

Right View from Right Effort

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It takes effort to overcome suffering—something we don't like to hear. We'd rather think we can just simply sit there and it'll go away on its own. Or someone else will come and take it away for us. Or maybe we can read a book and understand all about it and that will take care of it.

But that's not the case, because there's also another principle: that it's through effort that we gain wisdom.

You look at the noble eightfold path: It starts out with right view, which informs our efforts. But then again the efforts turn around and train right view.

The things you learn through the practice that you can't learn from books, you can't learn from hearing someone else talk about them: They come from your own efforts to abandon unskillful behavior and develop skillful behavior. That requires desire. So discernment comes from desire.

Ajaan Chah has a nice analogy. He says it's like you've gone to the market and picked up a banana and you're taking it home. Someone asks you, "Why are you carrying the banana?"

And you say, "I'm going to eat it."

"Are you planning to eat the peel as well?"

You say, "No."

"So why are you carrying the peel too? Why aren't you just carrying the flesh?"

And Ajaan Chah asks, "How are you going to answer that person?" And the answer is that you answer through desire. In other words, you want to come up with a good answer. That's how you figure out the answer, which is that the time hasn't come to let go of the peel yet. You need the peel so you can carry the banana home and it doesn't turn to mush in your hands. Once you get home, you take off the peel, eat the banana, and then you're done with it.

It's the same with the practice. You have to want to really do it skillfully for it to work. You hold on until the path factors have done their work. Only then do you let them go.

So again it's not simply a matter of watching things arising and passing away and saying, "Oh, they arise and pass away." Anybody can see that.

What it takes is putting in your own efforts to cut through all the unskillful things in the mind. In the course of that, you learn an awful lot about cause and effect in the mind. And it's through understanding cause and effect that you really break through to something beyond cause and effect.

The Buddha's short answer, when he was asked about his awakening, was that he learned a basic causal principle:

“From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this is, that is. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.”

It sounds very basic, but actually it's quite complex. Some things arise together and pass away together. Other things arise and their effects arise later. Or they may pass away and their effects will pass away later.

So you've got two principles interacting there, which is what makes things complex. You do something right now and you can't be guaranteed that you're going to see the results right now. At the same time, you may be experiencing something right now and you can't be sure whether it's coming from what you're doing right now or from something you did in the past. You have to check things over and over again.

Like that story of the two Thai farmers going to town for the very first time and seeing their very first blinking neon light: They go up to the light and one of them blows on the light and it happens to go out. So he thinks he's blown out the neon light. You have to stay there for a while and realize that you can blow without having any effect. The two events are not connected.

And it's the same with the meditation. You have to try several techniques again and again and again. They may not work the first day, but if you stick with them, you discover that they do work. Or vice versa: Something that may work today may not work tomorrow.

So you have to keep coming back again and again. You take the basic principles and you learn how to adjust them to your practice—what's actually going on right now. A large part of understanding the Dhamma is knowing what are the basic principles that never change and what are the things that have to depend on on the specific context—and your own ingenuity.

The precepts never change. The basic pattern of the practice never changes. It's simply a matter of your learning what's right for your situation, how to apply the basic principles, right now. It's in using your ingenuity this way that you really exercise your discernment—again, in ways that reading books or listening to other people can't do.

For example, you're working with the breath right now. What kind of breathing is good? There's no categorical answer to that question. What feels good right now? You experiment: longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper/more shallow, heavier/lighter. When you find something that feels good, you stick with it. It may feel good for a while and then not so good. So you've got to change.

Then once you've got the breath going well, what do you do with it? Some

people want to jump straight to insight practice. But you don't gain insight until you learn how to maintain your concentration. In fact, the task of maintaining your concentration is an important way of developing your insight—because again, it requires you to learn how to read cause and effect in the mind.

So you stick with the nice in-and-out rhythm of breathing. After a while you begin to drift off. Okay, what are you going to do? Ajaan Lee recommends that you take the sensation of the breathing and the comfort and spread it around the body. Expand your awareness so that it fills the whole body, all the way down to the tips of the fingers, the tips of the toes, out to every pore of the skin. The energy that's required to keep your awareness that broad and maintain it without letting it shrink: That's one way of overcoming drowsiness.

Which sometimes works, sometimes doesn't. Other times, you've got to use your ingenuity in other ways. I've found sometimes that if you make up your mind you're going to stay with one spot in the body for three in-and-out breaths and then move to another for three, and then another for three—in other words, you keep moving around and you have to keep counting your breaths—it gives you something to do, gets you engaged, helps keep you focused and awake.

Or you can think about the different parts of the body. We have that chant on the 32 parts of the body. You can make your own list or you can go through the standard list: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin. When you get to skin, try to think of the skin surrounding your whole body. That helps to develop full-body awareness, maybe one of the reasons why the Buddha sometimes stops there, after the first five. Those are also the five parts of the body you actually see from the outside.

Everything else is inside. If you want, you can work with the bones. Visualize the bones in your toes and try to be sensitive to where they are right now. Work up through the bones in your feet, your legs, the pelvis, the spine, the neck, the skull. Start with the tips of the fingers, go up the arms.

In other words, you've got to give the mind work to do here in the present moment. Otherwise it's going to zone out.

And again, what may work today may not work tomorrow. But don't throw away something that worked today and doesn't work tomorrow because it may work again some other day down the line. You've got to realize that the mind has different conditions from day to day. Sometimes your defilements are quick to do an end-run around a technique that worked yesterday, but don't think of it as meaning that yesterday's technique was a failure, simply that you've got a new situation right now. If you start getting lazy, thinking that you can just hold on to one approach that's going to work every day, every day, then as many of the Thai

ajans would say, “Your defilements are going to laugh at you.” You think you can look in the same spot and find them every day, but they’re going to be off someplace else. Or they come dressed up in other ways.

In other words, you’ve got to keep your ingenuity alive, keep your discernment alive, so that you can deal with problems as they come up. Otherwise, laziness sets in.

This is another way in which effort gives rise to discernment—the effort to be skillful.

So learn to be up for the challenge. Your mind is very complex, and you’ve got to be willing to study something very complex. It’s going to take time; it’s going to take energy. Sometimes you may see your sense of accomplishment just dissolving in front of your eyes, but that’s simply a sign that you’ve got to learn how to ramp up your efforts, go back, and look over what you thought you knew.

You’re going to be learning many things over and over and over again. But there’s always a possibility that going over something old, you may see something new you didn’t see before, by approaching it from a new angle.

After all, all the things you need to know are right here, simply that your discernment is not sharp enough yet. So you’re going to have to be looking over again and again and again at the same spot where the mind and the body meet at the breath.

It’s like reading a really good book several times. You read it the first time, you notice some things. You read it again a couple of months later, you notice something else. Read it again next year, it’s a different book. It’s the same book, but you’re a different person.

Bring the same attitude to your breath. There’s a lot more here than you may suspect—a lot of different angles you can use to approach it.

If you learn how to think outside the box a bit, you’ll see all kinds of things right here where you’ve been all along that you’ve never seen before.

That’s how your discernment gets trained, and that’s how we learn how to overcome suffering.