Making an Effort (outdoors)

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In the forest tradition, when they talk about meditating, one of the idioms is “to make an effort,” which shows how important the path factor of right effort is in the meditation. When the Buddha divides the Eightfold Path into three sections, there’s a section related to virtue, which is right action, right speech, right livelihood. and a section related to discernment, right view and right resolve. And a section related to concentration, which is right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration itself. The effort is to let go of things that are unskillful, that get in the way of the mind settling down, and to develop things in the mind that will make it easier for the mind to settle down. It’s not that you’re going to create these good qualities out of nothing. You’re taking good qualities that you already have, qualities like mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind, alertness, the clarity with which you see what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing, and then ardency. This is probably the factor that’s most lacking. Ardency is the desire to do it as well as you can. Sometimes we want to do it really well, and other times we just let it go. Then we pick it up again and let it go. It’s like trying to make a fire with those old fire sticks. You spin the fire stick, and it gets warmer and warmer and warmer, but then you get tired. So you put it down for a bit, and the fire stick cools off. Then you pick it up again, you spin it, spin it, spin it again. Then you get tired. Keep this up. Spinning it for a bit, and then let it go, spinning it for a bit, let it go. You’re never going anywhere. You’re going to wonder, is this really a fire stick? Can people actually make fire this way? But if you stick with it, regard this as something you want to do all the time, no matter what your body is doing right now. You’re sitting with your eyes closed, sitting with your eyes open, getting up, walking around, doing chores. Whatever you’re doing, you can always keep an eye on your mind. That’s the important thing, to make sure it doesn’t go off thinking things that it shouldn’t be thinking. So you take the good qualities you have, and you try to make the most of them. As for the qualities that are not good, you can let them go. Do you ever think that letting go would be easy? Because after all, thinking unskillfully takes as much energy as it does to think skillful thoughts. When you’re told, “You don’t have to think about this, you don’t have to think about that,” you’d think and say, “Well, that’s easy, that’s nice.” It just won’t do that. But the problem is, it’s an old habit, and old habits have big pathways in the mind. It’s easy to just go along wherever the pathway is big. So you have to keep reminding yourself “No, we’re not going to go there, we’re not going to go there.” It’s like that series of stories in Indian literature. The frame story is very complicated, but the important, relevant part is the fact that you have this creature called the Avedala. It’s been caught, and it agrees to go along with the person who’s caught it on one condition, that it gets to tell a story. And at the end of the story, he’s going to ask a question. And if the listener answers the question, the Avedala gets free. If the listener doesn’t answer the question, then the Avedala continues going with him. So the listener is happy to take on the stories on those conditions, because he thinks, “Well, that’s easy, you don’t have to answer the question.” But as the Avedala tells the story, you get more and more involved in the story, to the point where he asks the question, and the listener is forgotten. And if the listener answers the question, the Avedala escapes. It keeps us up throughout the series of stories. This is the way our mind is. We get so carried away by other things that we forget. We make up our mind to do something, to let go of something, and not to pick it up again. It just seems second nature. When you’re not paying attention, you pick it up, which means that you have to pay attention to what the mind is doing all the time. That’s the effort in letting go, seeing the drawbacks of something. And then paying attention to see what would make you forget, what would make you pick this thing up again. Because obviously, if you really saw the drawbacks of that unskillful thought, that unskillful quality, and they really hit home, then you wouldn’t want it ever again. The problem is that they don’t quite hit the target. Our understanding of why we like something sometimes is missing something. So it’s not just a matter of attention, you also have to have some understanding of why that thing that you’re told to let go really is worth letting go. So you can argue with the parts of the mind that would instinctively want to pick it up again. So it’s a combination of attention and discernment. That’s how we let go. As for developing, it’s largely a matter of protecting. You’ve got some good qualities in the mind already, protect them, don’t throw them away, don’t drop them. If they fall away on their own, okay, you pick them up again. Pick them up again. Like your concentration on the breath. You can be here, concentrated on the breath, and suddenly it’s like the camera that’s changed its focal range. You’re suddenly focused someplace else. And as soon as you recognize that, you’ve got to readjust the focus, bring it back. If this happens many times, you may say, “Well, I’m getting tired of this.” Well, how else are you going to develop new habits, except through lots of repetition? If you learned a musical instrument in the past, you’ll understand this point. There are a lot of things you just have to repeat over and over and over again until you get them right. So remember that we’re meditating. We are making an effort, an effort to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. It’s based on a sense of discontent. There are so many areas in life where we’re told to be content, especially in the area of our physical requisites, food, clothing, shelter. As long as those things are good enough to survive, they’re good enough for the practice, okay, then it’s enough. But there is an area where the Buddha says, “Don’t rest content.” That’s “Don’t rest content with skillful qualities.” If there’s anything more you can develop in the direction of skillfulness, you make that effort, you make that effort. And you try to encourage yourself to want to make the effort. The role of encouragement here is as important as the texts tell us that when the Buddha would give a Dharma talk, he would instruct, rouse, encourage, urge. Four different activities, only one is instructed. Instructing, i.e., giving information. The other three are giving encouragement. Yes, you can do this, and it’s worth doing. As the Buddha said, if human beings couldn’t practice the Dharma, he wouldn’t have taught it to human beings. And if they didn’t benefit from practicing the Dharma, he wouldn’t have taught that either. But it’s because they can do it and they can benefit from doing it, that’s why he taught. Stories of the monks and the nuns in the Therigata. And you realize that some of them, even though they later became noble disciples, some of them started out pretty bad. So think about that the next time something in your mind says, “Well, there’s no way I’m going to reach any of the noble attainments, so I shouldn’t push too hard.” That’s laziness speaking. That’s laziness that’s destroying your speaking. There is the Dharma. There isn’t always going to be a Dharma around. We live in a world where the memory of the Buddha and his teachings is still alive. That’s not always going to be the case. So while we have this opportunity, while you’re strong enough to practice, give the practice whatever you can. Put in whatever effort you can, because it will all be rewarded.

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