Right Effort

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Right effort is an important part of the path. It’s so important that at one point the Buddha actually said it’s through effort that suffering is overcome. But it’s not just brute effort. Right effort involves a lot of qualities of mind. The definition is that you generate desire or ask persistence and uphold your intent for preventing unskillful mental qualities from arising, for banning ones that have arisen, for giving rise to skillful qualities that haven’t arisen yet and, once they have arisen, maintaining them, developing them, bringing them to their culmination. It requires a lot of balance. It starts out with desire, persistence, and intent. These are in other places called bases for success. The desire has to be balanced, as does the persistence and the intent. If your desire is too sluggish or if it’s focused in the wrong place, it can actually get in the way. If it’s too overactive, it can also get in the way. This is why discernment is an important part of right effort. As a meditator, you have to learn to be your own teacher. It’s like being the teacher and the student at the same time, or being the doctor and the patient at the same time. The Dhamma gives you recommendations as to what medicine might work, but you have to figure out which Dhamma lesson is the right medicine for you and you have to figure out what dosage to take it in. That means you have to be very observant, checking on what’s working and what’s not. This is how discernment is developed. I once had a student who wanted to be told precisely what to do, and when he was told, “Well, try this and see what happens,” he got very upset. He wanted to be given a path of practice he didn’t have to think about. Just focus on doing what he was told and the results would be guaranteed. That’s not how it works. If you want to develop discernment, you have to learn how to observe cause and effect in your mind. It’s right here at the element of right effort. A lot of discernment is developed when recognizing the qualities of the mind to see whether they’re skillful or not. Some qualities are always skillful. Mindfulness and alertness are always skillful. When the mind is sluggish, you don’t want to pour on lots and lots of serenity, concentration, and equanimity, even though these can be factors for awakening. The image is of a fire that’s about to go out. You want the fire to burn, but then you pour lots of ashes and dirt on top of it. It just puts the fire out. A lot of times, when the fire is too strong, you just put lots of effort into it and lots of analysis. In other words, you get the mind really wired. It’s like putting more and more fuel in a fire that you’d like to have calm down. So even with skillful qualities, there are times when they get out of balance and they become unskillful. So you have to be very observant. How do you know these things? Well, you learn over time. This is an important part of the meditation. You learn from trial and error, getting to know your own mind, getting to read your own mind. There are times when pushing yourself into the practice is precisely what you need. Other times, you may push yourself so hard that the mind reacts. It doesn’t want to sit and meditate anymore. It’s a basic rule of thumb. It’s always wise to err on the side of pushing yourself a little bit harder than you might like to go, because it’s so easy for the lazy voices in your mind to come up with lots of good reasons to cut short your meditation, so that the mind isn’t settling down and says, “See, today’s not a good day to meditate.” It’s the days when the mind is not settling down. Those are the best days to meditate. You can try out different approaches. If the mind is way too active, what can you think of that’s going to calm it down? You might try different ways of breathing. You might try checking out exactly what is this activity. Which direction is it going? Is it going in the side of lust, in the side of anger, in the side of doubt and uncertainty? Once you can identify and get a sense of what it is, you’ve learned an important lesson about your mind right there. Then the next question is, what’s a good antidote for it? A lot of the meditation topics are antidotes, like the chat on the parts of the body just now. That’s good for lust. Some people complain about it, saying that it teaches a negative body image. Many of us living in this modern world, with all the advertising of beautiful and perfect bodies all around us, tend to suffer from negative body image. But that’s unhealthy negative body image. The idea of being out there, there’s somebody out there that’s got a really perfect body and there’s something wrong with yours. A healthy negative body image is when you realize everybody has the same parts, no matter who, no matter where. We’re all equal in this way. The body for which you feel lust is made up of just these things, just like you are. It’s a great equalizer. When there’s doubt, you can remind yourself, at least you know the breath is coming in, you know the breath is going out. You can take that as your beachhead. Many of our concepts are really, really uncertain. Sometimes it’s a scary thing to think about how many decisions you’ve based your life on that are based on concepts that really are kind of shaky. When you focus on the breath, you know the breath is coming in, you know it’s going out, you know when the mind is with the breath, you know when the mind is not with the breath. You develop a quality of your own truthfulness here. You say, “Well, if nothing else, I’m going to stay right here.” Then you stick with that. You say, “We overcome uncertainty not by learning about the truth, but by being true.” Make this experiment here. See what happens when you really stick with the breath and then maintain that intention, not deviating from it, not straying away. Instead of being really clear about what you’re doing, being really determined about what you’re doing, that’s when you start learning true things. Truth is not so much a quality of truthfulness or a quality of ideas. It’s a quality of the mind. It’s a quality of the character. When you’re feeling ill will, there’s meditation on good will as an antidote. Although sometimes it’s hard to replace ill will with good will. But you can remind yourself that if you let yourself get burned up by ill will, you’re going to do and say and think a lot of things that are not even in your own best interest and are much less helpful than anybody else. So start out there. Have some good will for yourself. There’s even a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says, “Remind yourself that if you act on anger, you end up doing things that are going to please your enemy.” If your mind is in a state where it has trouble feeling good will for anybody at all, just remind yourself, “I don’t want to please my enemy.” Otherwise, when you act on anger, you destroy your friendships, you destroy your reputation, and many times you destroy your own personal belongings. So if nothing else, start from that point and then move on to good will for yourself and then finally good will for the other person. There’s an interesting passage where the Buddha has you contemplate that when you see that someone else has, say, good in their actions to you but bad in their words or vice versa, think of yourself as a person who’s coming across the desert, trembling with thirst, and you find a pool of water. The pool of water is covered with slime and scum and other stuff, but it’s water. So you go down and you part the scum and the slime, and you drink the clear water that’s left behind. What’s interesting about this is, on the one hand, there is some good to that person. It’s the water. But also, you’re trembling and thirsty and hot. We need the goodness of other people for our own well-being. Think about that for a while. If we focus just on how bad other people are all the time, it dries us up. If we learn how to focus on the fact that they have some goodness to them, well, you can begin to nourish your own mind, your own goodness, and then work from there. So we learn to read the mind and then see which way it’s going off balance, bringing it back into balance with the different techniques. As for the amount of energy you have to put into this, it really depends on your ability to read your mind again in a different way. What are you capable of? How far can you push the envelope before it starts pushing back too hard? There’s going to be some resistance, no matter what. So try pushing. Learn to recognize the signs of burnout. Also learn to recognize the state of the mind, exactly how much energy it really needs at any particular time. Sometimes, just to prevent unskillful mental qualities from rising, all you need is just to be very watchful. You don’t have to do anything much, just be steady in your gaze. John Lee has the image of sunlight. If you expose certain seeds to the sunlight, the sun doesn’t have to do anything. It’s just ordinarily bright as it is, but the seeds just burn up. Other times, you have to focus the sunlight to burn up the seeds. Take a magnifying glass and raise the heat a little bit. Other times, you have to take the seeds apart. One of the most fruitful connections in the Buddhist analysis of causality, the causality of suffering, is the connection between ignorance and what he calls fabrication. Fabrication here can mean anything, but it’s very useful to apply it to emotions that arise in the mind. There are five factors for it. On the one hand, there’s your breath. Then there’s directed thought and evaluation. That’s the comments and questions the mind makes on whatever’s happening. Then there are feelings of pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Then there are perceptions, the labels you apply to things. When you find an unskillful emotion arising, sometimes you have to take it apart in those terms. In other words, simply looking at it or putting a magnifying glass next to it is not going to burn it away. You’ve really got to get out your dissecting equipment. One way of testing it is to say, “What happens if you change the way you breathe? What if I try to perceive the situation from another angle? How about if I change the questions I ask about it?” In other words, you analyze the state. Just the ability to think of yourself as getting outside of the state so you can analyze it, that’s a major step right there. All too often, we’re in our thoughts. It’s like being in a bubble. It’s been colored by a dye. You’re in the thought, and the bubble is red, and so everything looks red or everything looks green or whatever. You have to get outside to realize, “Oh, it’s just the bubble that’s red or green or whatever.” The Buddha once said that that was how he began to get on the right path. The very first step was his ability to step outside of his thoughts and just look at them in terms of cause and effect—where they were coming from, where they were going—and label them as skillful or unskillful, harmful or harmless. Not so much in terms of their content, but more importantly, in terms of what they lead to, where they take the mind. Right effort is not just a matter of how much effort you put into it, but how much discernment you need to apply to any particular situation. Then you try to apply whatever is necessary. Sometimes it takes a lot. Sometimes hardly any effort is needed at all. This is what’s right about right effort. It’s right for the particular problem that’s arising. Some people think that right effort means sort of halfway between laziness and overexertion. So everything becomes a middling effort. Sometimes that’s in life. If there were a little fire, say there’s a little tiny pile of brush out in the middle of the parking lot here, just a few pieces of paper, and it was on fire, all you’d have to do is look at it and make sure that it didn’t get blown off by the wind someplace else. You wouldn’t have to do anything else. Eventually the fire would go out. Other times it may be a brush fire approaching from the east. We have to do everything we can. It requires a lot of effort, a lot of adrenaline, even to fight off the fire to get to safety. So learn how to read your mind so you can know exactly what kind of fire is burning inside, the little fires that will go out on their own if you are just very careful to watch them and not add any more fuel, or the really big ones that require all your energy. Then learn to apply whatever effort is required. This is why right effort comes after right view in the path. You have to have some understanding of what’s going on. It’s through your application of effort and your ability to read the results that your discernment gets developed. So you can’t really separate these two faculties. They have to work together. But when they do work together, they can move mountains, a huge mountain of suffering on your heart, a huge mountain of ignorance that blinds your eyes and obstructs your gaze. You really can be moved when you learn how to read things in the mind.

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