

Wise Effort

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The Thai idiom for meditation is making an effort: *tham khwaam phian*. And the important thing, of course, is to make the effort right. Brute force is not going to take nibbana by storm. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you could get to nibbana simply through effort, we all would have been there by now. You have to make the effort, *right effort*. This involves an element of wisdom and discernment.

There are several ways of applying discernment to right effort. One that we're probably most familiar with is the simple question of the amount. There's that famous story about Venerable Sona, who was very delicately brought up—so delicately brought up, they say, that he even had hair on the soles of his feet. When he became monk and was doing walking meditation for many hours, his feet started to bleed. And he got discouraged: "Here I've put in so much effort," he said, "and still I haven't gained awakening. Maybe I should disrobe, go back to being a lay person, and make merit." The Buddha happened to read his mind, so he levitated and appeared right in front of Sona, and asked him, "Back when you were a lay person and were playing the lute, if you tuned the strings too tightly, what was it like?" Well, it didn't sound good. "How about if they were too loose?" That didn't sound good either. "How about if you tuned them just right?" That was when the music sounded right.

Then the Buddha said, "It's the same with your meditation. You tune your effort to the amount that you're able to do." When you tune a lute, you first tune one string and then tune all the other strings to the first. In the same way, you tune your effort, then you tune the rest of your faculties—your conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—to the amount of effort you're able to put in. And the meditation will go well.

So in this case, the discernment involves seeing how much energy you're actually able to put in, when you're pushing yourself too hard, when you're not pushing yourself hard enough. And how do you know? Well, you try to push yourself in a way that seems too hard, and see what happens over time—because we do have a tendency to be lazy. We all want to belong to the group of easy practice and fast results. But the people with easy practice and fast results have pretty much all gone to nibbana already. We're the ones left over. So you push yourself until you find that you're pushing too hard. You can tell from your own experience: The mind gets frazzled; you have trouble focusing. So then you let up a bit. You don't go back to the other extreme and say that effort is bad. You simply fine-tune your effort.

But the amount of effort also depends on the particular problem facing you. There's another passage where the Buddha says that some defilements will go away simply by watching them. You don't have to analyze them. You don't have to put in much effort. Simply by noticing that "This is a defilement," and realizing you don't want to go there, it'll go away. Other defilements, though, require what the Buddha calls exerting a fabrication. "Fabrication" here has many aspects: verbal, mental, and physical. Physical fabrication is the breath. In other

words, when you see greed or anger or delusion arising in the mind, ask yourself, “How is the breath going right now?” See if you can change the mind state by changing the way you breathe.

That, of course, will involve verbal fabrications: directed thought and evaluation. Instead of chattering on to yourself about how much you want something, how much you’re angry about something, you start chattering to yourself about the breath. Ask yourself, “How is the breath right now? How does it feel? What would feel better?” Once you’ve got something that feels good, how about spreading it around? And how do you spread comfortable breath around the body? This is also an element of right effort. If you push too hard, you destroy the comfort you started out with. If you don’t ask questions, if you don’t take an interest, it just doesn’t happen. So again, you’ve got to find the right amount of effort for dealing with the breath.

And then finally there’s mental fabrication, which covers feeling and perception. In this case, once you’ve got a useful feeling of comfort or pleasure from the breath, you put it to use. You don’t just sit there enjoying it. You see what use can be made out of it, again by spreading the breath around, letting it permeate the whole body, giving the mind something to do. Because it’s very easy, when the mind gets into a pleasant place, for it to start drifting off, going into delusion concentration where everything is very pleasant but not very clear. You’re still, but when you come out of it you can’t quite figure out where you were. Were you with the breath? Well, no. Were you asleep? No. Awake? Not really. So in order to avoid that state, you’ve got to give the mind work to do with the feeling of comfort. This is one of the more radical parts of the Buddha’s teaching. Comfort is not an end in and of itself. It’s something you can use as a too;

And then use your perceptions, the labels you have for things, to figure out how to get the most out of the comfort you’ve got and also how to analyze the defilement that was causing so much trouble. You can use your perceptions in lots of ways. If you find that you’re angry at somebody, remember the Buddha’s famous image of a person who is tired and thirsty and hot, crossing a desert, needing water, and finding a little puddle in a cow footprint—and being willing to get down in his hands and knees and slurp it up, because he needs the water so much. In the same way, when you’re angry with somebody, you have to realize that you yourself are tired, thirsty, hot, and trembling. In other words, the goodness of your heart is not yet strong. It needs nourishment. And focusing on the bad points of the people is not going to nourish the goodness of your heart. It’s going to make you even hotter and thirstier. You need to focus on the other person’s good points, even if it means getting down on your hands and knees and slurping them up out of a cow footprint. Hold that perception in mind. That’s one way of using perception to put yourself in the right mind state for dealing with whatever the defilement may be.

That’s called exerting a fabrication. So again you’ve got to use your discernment to see when the issue in the mind will go away simply by watching it and when you’ve got to make an effort with the three kinds of fabrication.

Discernment plays other roles in right effort as well. In the classic formula, the Buddha says that you “generate desire, arouse your persistence, and uphold your intent” for four tasks. But even before you take on the four tasks of right effort, notice the attitude you’ve got to bring to

them. You've got to generate desire. You've got to *want* to do it. And your wanting has to be wise and discerning. It's easy to point out people who have a very strong desire for awakening, and the desire actually gets in the way of awakening, or their desires are turning neurotic. They're trying to obliterate themselves. That's where the idea that the stream-enterers wipe out their personality comes from. There are people who hate their personalities, so they want to get rid of them and think that here is the Buddha's approval of their attitude. That's a neurotic desire, which is easy to satirize, easy to make fun of. And it's really unhealthy in the practice. But satirizing at it, making fun of *all* desire, is not helpful either. You've got to realize that there is such a thing as healthy desire. Desire for awakening is a lot better than the desires most people act on, but again you've got to learn how to do it skillfully, with wisdom.

In other words, you realize that awakening comes from causes, so you focus your desire on the causes in a way that helps give rise to them. If the practice requires more mindfulness, you work on being mindful. You want to arouse the skillful desire to be mindful. To develop concentration, arouse a skillful desire to be concentrated. The term "skillful" here is important. Look at the meditation as a skill, not as something you're just going to push yourself through with blind effort.

But notice what skills are required to get the mind to stay still. Once it's still and you get up from the meditation, how can you maintain that stillness? It's like balancing a bowl of oil on your head. You have to be very careful not to lose your balance, not to get distracted. How do you do that? Make it a game, take it as a challenge, and try to figure out what you can do to meet that challenge. This way the desire becomes a healthy desire. It takes this massive task of reaching awakening and breaks it down into manageable bits. You work at all the various skills you need as a meditator, trying to figure out how to get the mind to settle down when it's angry, how to get it to settle down when it's lazy, how to give it energy when it's depressed, how to make it more stable when it's getting too manic. These are all necessary skills to work on.

So your desire for awakening has to get focused on the steps that lead there. Realize that there are steps you can follow bit by bit by bit, and they lead to something that's more than the sum of the steps. Some people say, "Well, focusing on the path like this distracts you from the deathless, which is all around you." But it's not a distraction. The Buddha taught a path with a purpose; he didn't teach the path as a distraction. He says that this is the way to the goal. Because of the complexity of the mind, it's possible to work on a fabricated path that takes you to something unfabricated. So you generate the desire—in other words, you develop the right attitude toward the effort. This requires wisdom as well.

And then there are the four specific tasks: to abandon any unskillful qualities that have already arisen, to prevent unskillful qualities that haven't arisen from arising, to give rise to skillful mental qualities, and then, when skillful mental qualities have arisen, to maintain them. Those are four different types of effort. You've got to read the situation in your mind: What needs doing right now? Do you have to focus on getting rid of the unskillful side, or do you have to focus more on developing the skillful side? You learn how to read your mind so you can understand what type of effort will be the right effort at any one particular time.

So it's all a question of your attitude to the effort, the type of effort that has to be applied, and the right amount to apply—the amount being based, one, on the level of energy you have

right now, and then two, the specific problem you're dealing with, whether it requires a lot of effort or no effort beyond simply watching.

All these qualities, when you put them together, constitute right effort. So when you're making your effort here, when you *tham khwaam phian*, realize that it's largely a matter of discernment, understanding, and the willingness, the desire to give whatever effort is needed. Because sometimes it takes a lot of effort, a lot of patience, to overcome a particular problem in the mind. Your mind gets knocked off balance. You try to go to the breath and there just doesn't seem to be any breath at all. If you immediately get worked up, then you've got a problem. But you say, "The breath's got to be here. If there were no breath, I'd be dead." Or if you can detect the breath but it's not comfortable, be willing to sit with it for a while, as you would with an irritable child, so that your patience finally helps get the breath to calm down.

So whatever effort is needed—whether it's to sit there and be very still and very patient, or to push in a particular direction—you've got to be willing to give the effort that's required. You've got to develop your discernment to figure out what's needed at any particular time and to motivate yourself to do it. There's no one blanket piece of wisdom that's going to cover all situations. The word for wisdom, *pañña*, actually means discernment, the ability to detect differences. Sometimes you accept the way things are if you can't do anything about them, and other times you realize, "I've got to push." And accepting the way things are may sometimes mean realizing that you *do* have the power to make a change, the power to make a difference in the mind, and you now have the opportunity to do that. It's the right situation to really push and make a hard effort. Learn how to accept that, too.

When you've got all these factors working together, that's the kind of effort that forms part of the path. In fact it's such an important element of the path that the Buddha said that the four right exertions—which are the basic formula for right effort—can stand in for the path as a whole.

So try not to bring a simpleminded attitude toward right effort. It's a complex issue. But it's not so complex that you can't figure it out. It's simply a matter of time and using your powers of observation. The Buddha once said that if you want to know a person, really know the person's virtue, you've got to spend a lot of time with that person and be really observant. And the same principle applies to your mind. You've got to make observing the mind and spending time with the mind your top priority, because it takes time, takes effort, to determine what's really needed—but it's time and effort well spent.