s effort in all of these things. The basic building blocks of our experience, the five aggregates, require fabrication. Even before we sense things, there’s an effort element of fabrication that goes on in the mind. If the mind weren’t active, if it weren’t putting effort into this, it wouldn’t be able to see, hear, smell, taste, touch anything at all. And then all the effort that goes into appreciating these things, sometimes requiring the mind to twist itself into all kinds of somersaults. Years back, when I first came back to the States, Jon Swat and I flew to the Abbott’s Meeting in Fort Worth. On the way back, we were sitting next to this man in the plane who told us a little of his life story. He had a son who was in jail after having been framed by his friends. He had a daughter who had hooked up with a drunk junkie someplace. She herself had gotten hooked on drugs, had a kid, and then came back and left the kid with her parents and then disappeared who knows where. He kept insisting, though, that it was all worth it, that life was really basically good deep down inside. And you could see his mind twisting itself into all sorts of contortions, just to keep going. And in the end, what do you have left? A life like that. After all, the effort becomes just too much for the mind to maintain. I knew a monk who, one night, started recollecting past lives, ten all together in the course of one night. And his memory of the end of each life was just how hard it was, how much effort had to go into it, and just nothing to show for it. All those pleasures of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas you’ve had in the past, where are they now? Gone, as if they’d never happened. And yet the mind is still clamoring after those things in order to find some little sip of happiness, a little bit of happiness, just not too much, just enough to keep you going. And yet the effort that goes into it is really, many times, just goes totally to waste. So since there has to be effort, effort one way or another, it makes sense to apply effort to putting an end to suffering. The mind sometimes rebels, largely because it goes against old habits. Restraint, for example. The eye wants to look, the ear wants to hear. Actually, the eye and the ear don’t have any desires at all, but the mind wants to use them to look and to listen to that, this, that, and the other thing. And it feels hemmed in when we start talking about restraint. And yet the effort that goes into looking and listening here and there to get a little snatch of happiness, usually there’s nothing much to show for it. The potential for true happiness is right here, staying focused on the breath. And once you get skilled at it, you realize it’s much easier. It takes much less effort, much less frantic energy. And the result is more lasting. You’ve got a skill inside that you can depend on. And the normal skills we have in terms of looking at this thing in such a way to find it interesting, looking at that in such a way to find it attractive, it really takes an effort to look at the body and make it seem attractive. And yet we do it without thinking because we’ve done it so much. And then it seems like a real effort to look at the unattractive side. Actually, it takes a lot less effort because it’s right there showing itself all the time. The effort lies in breaking an old habit and seeing the sense of well-being that comes from restraint or from counteracting our greed, anger, and delusion, our lust, and our aversion. That the well-being that comes from counteracting these things is much more lasting, goes much deeper. Many times you hear people say that the Buddhist analysis is that we’re always looking for happiness in something that’s constant. We get disappointed because things are not constant. Most people could care less whether their happiness is constant, as long as they feel that it’s worth whatever effort that goes into it. That’s the attitude. And it’s learning to see that it’s not worth the effort. Our perception of things, our appreciation of things, that we try to milk a little bit of happiness or a little bit of a moment of beauty, a moment of satisfaction, out of these things, the effort that goes into that is tremendous. And then many times what’s left is nothing. Sometimes it’s worse than nothing because we had to do things we don’t particularly admire in ourselves in order to snatch that little bit of happiness. So it’s learning to see that it’s not really worth it. It’s worth it only as long as you don’t think that there’s any alternative. But there is the alternative, looking inside, developing this skill, simply breathing in such a way that it feels really gratifying. It allows every cell in the body to get bathed in a sense of saturated energy, good energy, and then allowing yourself to sit with that for a while so that it nourishes the body, nourishes the mind. And learning to protect that through restraint of the senses, restraint of our thoughts. Restraint in some cases means simply not looking at just a lot of distractions. And if you focus on something that excites greed, anger, delusion, you learn how to counteract it. Look at the other side. If something excites lust, look at the side that would put a damper on lust. If things excite anger, look on the other side. The side that makes you realize that the anger isn’t really worth it. Make an effort here and it’s effort well spent. Because the effort that’s involved in swimming around and this wandering on that we’re constantly doing, there’s no end to it. You’re making an effort to get a little bit of rest and it gets destroyed. You keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. There’s no end to it. But the effort that’s put into putting an end to suffering and stress, that does finally reach an end, a sense of well-being that’s totally effortless, that can’t be shaken by anything at all. So when the effort of the practice seems onerous, just remember that the effort of the wandering on is a lot worse, a lot more wearisome, a lot more heartbreaking. Sometimes the amount of effort that people put into their lives is so great and the results are so small, they go insane. Whereas the effort that the Buddha has us put into the practice, it leads only to good, solid, healthy states of mind. So as long as we have to put effort into life, let’s put it into activities that really do show results, results that are really gratifying, results that are really lasting, results that are more than worth the effort. Keep things in perspective.

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