AB Skillful Effort

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One of the Thai terms for meditating literally means “making an effort,” tham kvampiyen. And I’ve noticed that when I mention this here in the West, sometimes I get some raised eyebrows. This is a very common line of thought that some people say there are two ways of approaching the practice. One is trying very hard, exerting an effort, and being miserable with all your thoughts focused on the future. And the other is relaxing into the present, into the Dharma that’s already here. Now, if those were the only two choices, it’s obvious which is the wiser choice. Everyone likes the idea of relaxing. This seems to be built into American culture. I was reading a biography of William James recently, and it turns out that there was a movement during his time which he called the “Gospel of Relaxation.” There was a woman, I’ve forgotten who her name was, who wrote a book on the topic of what she called “Repose,” stating that American culture is much too tense. What everyone needs to do is to learn how to relax. How to relax systematically all the muscles in your body that you’re not using. And just try to maintain that sense of relaxation as you go throughout the day. That was the 19th century. Things haven’t changed. But you probably noticed, it’s the 19th century, things haven’t changed. People are relaxing and they’re still miserable. Which goes to show there are actually four choices. You can relax and be happy. You can make an effort and be miserable. You can relax and be miserable. And you can make an effort and be happy. So tonight I’d like to focus on that fourth alternative, how to find joy in effort. As the Buddha himself says, there are two kinds of causes of suffering. The ones that will go away simply if you watch them with equanimity. And there are those that go away only when you exert a fabrication or a sankara against them. And that phrase, “exerting a sankara,” sounds kind of strange, but it’s actually pointing us to where some very useful tools are. In the Buddhist analysis of the causes of suffering, sankara or fabrication comes right after ignorance. We tend to fabricate, we tend to create intentions out of ignorance, and that’s why we suffer. But if we learn how to do those fabrications with knowledge, that leads to the end of suffering. These are our tools. So what are the tools? There are three altogether. There’s bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the breath. Verbal fabrication is direct thought and evaluation. And mental fabrication is feeling and perception. These are our tools for overcoming the causes for suffering. And the question, of course, is whether we use them ignorantly or use them with knowledge. It’s not simply book knowledge. It’s the knowledge that comes from actually doing. It’s the kind of knowledge that comes from developing a skill. This is why it’s useful when you meditate to reflect back on the skills that you’ve mastered in the past. Things that you’ve enjoyed doing, that you’ve learned how to do well, and that you’ve enjoyed the process of learning how to do well. Whether it’s cooking, or carpentry, or a sport, or music. If you’ve learned how to do it well, you’ve mastered a lot of the skills you’re going to need as a meditator. One is you have to deal with desire in a skillful way. Again, we often hear that desire is the bad guy in the Buddhist teachings. But when the Buddha talked about the causes of suffering, he only mentioned three kinds of desire. Sensual desire, desire for becoming, and desire for non-becoming. Becoming means wanting to take on a particular state. And non-becoming means wanting to annihilate the state that you’ve got. But there are lots of other kinds of desire. In particular, the Buddha has you, instead of focusing on wanting to be an enlightened person or to annihilate yourself, just get yourself out of the picture for the time being. Simply look at where there’s stress, where there’s a cause of stress, and what you can do to put an end to that stress. The desires focused around that are actually skillful desires, especially when you’re focused on the causes. If you spend all your time focusing your desires on what you want to gain out of the meditation without paying attention to the causes, it’s like driving down a road toward a mountain. If you spend all your time looking at the mountain on the horizon and forget to look at the road, you’re going to drive off the road, you’re going to run into people. You never get to the mountain that way. But if you focus on the road, and every now and then make sure you check in your rearview mirror to see the mountain is not in the rearview mirror, you’re going to get to the mountain. That’s how you use desire in the practice. Without that desire, you’re never going to get anywhere. Then there’s persistence, the ability just to stick with something over time. Intent, your ability to focus lots of attention on what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. And finally, there’s a quality in Pali called vimamsa. It translates as analysis, discrimination, the ability to notice what’s working and what’s not working, and also the ingenuity to come up with new ideas about what might work when you find yourself banging your head against a wall. These are the qualities that help, that are necessary for developing a skill. You want to bring them to the practice. Particularly this element of desire. As John Foong often used to say, when you meditate, he said, “Play with the breath.” And when he said play, it’s not playing around in a desultory way. It’s just the way, say, Michael Jordan would play basketball. In other words, you keep doing it, keep trying to figure out new ways of tackling problems, but at the same time enjoying what you’re doing. Make a game out of it. This relates particularly to that first kind of fabrication, the breath. You can use the breath in lots of ways to deal with the causes of suffering. If you know that breathing in ignorance leads to suffering, well try to breathe with some knowledge. Notice what you’re doing as you breathe. Where does the sensation of the breath come in? Where does it go out? What kind of breathing feels good? What kind of breathing maintains a sense of good energy in the body? What kind of breathing wastes away the energy in the body? Have you ever stopped to notice? If you pay attention here, you’ll begin to see that there are a lot of things that are hard to explain, hard to put into words about the breath, because it is such an immediate, visceral experience. But if you pay attention, you’ll begin to notice that when you breathe comfortably, there can be a sense of ease, and different parts of the body will take that sense of ease and allow it to connect up. There will be a sense of fullness that will allow that sense of fullness to connect up in the different parts of the body. So you breathe in, the whole body feels full, the whole body feels at ease. And this way you’re engaging all three kinds of fabrication. You’re focusing on the breath, you’re directing your thought to the breath, you’re evaluating it, you’re maintaining that perception of breath and mind, and you’re trying to induce a feeling of ease. You’re working with whatever feelings of blockage, or discomfort, there are. And then see what different ways of breathing will help. In this way, you’re fabricating with knowledge. And it’s a very useful tool to use against a lot of uncomfortable or unskillful mind states. Say, for instance, that lust has arisen in the mind. Now, it’s a standard way of dealing with it is to focus on the 32 parts of the body, and we’ll talk about that a little bit later. But you can also say, “Hey, wait a minute, what do you lust for? You lust for pleasure. Well, can you create a sense of pleasure in the body right now?” When lust is filling the body, where do you feel tension? Some people feel it in the back of their hands, and then spreading from the back of the hands up the arms throughout the body. So how about relaxing the back of the hands? Breathe in a way that feels full and at ease in the back of the hands. And that way, that sense of immediate visceral pleasure helps take away some of the charm and appeal of that feeling of lust. You say, “Why would I bother with lust when I’ve got pleasure right now?” And sometimes you’ll find the lust goes away. This doesn’t uproot the lust, but it gives you some ammunition to use against it. The same with anger. Anger rises in the body. Sometimes you feel a tension in the middle of the chest. Breathe around that. Develop a sense of fullness and ease. And then ask yourself, “Do I really want to indulge in the anger? What kind of pleasure do I get out of the anger?” Maybe it’s better just to have a sense of ease right now. This helps to take that edge off the anger, the part of the anger that says, “I’ve got this horrible feeling in my body. I’ve got to get it out of my system.” But you can get the tension out of your system by breathing. Again, down through the hands, out the hands, out the feet. And you’ve weakened a lot of the power of the anger right there. Then you can look at the anger with a lot more equanimity, a lot less feeling of urgency that you’ve got to act on the anger. And you can ask yourself, “What is actually wrong in this situation right now? What would be the skillful thing to do? What would be the skillful thing to say?” And you’re in a much better position to think of those things and then to decide whether you need to act right now or whether it would be better to act later. So what you’re doing is you’re using this process of fabrication as an aid in overcoming the causes of suffering. So it’s good to think of these things. Breath. Directed thought. Concentration. Feeling. Perception. And you can ask yourself, “What’s the perception you’re holding in mind about that body that makes it attractive?” And learn to analyze the perception. And you’ll see that it’s focusing on only certain details. They’re big blank spots, i.e., everything inside the skin. So you might ask yourself, “Well, what if I were to allow myself to hold those perceptions in mind as well?” Now, I know a number of people who say this. Analysis of the body in this way creates a negative body image. But there are unhealthy negative body images, and there are healthy ones. Unhealthy ones say, “My body is ugly. Everybody else’s body is beautiful.” Healthy ones say, “Everybody’s body is ugly.” Even Miss America, if you asked her to take out her liver, what would it look like? We’re all pretty much equal. You could line them up on the stage. Who’s got the best-looking liver? Nobody would come. Nobody would even turn on the TV except for a few sickos. And then you ask yourself, “Is that what I really want?” Well, no. Again, this is a way of using perception to help against the causes of suffering. Or you can focus the perception on feelings of pain. How do you perceive pain? Have you ever stopped to analyze it? First, it’s good to get the mind in as much concentration with a sense of ease as you can around the pain, so that when you look into the pain, you’re not looking with a sense of desperation or with the desire to make it go away right away. You’re looking from a position of strength. You’ve got the body at ease with the breath, but there is a section where there’s pain. When you’re not feeling threatened by the pain, then you can look at it in the right way, which is to try to understand it. This is what the Buddha said, “Your duty with regard to suffering or stress is to try to comprehend it.” And so you might ask yourself, “What are the perceptions you have around the pain?” This is an excellent way of seeing what’s going on in the mind. Some people object that the Buddha’s focus on suffering, the focus on pain, gives an unduly negative look on life. Well, he’s not trying to give a total look on life. He’s trying to give you skills for overcoming suffering. He’s like a doctor. When you go to the doctor and the doctor says, “Where does it hurt?” You don’t accuse the doctor of being negative. The doctor’s doing his job. Or her job. In the same way, when you learn how to look at pain, say, in the body, it’s because lots of interesting things come around the pain. There’s that image in “A Still Forest Pool” where Chan Chaya says, “Get the mind very still and all sorts of rare and wonderful animals will come around this pool of water you’ve got here.” Well, actually, those rare and wonderful animals are all your crazy inner Osis that have gathered around your pain. The pain is actually the watering hole where all your strange and weird ideas about pain and suffering come gathering. And you get to watch them. Because, after all, when was your first experience of pain? It was right after you were born. Actually, when you were in the womb, it was pretty bad to begin with. And then suddenly you get pushed out and you find yourself in this air that you’d never experienced before. And someone pulls you out by the feet and spanks you. And you had to deal with it. And for a lot of your first couple years, before you could even learn how to speak, you had to deal with pain. And so you came up with lots of pre-verbal attitudes towards pain, many of which are still hanging around. So if you learn how to focus on the pain and you look at what’s coming around the watering hole, you see lots of strange perceptions, strange ideas. And you can ask yourself, “Do you still believe that?” Especially if you see that those ideas are adding more unnecessary suffering onto the pain, you learn how to drop them. Take, for instance, the perception that you’re on the receiving end of the pain. You can switch that perception around. How about perceiving the pain as, as soon as you perceive the pain, you’re seeing it going away. You’re not on the receiving end. It’s like sitting in the back end of a car with your back to the front, facing the back, and watching things pass by. You’re watching them go away and go away and go away. What if you were to have that attitude toward the pain? You’d find that the mind immediately would feel a lot less stress around the pain because you’re not on the receiving end. Or you can ask yourself, “Where is the sharpest point of the pain right now?” And you watch it move around. You begin to realize that the variations in the pain, some of which are caused by the physical causes of the pain, but there are also variations in the mind. When you begin to see those, say, the sense of being oppressed by the pain will go away for a second and then will come back. Well, what happened when it went away? What was the change in the perception? What was the change in the thought? Sit there and watch. It’ll come back again, so you can watch it come and go, come and go. And after a while, begin to realize that there was a certain perception you held for a while that carried the physical pain and made it a burden on the mind. When the perception stopped, the sense of burdensomeness stopped as well. What was that perception? The next time it comes up, can you drop it immediately? Or you can analyze the pain. Say there’s a sense of pain in your knee. How do you perceive that? Is it a sense that the pain is eating up your knee or has occupied your knee, that the whole knee is pain? There are actually lots of different sensations going on there. There’s the body sensations, there’s breath, the other elements of warmth, coolness, solidity. And then there’s the pain. Can you separate them out? What often happens is the sense of solidity and the sense of pain get glommed together, which makes the pain seem a lot more permanent and lasting than it actually is. If you learn to hold the perception of earth to apply to the solid sensations and the pain, it’s just the sense of sharpness around. You see that that sense of sharpness flits around. It’s not nearly as solid and lasting as you might have thought. So in this way, you get to play with your perceptions. And you play in a serious way. Again, it’s like Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan plays to win. And you begin to see the power of your perceptions. You can change a perception. It’s going to change the amount of suffering you feel. This gives you an excellent tool to use against the causes of suffering. So as we’re working with the breath, you’ve got all those forms of fabrication working together. You’ve got the breath. You’ve got directed thought, evaluation, perception, and feeling. And as you develop concentration based on the breath, you’re working on developing the skills that you need to learn how to use these things in a knowledgeable and helpful way, rather than as part of the cause of suffering. This is one of the reasons why there’s no clear distinction between concentration and discernment or concentration and wisdom in the teachings of the forest masters. Because the skills you develop in the course of concentration practice are precisely the skills you’re going to need to turn around and look at pain, the tools you’re learning to master. These processes of fabrication in the mind. Prior to your practice, they were done in ignorance, which is why they contributed to pain. But when you learn how to use them with knowledge and try to develop that attitude, the joy of working on a skill and learning how to master it, learning how not to get discouraged by failures, learn to use them as an opportunity to gain new knowledge. I had a friend once who was learning to be a potter, and she had the opportunity to go to Japan and study with one of those living national treasures they have over there. And at first she found the experience very discouraging. She would throw her pots, put on the glaze, get them into the kiln, and the next morning they’d come back and they’d all be broken or burnt or hurt and destroyed in one way or another. Whereas the living national treasure, he’d put his pots in, and the next morning they came out and looked really nice. Until one day they opened up the kiln and his pots were burnt and destroyed. And she noticed that he didn’t get upset. He just went in and tried to figure out what had happened. And she realized that’s how you become a living national treasure. You don’t beat yourself up over your failures. You try to use them as an opportunity to learn. So we have to realize, as we’re approaching this problem of suffering in the mind, that some of the causes go away simply by watching them. Those are the ones where you can relax and just watch, and they just go away. They’ve been allowed to fester because you simply haven’t looked at them. Others, though, you need to exert fabrication. Now, exerting here, again, doesn’t mean simply brute strength. It means learning how to master these tools that you’ve got. And as you master them through concentration, you begin to see their power. At the same time, you will, of course, run into the limits of concentration. Because after all, what are you doing as you get the mind concentrated? You’re pushing against the three characteristics. In other words, you’re taking things that are inconstant and you try to make them constant. You want the mind to stay still. You take things that are stressful. This body here has just lots of stress. But you’re learning how to make it pleasant by the way you breathe, by the way you relate to the energy flows in the body. And you take things that are ultimately out of your control and you try to exert some control over them. And you find that you can do it to a certain extent. Now, this is important. If you simply say, “Well, it’s inconstant, stressful, not self, I’ll just give up,” you’re never going to get anywhere. You’ve got to push against the three characteristics. Now, of course, you’ll find that they push back. But that comes in in the practice. Because you’re not trying to make them absolutely constant, absolutely pleasant, absolutely totally under your control. Just enough to give you the strength you need to let go. Because remember, we are trying to let go out of strength, not out of weakness. If you let go out of weakness, it’s out of desperation and there’s a sense of sour grapes around the whole thing. “I could never get my mind to settle down,” you say. Well, that’s simply because the mind is totally out of control. So I’ll let go. Letting go like that, as Ajahn Lee said, is letting go like a pauper. A pauper doesn’t have anything to let go of to begin with. But if you learn how to develop a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, even though it may not be absolute, it’s relatively strong enough and pleasant enough, so that when you do begin to see the things that are totally out of your control, you let go, not out of frustration, but out of a sense of contentment, a sense of balance. So you try to use the process of fabrication, even though they are stressful and constant and not self, to gain this sense of ease that can come from the concentration. And from that vantage point, then you can use your tools to uncover something that lies deeper still. This relates to another common misconception. I was reading a book one time, where the author said there are two ways of approaching awakening. One is trying to create the unconditioned through your practice, and the other is realizing that the unconditioned is already there and all you need to do is relax. Well, this ignores the third possibility, that the unconditioned is already there, but it doesn’t come about, or it’s not attained, simply by relaxing. The image that John Lee gives is of salt water. He says there is fresh water in salt water, but if you simply take the salt water and let it sit there, you can come back a hundred years later and it’s still salt water. It doesn’t separate out. You have to distill it. The effort we put into the practice is the distilling. Sometimes it’s simply the effort of watching something with equanimity. Sometimes it’s exerting a fabrication, the breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings and perceptions. But if you learn how to take joy in the process of learning how to be skillful with these fabrications, finally you do realize, okay, there is something unfabricated here as well. That’s where it gets really good. So when you think about the issue of effort, don’t think about that poor neurotic person who’s trying, trying, trying and never going to get there because they’re so miserable in their effort. Think more about the person who’s learned to master a skill. It’s taken effort, it’s taken time. But in this particular case, the result is more than repay all the effort put in. So make your effort with a sense of good-heartedness, good humor. And you find that this path of fabrication really does lead to the unfabricated. That’s the Buddha’s promise. And he wasn’t the sort of person to make promises in vain.

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