

Energy

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There's a formula that gets repeated for each of the four types of right effort: preventing unskillful qualities from arising, abandoning them if they do arise, giving rise to skillful ones, and then maintaining the skillful ones when they've arisen. In each case, you're supposed to generate desire and activate persistence or activate your energy to do the right duty. Generating desire and activating persistence are pretty similar. In both cases, you have to use heedfulness.

When the Buddha talks about arousing your energy or overcoming laziness, he focuses mainly on the narratives you tell yourself about how tired you are, or how you're going to be tired tomorrow, so you'd better rest up today.

Some of the cases are: You've been on a journey. The lazy part of you says, "Well, I've been on this journey. I'm tired, I need to rest." The more active and heedful part of the mind reminds you, "Hey, while I was on my journey I couldn't practice as fully as I can now, now that the journey is over. So I should practice."

Or if you've been sick and just recovered, the lazy part says, "Oh, I need to rest up some more before I really get serious about the practice." The more energetic part says, "Look, while I was sick I couldn't practice and I could have a relapse at any time. I'd better practice now."

The same for when you've had too much to eat or too little to eat or you're about to go on a journey. In each case, the external circumstances are the same. The difference lies in the narrative you tell yourself. As for what's behind the narrative, what's driving the narrative: You have to look into that.

One of the important aspects of activating persistence or activating energy is finding where your energy is right now. If you find yourself meditating and dozing off, getting drowsy, someone inside will say, "Well, it's a sign I'm really tired. I need to go back and rest." You go back and you find something to read and then you find yourself staying up late, until one o'clock, two o'clock, reading something. Where did the energy come from? It was there. You just have to *want* to find it.

The problem is that we tend to get overcome both by pain and unpleasant things and by pleasure or pleasant things that happen. If the meditation isn't going well, we say, "Well, maybe tonight's just not going to work, let's give up." Or if the meditation *is* going well, the breath feels comfortable, everything feels nice, you just drift off into a nice little never-never land. Either way, the pain and the pleasure overcome the mind, overcome your energy.

This, as the Buddha said, is an important issue in the practice. He once told a wanderer that ever since he'd left home, he'd never allowed his mind to be overcome by pain or overcome by pleasure. The wanderer said, "Well maybe that's because you've never experienced any really intense pleasure or pain." The Buddha replied, "Why wouldn't that be the case?" He then went on to describe all the torment he went through during those six years of austerities. And then, after he'd realized that the austerities weren't taking him anywhere, there was the pleasure that came when he got his mind into concentration and gained lots of different insights—memory of previous lives way back, visions of the whole universe, all the beings dying and being reborn: In each case, he said, he didn't allow the pleasure to overcome his mind.

This, he said, is what it means to be developed in body and mind. We think of developed in body as somebody going down to the gym to lift weights or whatever. But that's not what the Buddha meant. He was more concerned with how developed you were in dealing with pleasure and pain in the body, and dealing with pleasure and pain in the mind. In other words, you don't let yourself get discouraged by the pain, and you don't let yourself melt into the pleasure, wallow in the pleasure when that comes up in the meditation.

When there's pain in a part of the body, or there's an emotional pain in the mind, you learn how to work around it. Ajaan Lee has the image of someone digging down into the soil and running into a huge rock. Some people just give up and think, "There must be rock everywhere under the soil." But if you realize, "There's rock in some places and not in others," you dig a little bit here and dig a little bit there and try to find your way around the rock. Because, as he says, there's diamond buried underneath the rock.

So when you're working with the breath in the body and you find that you come up to an area of pain, try to treat it as a challenge, and not as a blockage. It's important that you make use of whatever pleasure you do get from the breath, because if you're focusing just on the pain, it gets wearisome after a while. You just run out of energy.

One of the secrets to activating your energy is knowing where your strong points are, what you've already got that can be used as fuel for your energy. That sense of well-being, a sense of fullness in the breath: Always make sure you're coming from that as you focus on the pain.

And try to notice: Where are you in relationship to the pain? Are you above the pain or below the pain? Does the pain seem to be like a barrier? Can you get your awareness around the pain on all sides? And can you then get the breath flowing around on all sides? Can you get the breath to permeate through the

pain?

If working directly with the pain seems to make it worse, try another tactic. Say the pain is in the right hip: Well, you focus on the left hip. If the pain is in your stomach, focus on your back. If the pain is in your back, focus on your stomach or your chest. In other words, use the pain as an opportunity to develop your ingenuity.

After all, pain is a noble truth. We learn and we gain progress in the path by comprehending it, and there's no way you're going to comprehend it if you just give up every time you run into it and throw down your shovel and run away.

Similarly with pleasure: You've got to learn how to use the pleasure and not just wallow in it. For most of us, once we run across a little bit of pleasure, that's what we do: We just jump in as if it were a big mud puddle and we just wallow around. It may be pleasant while we're there, but it runs out pretty quickly, especially if we lose our focus. You've got to remind yourself, "This pleasure is not going to last, so let's make use of it while we've got it."

Learn how to keep on working with the pleasure, in the same way that you work and earn a salary, and you keep on working even as you're spending the money from your salary to find pleasure. Most of us, though, when we meditate, are like the peasants who have their first experience with wage labor. They work for a week and they get their paycheck at the end of the week and then they drop the job and go off to spend their money. They disappear until the money's all gone. Then they come back and want to start up the work again. If that's the kind of meditator you are, you're like that kind of peasant: You're never going to get a raise; you're never going to be regarded as a reliable employee.

To be a reliable meditator you have to learn how to sit with the pleasure and not get distracted by it. Remember that the pleasure comes from a cause. You've got the mind focused on the breath, you've been able to let go of all your normal worries and concerns. And realize: This is much more pleasant now than it was before, but there's still work to be done. You want to learn how to make that pleasure more reliable.

Again, you realize the pleasure comes from the mind's being focused, from its pulling itself out from all its ordinary concerns or by being concentrated on the breath. So you maintain that concentration. Whatever pleasure fills the body, it'll do whatever work it needs to do. Sometimes we're afraid that if we don't wring every little last bit of intensity out of the pleasure, it's not going to benefit us as much as it could. But that's not the case. It'll pleasure do its pleasure work, refreshing the body, giving you more energy, which you then plow back into the meditation.

Ajaan Fuang called this “investing your merit in more merit,” investing your sense of well-being in developing more well-being. But in all these cases, being developed in body, being developed in mind—not letting yourself be overcome by the pleasure or the pain—requires a very strong sense of heedfulness. You have to realize that you don’t know how much time you’ve got to get your work done. So with the narrative you tell yourself about how much energy you have tonight, how much energy you have right now to put into the practice: Try to tell yourself a narrative that stirs up the energy, arouses the energy, finds whatever little pockets of energy you have in body and mind. They give rise to the sense that, “Yes, I can do this, I can stick with it.”

One of the tricks here is not focusing on anything that’s discouraging. Have the sense that whatever comes up, you can handle it. You’ve got the resources someplace. You’d be amazed at where you can find them.

So the potential for energy is there. Look for it. Learn how to make the most of it. Because it’s only when you can maintain that sense of persistence—sticking with it through the pain, through the pleasure—that the centered state of mind becomes normalcy for you. Everything settles in and it feels *right*, so that leaving this center of normalcy feels abnormal. That’s the perspective you want to gain. It requires energy, but remind yourself you can find it someplace, you can stir it up one way or another.

Don’t let yourself be heedless.