Right Effort

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One of the Thai idioms for meditation practice is “making an effort.” Now, a lot of us don’t like seeing it that way. We like to think of meditation more as a process of not doing anything, of relaxing. Well, there is relaxation, but there’s relaxed effort. Actually, joyful effort, because the term “relaxed effort” sounds like a lax effort, which it’s not. We’re making an effort in pleasure and ease, trying to develop a state of mind where the body is suffused with pleasure and rapture. And there’s work there. It’s the work of directed thought and evaluation. Evaluating the breath so that it can give rise to a sense of ease, at least in some spot of the body. And then being able to work that sense of ease and fullness throughout the whole body, which requires that you understand the process of breathing, you understand how you relate to feelings, what can be actually done with a feeling of pleasure, how it can be allowed to spread, what ways of trying to make it spread don’t work, what ways do work. This requires effort. But when you have the right attitude toward the effort, it pays off. Right effort is sometimes described as a certain level or amount of effort, and that does play a role. But it’s more important that you understand what’s skillful and what’s not. There are four areas that you have to attend to, and they all depend on having a good sense of what’s skillful in the mind, what qualities are skillful and which qualities are not. The Pali word here is gusala, which is sometimes translated as wholesome, i.e., wholesome qualities and unwholesome qualities. But that misses an important aspect of the practice. We’re trying to develop the attitude toward effort that you have when you’re developing a skill. When you see the importance of the skill and begin to get a sense of mastery of the skill, there’s a joy that comes. You’ll notice this with any skill. As you begin to sense that you’re becoming a better and better cook, you want to go back into the kitchen and work at it some more. As you begin to master a foreign language, you find that you enjoy learning new words, figuring out the idioms, trying to test your skill so that it gets better and better. You want to take the same attitude towards the meditation. In fact, you want to take the same attitude towards your whole life when you’re dealing with other people. Think of it as a skill, because you’re bound to run into difficult people. You’re bound to run into difficult situations. And if you simply wilt in the face of difficulty, you’ll never learn anything. Or if you want to try to avoid difficulty and want to be surrounded by nothing but wonderful people, you don’t belong in the human realm, because you’re never going to find a situation like that. But if you realize that, regardless of the difficulties, there are ways of dealing with them that are more skillful. And as you develop those skills, you find that you’re more and more eager to master them, to perfect them. And that’s the right attitude toward right effort regarding, say, the hindrances of the mind, as a challenge that you want to meet, regarding the difficulties and factors for awakening, also as a challenge that you want to master. And as with any skill, you’re going to find that you make incremental progress at some times, and other times there are big leaps and bounds. But you want to value both. If you look down on the incremental progress, you’re developing the wrong attitude. You have to learn how to prize the times when you make a mistake. As Ajahn Mahaprabhu says, even one little tiny piece of bark on this tree of your defilements gets taken off. You should value that fact. Because as you value the little bits of skill, that gives you encouragement to work on them again, and again, and again, until finally there are days when you see huge strips of bark coming off. So on the one hand, you’ve got the unskillful qualities of the mind, and your duties with regard to those are two. You want to generate desire, arouse your persistence, uphold your intent. For abandoning unskillful qualities of the mind, you’ve got to prevent them from arising. Notice that desire is an important part of the practice here. This is where the Buddha explicitly recommends it as part of the path. And again, the way to spark that desire is to regard all of this as a skill, or even as a game. If you’ve ever played a game of strategy, you want to take that same attitude and bring it toward dealing with your sensual desire, or your anger, or your sloth and torpor, your rustiness and anxiety, or your uncertainty. What are the strategies of these unskillful qualities? How do they move in and take over the mind? You want to figure out their strategies so that you can have some strategies of your own. Then there are the skillful qualities and seven factors for awakening, mindfulness as a factor for awakening, analysis of qualities, i.e., analyzing things into skillful and unskillful, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity. These are things that, if they happen, haven’t arisen yet, you want to give rise to them. And when they have arisen, you want to develop them. Notice that the Buddha’s attitude here is not that you simply watch these things come and go. Sometimes you hear that if concentration comes, just note the fact that concentration is there, don’t get attached to it, and watch it go away, and you’ll see the truth of inconstancy. That’s not what the Buddha taught. Your duty here is to, once you’ve given rise to it, you want it to develop. You want to bring it to culmination. Again, it involves desire, but it’s a skillful use of desire, i.e., desire that understands cause and effect. Our unskillful desires are the ones that don’t want to hear anything about cause and effect. They just want what they want. Skillful desire realizes that in order to get a certain cause, you’ve got to give rise to a certain effect. In order to get rid of something, you have to get rid of its causes. So if you find that there’s sensual desire taking over your mind, try to figure out what are the causes of the desire. You can’t attack the desire directly. You’ve got to attack the causes. When you want to give rise to mindfulness, you just can’t think, “Poof, mindfulness!” You’ve got to ask yourself, “What are the causes of mindfulness? What nurtures it?” Being very careful about your behavior, being very careful about your precepts, that’s one thing that fosters mindfulness. Look at your daily life. Are you very careful about your behavior? Are you sloppy? This quality of being meticulous is an important help in the meditation. So much emphasis is placed on it in the forest tradition. The way you wash your bowl, the way you wear your robes, the way you clean spittoons, the way you’re sensitive to the needs of others—this is going to have an impact on your meditation. So this is how you train your desire to be skillful desire, part of the path. Look for the causes, both for skillful and unskillful qualities, because that’s where you’re going to be dealing. Once you understand what’s skillful, what’s unskillful, and how you want to approach these qualities, then you bring in the issue of exactly how much effort can you put into the practice at any one time. There are two considerations here. One is what is the nature of the problem, because some problems require a huge amount of effort. And others are more delicate, in which case the effort is simply the effort to stay mindful continually and just keep watch until you understand the problem. So in that case, the amount of effort required is determined by the nature of the problem itself. The other side, of course, is what you’re up for. What’s your level of energy right now? You may have high plans for what you want to accomplish in the meditation, but if your energy level is not up to it, you have to adjust your expectations. This is where the famous simile of the lute comes in. The young monk who’d been very delicately brought up, Sona, was his name. The soles of his feet were so soft from being delicately brought up that he even had hair on the soles of his feet. He became a monk and was doing walking meditation. His feet became all bloody from walking so much, and he got discouraged. So he sat there thinking, “Well, I could disrobe and I could use my family fortune to make merit, and that would be a good use of my life.” At that point, the Buddha appeared in front of him. We can only imagine Sona’s feelings about that. How would you feel if the Buddha appeared in front of you right now and had been reading your mind? But Sona took it well. The Buddha knew exactly what was on Sona’s mind. So he asked him, “When you were young, did you play the lute?” “Well, yes.” “And what was it like when you played the lute when the strings were too tight?” “It sounded horrible.” “How about when the strings were too loose?” “It sounded horrible.” “How about when they were tuned just right?” “Well, that’s when you could play your music.” And the Buddha said, “Okay, think of tuning the first string on your instrument as tuning the level of your energy, and then tune the rest of your strings to that.” In other words, tune your conviction, your mindfulness, concentration, and discernment to what you’re capable of right now. If you find some days when you’re really capable of a lot, well, put in as much energy as you can. Other times, when you find that you’re not up to it, either physically or mentally, find the right amount of effort to apply. Try to be as skillful as you can, given the amount of energy you’ve got. Try to keep the proper form. It’s like when you’re practicing to be a swimmer. There are days when your energy level is down. Well, you do less practice, but you try to maintain proper form throughout the practice. It’s the same with the meditation. On days when your energy level is down, try to be at least as skillful as you can. When you notice unskillful thoughts coming up, do what you can to prevent them. When skillful mental states arise, well, do what you can to maintain them. Above all, try to keep the right form. Keep that proper form in mind. Try to keep that proper form constant, because it’s the skillfulness of your effort that makes all the difference. If you have a lot of effort, but it’s not being applied skillfully, then it’s going to be counterproductive. You just throw yourself into it, and you see nothing coming out of it, and you get discouraged. Then you may decide, “Well, maybe it’s a lot easier not to put so much effort in. I feel lighter.” Now you’ve learned that effort is bad and not effort is good. When you find that happening in the mind, remind yourself of the image of the cow. As the Buddha said, there’s a right way and a wrong way to get milk out of the cow. If you try twisting the cow’s horn and don’t get any milk, it doesn’t mean that you’re not twisting it hard enough. It means you’re doing the wrong thing. You may just sit there twisting and twisting and twisting, getting the cow all aggravated, and you get aggravated. Then if you stop twisting, you say, “Ah, here we are. It’s much easier not to twist the cow’s horn.” Well, it’s easier, but you still don’t get any milk. You go down and you pull on the udder. Okay, then you’re going to get milk. So the first issue in right effort is always the question of skillfulness. Understanding what’s skillful, understanding what’s not, and using your desire to become skillful as an incentive on the path. Because the desire is what gives the energy to your right effort. So don’t be afraid of desire. Simply learn how to use it skillfully. Understand cause and effect and the fact that some causes are more skillful than others. And even though there’s an element of craving and desire and conceit in trying to master that skill, they’re all useful parts of the path.

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