Just Right Effort

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As you meditate, as you go through the day, unskillful thoughts are going to come up. You have to take that for granted. Jon Furon once had a student who found herself cursing him one night in her meditation. She felt really bad about it and went to apologize a few days later. His response was very matter-of-fact. If the mind can think good things, what’s to keep it from thinking bad things? It just thinks. It churns stuff out. There’s no need to feel guilty, because guilt leads to denial. You pretend it’s not there. That doesn’t help at all. You have to admit the fact that it’s there and then figure out how not to get entangled. As the Buddha pointed out, there are basically two ways of doing this. There are some cases where unskillful thoughts come in, causes of stress come into the mind, and all you have to do is just look at them and they go away. In the John Lee’s terminology, they get embarrassed. They’re the kind of people who know they’re trying to get away with something unskillful, and they’re not all that strong. All you have to do is look at them, and when they know they’ve been caught, they get embarrassed and they stop. That’s one aspect of right effort. I read someone once say there were basically two paths. There was the path of right effort, where you put a lot of stress and strain into the practice and try to create certain mental states. And then there’s the path of right mindfulness, which just simply allows things to be. That’s way too simplistic. Right effort covers all varieties of intensity, focus, types of effort. And this is one aspect of right effort. Some things should go away simply when you watch them. There are other things, though, the Buddha says you have to exert a fabrication. It sounds strange. It’s a technical term. He uses it in conjunction, on the one hand, with the basis of success. Every state of concentration requires the exertion of fabrication. This is one way of dealing with unskillful thoughts, simply to get the mind really still in their presence and just not get involved with them, move your focus away from them. In Chan Chah’s explanation of how you separate the mind from its thoughts, you simply get the mind as still as possible, so still that the thoughts can’t even get in. That’s one way of exerting a fabrication. The other context is when the Buddha talks about the three types of fabrication. There’s bodily fabrication, verbal and mental. So when something comes up in your mind, you’ve got to figure out what it is. Or which of these three, or what combination of these three, is going to be most effective. It’s a useful checklist to keep in mind because it gives you an idea of what your basic tools are and where you can wring some changes on them, work some variations on them, so that your approach is just right for this particular situation. The Buddha’s image here is of a cowherd who’s got cows during the rainy season. It’s the time in India when people would be planting rice and the cows, of course, wanted to walk in on the rice fields and eat the rice plants. Of course, that creates a huge problem for the owner of the cowherd. So you have to be very careful. You have to check and beat and drive the cattle away from the rice. That’s when unskillful thoughts come up. Sometimes you have to be really active in dealing with them. The first of the fabrications is bodily fabrication, the way you breathe. How does the way you breathe aggravate unskillful thinking? How can you breathe in a different way that makes the mind less interested in the unskillful thinking? This is where it’s good to know how to breathe in a way that feels very full and refreshing. Because breathing gives you a lot of energy, healthy energy, wholesome energy, healing energy. How do you breathe in a way that feels healing and can soothe all the raw areas in the mind? It can go deep down inside, into the really sensitive parts of your body. When you’re not properly touched and nourished by the breath, you lose interest in a lot of other things that otherwise might pull you away. So ask yourself, where is the most sensitive spot in the body in terms of the breath energy? For many people, it’s the area down around the heart. Try to be really sensitive to that as you breathe in, breathe out, and see what would give a sense of nourishment there, what would give a sense of healing. Other times you notice that the mind wanders off after unskillful things because it doesn’t have much energy. What kind of energy can you stir up with the breathing? Other times, because it’s feeling frazzled, how can you calm things down? You’ve got to learn how to read the situation. Just as in general you learn how to read whether this is going to be a particular instance where you require some of this fabrication of exertion or exertion of fabrication, what’s going to require simply watching? You’ve got to learn how to see what works. It’s not a matter of having a technique that you like and that you’re going to bring out and apply all the time. It’s like being a cook and liking spoons. Spoons are good for some things, but you can’t fix soup in them. There are lots of things you can’t do with spoons. You need other utensils as well. So whether you like a particular utensil or not is totally irrelevant. What matters is the appropriate utensil for this particular task. So work with the breath for a bit, see if that helps. The second type of fabrication is verbal fabrication. It’s direct thought and evaluation. How are you thinking about this unskillful thought? What are you thinking about otherwise? And how are you evaluating the situation? Especially when there’s a thought of anger that comes in, you might want to re-evaluate the situation. Ask yourself, even if it really is that bad, is it worth getting angry about? Is it helpful to get angry about these things? Will you be acting more effectively if you get angry? And the answer is usually no. You can also frame the issue in terms of whether you want to get involved in the issue at all. Sometimes simply remind yourself that this is a distraction, this is something that’s pulling you away from something you really want to do. Something that has more value. So you look at how you’re thinking about your situation in the present moment as well as the situation that had you thinking those unskillful thoughts. Can you change the framework? Can you change the way you analyze things? Can you change the topic of your focus? Can you get it back? Can you get it back to the breath? Sometimes getting to the breath is hard, so you can use a meditation word. The Jhanas in Thailand like to use bhutto, which means “awake.” And sometimes they’ll repeat it very fast in the mind. It has nothing to do with the rhythm of the breathing. It’s more like jamming the circuits. Or you can think thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of equanimity, whatever is appropriate. It’s a different topic to think about to counteract the unskillful thought. One of the reasons we have that chant about the thirty-two parts of the body is not to gross people out during the meal. It’s to remind you that when you get really attached to the body, this is what you’re attached to. Whether it’s your body or somebody else’s body, it’s all the same. And this body with these thirty-two parts, where does it head? It heads to death. And what is death like? Have you ever seen a dead body? You know that every body in this room is going to head in that direction. Every body that you could think about is going to head in that direction. This is something that you really want to get attached to. This is not an unhealthy body image. It’s a healthy body image. An unhealthy negative body image is where you think your body is ugly and everybody else’s body is good-looking. Or there’s some ideal out there that you have to meet that you can’t. A healthy negative body image is reminding yourself that everybody has all these disgusting parts in their body, regardless of how nice they try to make it look on the outside. And when you look at it that way, then the people who spend a lot of time on their appearance make it really ugly. It’s like they’re dressing up something that’s basically disgusting inside. These are all antidotes for unskillful types of thought. And whether you like them or not, sometimes you need to bring them out, as is appropriate. And finally, there’s mental fabrication. That’s feelings and perceptions. On one level, this is related directly to how you get the mind into concentration. What is the perception you’re holding in mind? Can you get back to the perception of breath in such a way that it’s interesting? So you can give rise to feelings of well-being that will make you less interested in the present karma that causes these things to come up. But then there’s also the present karma, where you get interested, you fall for the hook, and you go with it. So can you create other feelings in the body, other feelings in the mind, that’ll make you less interested in these things? Do you want a perception of goodwill? Do you want a perception of compassion, equanimity, in addition to the perceptions of the breath? After all, concentration is a perception attainment. You have to hold on to a particular perception in order to stay with your object. That’s the agreement you have with yourself. Or you can look at the perception you have for your feelings of anger, your feelings of lust, your feelings of desire. Sometimes they have a real glamour. You enjoy them. That’s one of the things you have to look for. What is the allure of these things? Can you hold a perception that sees them in a different way that’s not so alluring after all? Greed, aversion, delusion, lust, anger, fear—these create a huge amount of suffering in life. And yet we find them alluring. You have to look into that. What’s the allure? If all of that is on the surface and you can start seeing the façade peel away here and there, then it’s a lot easier to pull yourself out of those unskillful thoughts. These are just a few of the tools. The general outline, in terms of bodily fabrication, verbal and mental, is useful to keep in mind. It can remind you of some of the range of approaches you might bring. Sometimes it’s a matter of dealing with the breath. Other times it’s a matter of thinking things in a new way. Rethinking or dethinking, as Dogon used to say. Taking apart the way you think about something so you can rethink it in a new way. But you find that you have to come up with your own approaches. This is an important part of the meditation. Insight, discernment—these are not things you can manufacture with an assembly line technique. They require ingenuity, your ability to think things quickly, on your feet. Take something you’ve learned and turn it inside out, turn it around so it’s just right for what you need right now. That’s an important part of discernment right there. We’re not here trying to clone some awakening that somebody else had a long time ago. We’re trying to use the tools that he used and then adapt them so they’re just right for our situation right now. So those are the two things you have to think about. One is learning how to read the situation, and the other is learning how to test different approaches. You have to remind yourself that the range of approaches is quite wide. The Buddha never taught one insight technique or one technique. He used the breath as his main focus, because, after all, it is one of those forms of fabrication, bodily fabrication. When you’re creating a state of concentration out of the breath, you’ve got all three forms of fabrication right here. But he didn’t limit himself to just that one approach. There are other themes, other approaches that you can use for what you need. The situation presents itself right here, right now. Take the breath as your home base as a meditator, and then use the other techniques as they’re appropriate. As for the amount of effort you have to put in, that’s something you have to learn for yourself. There’s that famous image of the lute player who pushed himself too hard in the practice. So the Buddha reminded him that you have to tune it just right, just the same way that you tune a lute. It’s possible to misunderstand that by thinking, “Well, we do sort of a half-hearted effort or a kind of halfway effort. Don’t do it too hard.” That’s one of the forests that Jon says, and usually that kind of middle way ends up lying down in the middle of the mat, the middle of the pillow. It’s more a question of finding the appropriate amount of effort and the appropriate type of effort, given the situation, given your own strength right now. What you’re capable of, what’s required, whether this is something you have to abandon or something you have to develop or something you simply have to watch, these are all things you can keep in mind. That’s where the training of the mind becomes a whole range of skills. It calls on a whole range of skills to deal with all the many facets of the mind and all its many ins and outs. It’s only when you have a sense of the range of options that you have at your disposal that you can really make the training of the mind really effective. So try to keep these points in mind as you learn to read your own mind.

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