

The Joy of Effort

September 6, 2007

Often you hear that there are two ways of approaching meditation. One is to put in lots of neurotic, miserable effort. You stress and strain with your heart set on the time someday in the distant future when you'll finally become awakened. The other approach is to realize that the Dharma is all around you in the present moment. You just relax into the present moment and there you are.

Now if those were the two only alternatives, the second one would obviously be the only reasonable approach. But there are other alternatives as well. It's possible to relax into the present and still be filled with delusion. It's possible to enjoy putting effort into the practice, to thrive on challenges, to realize that there's a mature way to relate to the goal of Awakening. You realize that, yes, Awakening is not here yet, it's someplace in the future, but to get *there* you have to focus on *here*. And focusing on *here* is not just a matter of relaxing; there's work to be done. The best way to make it all the way there is to figure out how to enjoy the work here.

In other words, the effort in the meditation doesn't always have to be miserable or neurotic, doesn't always have to be a matter of stressing and straining. Sometimes it will require strong effort, sometimes very subtle effort. Right effort doesn't mean middling effort all the time, you know. What makes the effort right is that it's skillful, appropriate for right here, right now — and you're up for the challenge.

In the Buddha's description of right effort, you're told to generate desire. And one of the best ways of generating desire is to learn how to enjoy the effort — in other words, to take joy in abandoning unskillful qualities and to take joy in developing skillful ones. This joy is one of the traditions of the noble ones. And this actually gets results.

Ajaan Lee has a good analogy. He says the practice is like trying to get fresh water out of salt water. The fresh water is already there in the salt water, but just allowing the salt water to sit for a long while is not going to get the salt to separate out. You have to distill it. And the fire of your distillery is analogous to the effort that goes into the practice. If you don't put in the effort, you're never going to get the fresh water out of the salt water. But the trick is learning how to sustain effort, how to take joy in effort, and that's connected to something else in the practice.

One of the qualities I've noticed that's common among all the forest *ajajans* — in spite of all their different personalities — is they all like to use their ingenuity to

figure things out. In other words, they're not the type of people to simply do as they're told and hope that simply by doing as they're told, Awakening is going to come out the other end, like processed cheese out of a factory. They each found aspects of the path that were like riddles that captured their imagination. These riddles didn't involve just an intellectual analysis, but more the type of analysis where you like to figure out skills. They saw a practical problem and liked to find different ways of figuring it out.

So that's a quality you want to bring to the meditation. Notice what you're doing with the breath and notice what things seem to be problematic. The problem might be a physical pain or an emotional one. Try to figure out how the breath can help. Notice the mechanics of how you breathe. When you breathe in, where in the body does the in-breath energy—the swelling in the abdomen, the swelling of the chest—start? And when this in-breath impulse ripples through the body, does it ripple through smoothly or are there places where it's caught up, where it's blocked, where it's tensed? Can you unravel the blockages?

That's one thing that you might want to work at if you find this an interesting problem. See what you can do. If this problem doesn't capture your imagination, if it doesn't seem to be a problem, notice what *is* a problem for you right here, right now. In other words, learn how to pose questions about the breath, and how to go about figuring out the answers and judging when you've found an answer that really works.

Another common tendency in the forest tradition is not to explain everything beforehand. The ajaans tend to give each meditator the opportunity to figure things out. One reason for this is that the things you've learned by figuring them out stick with you much longer than the things that you're simply told. The other reason is that a lot of our internal problems are extremely internal—the way mental events relate to physical events within you—and only you know how to express them to yourself. Your internal dialogue uses words, images, and language in an idiosyncratic way that only you can know. So you have to learn how to phrase the questions and then come up with answers in ways that are appropriate for your case.

If you can learn to enjoy this process, you're more than halfway there. If you see the effort simply as a chore, something you've got to get through, you're going to miss an awful lot. You're going to end up at the point where you tell yourself that this is not working at all. You want to go back to what in the 19th century they called "the gospel of relaxation," the idea that relaxation, simply accepting things as they are, is going to cure all your ills. This has been with us for a long time in America, the idea if only we could learn how to relax, everything would be okay.

But that's not the Buddha's take on the problem. In his analogy, you've simply been engaging in wrong effort. The difference between right effort and wrong effort is not so much the *amount* of effort as much as *where* you focus your effort. If you want to get milk out of a cow, for example, you learn how to pull at the udder. That's right effort. Wrong effort is trying to get milk out of a cow by twisting her horn. Now, if you've been putting a lot of effort into twisting her horn but not getting any milk, it might be a good idea to relax. But the relaxing is not the whole solution; it's just the first step. The next step is to ask, "What other parts of the cow can I squeeze?" And you look around. You try squeezing her leg; that doesn't work. You try pulling her tail; she kicks you. And finally you pull her udder. That's when you get milk.

In other words, relaxation is the first part of the solution if you've been putting effort into the wrong area, if you've been engaged in wrong effort. But if you're engaged in right effort in the right area, just keep at it. As your effort gets more consistent, you start getting results. The more you get results, the more you find a joy in the effort. And the more you find joy, the more you try to figure things out at even more subtle levels.

So to do well at the meditation it's a matter, one, of being willing to put in the effort, and, two, learning how to enjoy the effort, learning how to enjoy puzzling things out.

The Buddha's path is not the sort where you simply do as you're told— noting, noting, noting, or scanning, scanning, scanning without thinking: Those are simply concentration exercises. They're mindfulness exercises. But you have to do them mindfully, not mindlessly, if you're going to gain any insight. Insight comes from posing the right questions in the mind. "What are these assumptions I'm carrying around here? How could I do this more efficiently? What am I doing that I'm not noticing? How can I learn how to notice it? How can I catch the mind as it's about to let go of its mindfulness?" This last point may sound impossible, but it's not. When you learn how to pose questions in the mind like this and you enjoy trying to find the answers, that's going to bring progress along the path.

And it's perfectly all right to *want* to make progress along the path. After all, that's how the Buddha taught. A lot of people like to second guess the Buddha, saying, "He couldn't really mean what he said, using conditioned things to reach the unconditioned. There must be something behind all this." And they try to figure it all out beforehand, try to clone Awakening without having to go through the work of the path. That's the wrong way of trying to figure things out.

The right way is to take the Buddha at his word and then, when you're doing as he tells you to, to try to figure out why he has you do things this particular way.

That's one of the features of the forest tradition. They took the Buddha at his word, but in an inquisitive way. He said to follow the vinaya; they follow the vinaya. He said to develop right concentration, which means jhana; okay, they do that. Then they look at what they're doing to see how it helps in bringing suffering to an end.

What this means in practice is that you learn how to question your efforts in terms of the four noble truths, and then what you arrive at is going to be something that lies beyond effort, beyond the path. But you can't get to "the beyond" unless you go through the effort of the path. In fact, it's in focusing on the doing of the path that you actually come across the beyond.

So take the Buddha at his word: There *is* right effort. When the Buddha singled out three of the most important factors of the path they were right view, right effort, and right mindfulness. These are the most important helpmates or requisites for right concentration. Those are the factors you want to focus on while you're meditating: right view, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. They all involve doing things, developing things, watching the results, and then—when you see something unskillful happening—letting it go.

If you learn how to take joy in the developing and joy in the letting go, you're on the noble path. And it's not a bad place to be. It's better than being stuck in a place where you're trying to clone Awakening and end up with nothing but wrong view, wrong mindfulness, and wrong...all the way down the line. No milk in your pail, and an angry cow besides. So take the Buddha at his word. And be up for the challenge—because it's a lot of fun.