No Easy Formula

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One of the important issues in right effort is the question of how much is right. How much is too much? How much is too little? The short answer is there’s no easy formula. You have to take a lot of considerations into account. As the Buddha says at one point, if you see that by living at your pleasure, you’re developing, skillful qualities are increasing, and unskillful ones are falling away, then you should not reject that pleasure. But if you find that by living by your pleasure, unskillful ones are developing and skillful ones are falling away, that’s when you have to practice with pain. In other words, you push yourself. And it’s always a good rule of thumb to push yourself a little bit harder than you think you might be able to handle. This is one of the reasons why we have the rains retreat. They give you three months to try out pushing yourself harder than normal. But even then, you have to be very sensitive, because pushing yourself too hard is also not right effort. You have to learn to watch for the warning signs and the inability to focus, the mind that just seems running wild all over the place. Sometimes it’s a result of pushing yourself too hard. Remember, the problem is not so much the body, it’s the mind. Even when we chant, as we did just now, the contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body, it’s not the body’s fault that it has a spleen, kidneys, intestines, all these other things. If it didn’t have these things, it wouldn’t function. The problem is that we are so attached to the body, our own bodies, the bodies of other people. The problem is in the mind. There’s that famous account where Ajahn Mahaprabhu has been pushing himself, and he’s getting some results at the very beginning, so he keeps pushing himself harder and harder until finally one day Ajahn Maha says, “You know, the defilements don’t come from the body, they come from the mind.” That’s all he said when Ajahn Mahaprabhu immediately knew what he was talking about. He’d been pushing himself too hard, so he let up a bit. And Ajahn Fuhrman said the same thing to me. He said, “Right effort is not a matter so much of the body, it’s a matter of the mind.” After all, you look at the definition of right effort, it’s generating desire, arousing your intent for the non-arising of unskillful qualities that have arisen, for the abandoning of unskillful qualities that have arisen, for the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen, and for the culmination development of those that have arisen, taking them to the ultimate degree of their development. Those skillful and unskillful qualities are all issues of the mind. So that’s where the main effort should be in terms of how much you sit, how much you walk, how much you lie down. The posture of the body is not nearly as important as the question of what the mind is doing in those different postures. If you find you’re tired, you can’t think straight, lie down a bit, rest. But as long as you’re awake, keep with the breath. It’s like that book we have around here about teaching you how to learn how to swim. It’s not only about learning how to swim, it’s an excellent guide to learning how to do anything, any skill. And what are the instructions? You have to monitor the amount of time you put into practice. If the body’s not strong, you put in less time. But you always try to maintain proper form, regardless of how long or short your practice time is. Now, proper form in the meditation is not so much a matter of sitting straight, although it’s useful to learn how to sit straight. It’s good for the body, if you’re going to sit for long periods of time, that you can maintain good posture. Proper form here means the proper form of the mind. What’s the mind doing? Where is it focused? Are skillful qualities arising or unskillful ones arising? Then you learn how to read the amount of effort you have to put in by the results you’re getting in the mind. This is a matter of developing sensitivity, because the needs of the body are going to change. Sometimes you’ve set for yourself the goal of sitting for an hour. At the end of the hour you’re still bright and clear. Well, keep on sitting. If we finish the meditation here, you can either keep on sitting here or go back and sit at your spot under the trees. Other times you can barely make it. The body’s not strong. That means you have to adjust the amount of time you spend sitting or walking. But again, you have to be very sensitive to when the mind is being drowsy because it’s got ulterior motives, and when it’s drowsy because you’re really, really tired. The Buddha recommends a couple of tests. If by focusing on the mind’s one object makes you sleepy, try changing the object for a while with the breath. This means either changing the rhythm and texture of your breathing, or temporarily moving off to another topic. And John Lee talks often about how the breath is your home base. It’s your dwelling place as a meditator. But other meditation topics can be places where you go foraging. In other words, looking for strategies, looking for techniques that will help with specific defilements, specific problems. Contemplate the parts of the body. Contemplate death. Contemplate the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. See what that does. If changing the breath doesn’t make any difference, if changing the topic doesn’t help, you can try repeating in your mind any of the chants that you’ve memorized. If that doesn’t work, rub your limbs, pull your earlobes, go out and look up at the stars. Do walking meditation. Walking meditation is especially good right after you’ve eaten. We eat one meal a day here, and there’s a tendency to load up a few extra portions. Just to make up for the fact that you’re not going to be eating in the evening. Of course, that weighs down the stomach. All the blood’s going down to the stomach to digest the food, and the brain suddenly finds itself starved. Doing walking meditation is a good way to recirculate that blood, get everything moving again. But if walking meditation you find is still drowsy, then the Buddha says, “Lie down. Rest.” At this point, you can be pretty sure that the mind is not playing tricks on itself. But when you lie down to rest, you find yourself falling asleep, make up your mind that when you wake up, you’re going to get right up and continue meditating. You’re not just going to lie around wallowing in the pleasure of lying around. So reading the mind, reading its needs. Reading the body, reading its needs. As I said, there’s no easy formula. Sometimes it’s pretty obvious that you’re getting too much or too little sleep. Other times it’s not quite so obvious. Many times drowsiness can be just a disguise. Something is coming up in your meditation. Something is about to come to the surface, and the mind doesn’t want it to come to the surface, doesn’t want to deal with it. So it gets drowsy, moves off, diverts your attention. That’s for the shape of the body or the level of strength in the body. Remind yourself that whatever posture you’re in, you want that to be a meditative posture. In other words, you learn how to lie down meditating, you learn how to do walking meditation, standing meditation, sitting meditation, working meditation, whatever the activity is. You want to be centered on the breath and keep an eye out for the arising of skillful and unskillful qualities. That’s what right effort is all about. Remember Ajahn Fung’s maxim, “Right effort is a matter of the mind.” That’s something you can keep at regardless of how strong or weak you are. Or how healthy or sick the body is. Because after all, eventually the body will die. But you want to be able to maintain right effort even as you die. If you can’t maintain right effort while you’re lying down or walking or whatever, it’s going to be really hard to maintain it when you die. So try to make the effort a galley kind of thing. Don’t, as Ajahn Fung used to say, divide your day up into little times because then it gets all chopped up into little pieces and you find that you have no time left to meditate. You’ve got time to work, time to eat, time to chat, time to whatever. Some things you do are necessary to do, but make it all part of your time to meditate. That can be one big single time that goes for the whole day. And that’s what makes your effort right.

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