Cheerfully Ardent

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The path we practice is rooted in desire. You have to want to do it for it to happen. There are two truths in the world, what are called the truths of the observer and the truths of the will. The truths of the observer are simply facts. Whether you want them to be that way or not, that’s where they are. Other things depend on your will. And the path is a combination of both. Some things about yourself you simply have to accept. Other things you’re going to be able to change through your desire. It’s hard to figure out, but that’s what skills are. Figure out what you can do and what your limitations are. You’re working with a piece of wood. Sometimes you find the wood has limitations. So how do you work around those limitations to get what you want? This element of desire, the Buddha talks about how it has to be brought into balance. If it’s too strong, it gets in the way. You want the results and they’re not coming. You get frustrated. Other times you don’t really want it that much and nothing’s going to happen. But it’s not just a matter of the amount of desire. It’s also where you focus it. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha explains so much about cause and effect when he gave his most basic description of his awakening. It was a causal principle. When x exists, y exists. When x doesn’t exist, y doesn’t exist. That’s immediate causation. In other words, as soon as the cause appears, the effect appears as well. When the cause disappears, the effect will disappear too. It’s like sticking your finger into a fire. You don’t have to wait until the next lifetime for the results to come. They come right away. You take it out, even though there may be still a burn mark, you’re no longer burning the finger. Other causes and effects have their relationship over time. You plant a seed today, you’re not going to get the tree right away. You have to wait. But the fact that the seed is impermanent means that the tree is going to be impermanent too. It will end. Which means that right now what you’re dealing with is a combination of three things. The results of past actions, your current intentions, and the results of your current intentions. A lot of the frustration in meditation is trying to figure out which is which. An image that foresters like to use is that you’re planting a tree. There are certain things that you do and certain things that the tree does. And you have to learn how far you can go in getting the tree to grow as fast as you want it to. You can’t pull on it. If you pull on it, it’ll uproot it. You can’t stick leaves on it. You can’t paint the fruits to make them look ripe. Or they will look ripe, but they’re not going to be ripe. Your duty is to look after the water in the tree. Fertilizing it, trying to keep the bugs and other things away from it. And the tree will do its thing. Its duty is to grow. Your duty is to create the causes. So that’s where you want to focus your desire. So we want peace of mind. But peace of mind doesn’t happen just by doing peace of mind. We have to create the causes and focus on doing peace of mind. So you have to focus your desires on the causes. Now, whether peace of mind comes quickly or not quickly will depend partly on what we’re doing and partly not. That’s where it’s frustrating. The mind is more complex than a tree. So again, you have to think about your attitude in developing whatever skills you’ve had in the past. You’ve made sure that you’re happy to be doing the skill. When the results are not coming as you wanted them, you tell yourself, “I’m here to learn.” So you focus on doing the causes as best you can. And then you try adjusting them. Like with the breath. You work with long breathing for a while, then you work with short breathing. Can you make them both comfortable? How about heavy breathing, light breathing, fast, slow? Don’t just stick with one kind of breathing all the time, because you’re never going to learn anything about what your mind can do with the breath and what you can and cannot change right now. The important thing is that you’re willing to learn and you maintain a cheerful attitude. Even when things are not happening the way you want them to, tell yourself you’re learning. If you tell yourself, “I want the results right now. I want the results within a certain span of time,” you’re going to get yourself really frustrated. Just remind yourself that it’s good that you have the opportunity to practice right now, with this breath coming in, this breath going out. So you focus on the causes. You make your desires focus on the causes. This is what the Buddha taught, causality, as his main teaching. Given that causality can be complex, you have to put up with some frustration. But you’re feeling your way. And whatever amount of time you can devote to doing that, it’s time well spent. Have the right attitude toward that. Learn how to keep yourself cheerful. The Buddha said that one of the first things you do with the mind, once you find what state it’s in, is you try to gladden it. You can be glad that you’re here practicing. You can be glad that you’re part of a community that’s practicing. You’re glad that there’s support for this community. You’re glad that you have this breath coming in and going out right now, and your health is good enough that you can do this. There are lots of things to be glad about right now. There’s that story of the monk who was alone in the forest. He hears the villagers off in the distance. They’re having a festival. His meditation is not going well, and he’s miserable. He says, “At least these people know how to have a good time.” “I’m out here miserable in the middle of the forest. I can’t get anywhere in my meditation.” A deva appears to him and says, “Do you realize how many people are on their way to hell right now, and they really envy you, your chance to practice?” So think in ways that lift your spirits, and keep focused on the causes, and figure out, “Well, where is the cause? Where is the effect?” Because this is how discernment is going to get to you. It’s how you get developed. Because when you want to understand the four noble truths, you want to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, and you have to figure out what’s the line between the two. And how do you do that? Well, trial and error. And then trial and error again. Eventually you get to trial and success. Take it for granted that you’ll miss the mark the first time. And Jon Mun made that comment one time. He said, “The path is a middle path, and you’re going to expect that you’re going to go to the extremes first.” So simply learn how to recognize them as extremes. In the days when you’re discouraged, in the days when you’re too eager, it’s like there’s some place in the middle between the two that’s the right spot. So learn to listen for that right spot. Look for that right spot by trying things out. Then you’ll find that your sense of what is just right will develop, will grow. That’s when you know you’re focused right. Otherwise it’s like coming into a house. This house is full of smoke. And instead of looking for where the fire is, you try to put out the smoke. It’s not going to work. You’ve got to focus on the causes. Find out where the causes are. Again, this is why the Buddha talks so much about cause and effect. You’ve got to learn how to think in those terms. Not so much in terms of, “The results I want right now.” The results you want are there in the background of your mind. But the main focus should be, “Where are the causes? How do I get the causes right?” That way you begin to realize where the cause of suffering is and where the suffering itself is. The same with the path. The path and the cessation of suffering. You don’t do the cessation of suffering. You do the path. The release that comes, that’s going to be the result. You don’t do release. You do the middle path. You have to try. Make mistakes. Be willing to have a cheerful attitude about your mistakes. Don’t see them as failures. See them as learning opportunities. And when you’ve learned something that doesn’t work well, you’ve learned something important. You try to feel your way. Focusing on the causes. What is the cause of concentration? Mindfulness. We read about the jhanas. We think, “Well, I’d like that fourth one. That sounds pretty good. No, I’d prefer the second. I’d like to not have some good rapture.” Well, it’s not a menu that you can order things from. You go back and you look at the causes which are in right concentration. That’s required mindfulness. Focus on the path. You want to be ardent, alert, and mindful. Put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So your greed and distress related to the world here might be that you’re too eager to get results. “The amount of time I have here is so little. I’ve worked so hard to get here. I really want to see results of this.” Results are going to happen. The question is, they may not be what you expected. But learn to value the results you do get from the amount of effort you put. Focus on the causes. Mindful to keep the breath in mind. Alert to what’s happening. Alert especially to what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. And then ardent in trying to do this well. And the ardency has to be done cheerfully. If you resent the amount of effort you put in, saying, “I put in all that effort and I didn’t get the results I wanted,” you’ve got the wrong attitude. You should be cheerful that you have the ability to put in the effort. That’s simply a matter of reflecting. You commit yourself and you reflect on the results. View each meditation as a learning opportunity. And then you won’t go wrong. Even if what you learned was not what you expected to learn or wanted to learn, you’ve learned. That’s how you become an experienced meditator. We read the biographies of the Ajahns. The biographies are not as instructive as the autobiographies. The autobiographies of the Ajahns tend to be more honest about what their mistakes were, what they learned from their mistakes. We can take heart from that, and also take it as an example, the cheerful attitude they had towards their efforts. That’s what enables you to keep on making right effort and making it more and more right. So be happy that you have the opportunity to be ardent in your practice. And you’ll find that your ability to work on this becomes inexhaustible. And if you reflect properly, you’re bound to get it right. And that’s the attitude you want. There is right meditation. Some people comfort themselves and say, “Well, there’s no right or wrong in meditation. You’re just with the present moment.” That’s one of the discouraging things I learned when I was teaching in France. The teaching is that there’s nothing you can’t do. You might as well just accept where you are. It’s taught either with the background of saying that, “Well, you have no free will anyhow.” You might as well just accept that fact. The other attitude is that, “Well, you do have free will, but you’re probably going to screw things up. So don’t try. Just be with what’s there.” And you can make yourself cheerful that way. That’s the wrong way to be cheerful. It’s dressing up laziness as if it were awakening. As the Buddha said, it’s going to require effort. So learn to enjoy the effort. Focus in on the causes as best you can figure them out. And the results are going to have to come.

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