Persistence

July 20, 2025

In the list of the factors of awakening, persistence really comes after the wisdom faculty, analysis of qualities. What this means is that we’re not talking about brute effort. We’re talking about effort that’s informed by wisdom. And there are many ways in which it’s informed. We’re talking about by understanding what’s skillful and what’s not. Anything that comes out of the mind that’s based on greed, aversion, delusion is going to be unskillful. Anything that’s based on absence of greed, aversion, and delusion will be skillful. That means with your effort you have to notice when something comes up in the mind, where is it coming from? And then you have to decide what to do. The realization that you have to do something about this is important. There are some people who say that you can’t think of yourself as the agent doing the path. You just have to let the path run on its own. The path doesn’t run on its own. It’s not a machine. There’s a series of guidelines that you have to follow. And then you realize you have to motivate yourself. A lot of wisdom is involved here as well. Knowing how to psych yourself so that you want to do the things that are hard to do but you know will give good results. And to be willing to stop doing the things that you like to do that will give bad results in the long term. This is going to be an individual matter, how you can talk yourself into wanting to do what’s skillful even when you don’t like it, or wanting to say no to things that are unskillful even though you like them. The Buddha recommends that you develop a sense of heedfulness, realizing that your actions really do make a difference, now and on into the future. And if you’re not careful, you’re going to be doing things that will cause you suffering down the line, and you don’t want that. So you’re going to take the long term into account. You can also develop a sense of compassion, realizing that you’re going to cause less harm to yourself and other people if you follow the path. You can get rid of unskillful thoughts, develop skillful ones. Or you can develop a sense of shame, realizing here I am, practicing the Buddhist teachings, and had the opportunity to be born as a human being, made up of the Buddhist teachings. It would be a real shame if I didn’t follow through. Because there are many periods in the world when the teachings of the Buddha are not available. And even when they’re available, there are places where it’s really hard to practice them. But here you have the opportunity. So it would be a shame if you didn’t take advantage of it. So whatever way of talking to yourself that makes you want to do what’s skillful and want to stop doing what’s unskillful, that’s a better part of wisdom. In terms of mindfulness practice, this is called ardency. As Ajahn Lee points out, it’s the ardency, it’s the wisdom faculty there. Because if you just listen to the teachings but don’t do anything about them, that’s not very wise. The wise approach is to realize the Buddha’s pointing out the way to get out of the suffering you’re causing yourself. And be foolish not to follow the way. So whatever way of motivating yourself to want to do the practice, this will depend on you. The things you tell yourself in the morning when you get up, you wake up and you realize you can get up and meditate. But you tell yourself, oh, I’m still sleeping. I could use another hour of sleep. How do you get past that thought? How do you motivate yourself to want to get up in spite of that thought? When the meditation gets difficult and there’s a voice in the mind that says, oh, you’re meditating poorly today, it would be better not to be meditating. How do you argue yourself out of that? Stick with it. Tell yourself that there’s no way you’re going to get past your unskillful thoughts unless you really battle them. If you just give in like this, you’re going to keep on winning. It’s better to lose a battle than not win. It’s better not to even fight at all, especially if it’s a battle with your defilements. Because when you lose, you’ve learned something, you’ve entered into the fight, and you’ve begun to see some of the reasons that your greed, aversion, and delusion give for not doing the practice. And then you can take those home and think about it. What would be a good response? So whatever way you have of motivating yourself, that’s a part of the wisdom that’s needed for right effort, right persistence. And then there’s knowing how much effort or what effort you need. There’s some things the Buddha says you should comprehend them. Some things should be abandoned. Some things should be realized, and some others should be developed. So which type of effort is appropriate right now? That means you have to develop some of the mindfulness that you started with. And ask yourself, this mind state that’s coming up, where does it fall in the Four Noble Truths? Is it an instance of suffering or is it an instance of the cause of suffering? Suffering has to be comprehended to see that it’s in the clinging to the aggregates. And what is clinging? The Buddha defines it as passion and desire. What is craving? Well, craving is defined as passion and desire too. What’s the difference? The passion, the desire, and clinging is when you’re feeding on something. The passion and desire is craving, and when you’re hungry for something you haven’t found the food you want to eat. We’re not just talking about physical food here. We’re talking about mental food as well. So it’s when you’re thirsting for something, that’s craving. But when you finally found something, there’s still craving in the clinging as you consume whatever it is. That’s the suffering. That’s the holding on. You’ve probably seen this when dogs get food, especially dogs living outside. Anybody comes near them, they growl. That’s the way we are about a lot of things in our lives. So when you see that, you’ve got to tell yourself, this is something I’ve got to comprehend. Why am I clinging to this? Why do I think I’m getting nourishment out of this? When you can see this because of ignorant desires, then you let go of those ignorant desires. And you can see this most clearly when you get the mind in concentration. So develop your concentration. There are the guidelines right there for what kind of effort is going to be needed at any one time. And finally, there’s the amount. How much effort is too much? How much effort is too little? And this is something you’re going to have to learn from experience. The Buddha says you have to take two things into account. One is your own level of energy. The other is the nature of the problem itself. In terms of your own energy, you may know the story of Sona. He was a monk who had been very delicately brought up, so delicately brought up that he had hair on the soles of his feet. The king heard about this and he wanted to see what it was like to have hair on the soles of your feet. And so it went out that the king wanted to have Sona come for an audience. And there’s only one reason why the king was going to see Sona. It’s because of the hair on his feet. So they told Sona, “Okay, don’t point your feet at the king. Just sit with your legs crossed and the king can see at a glance. See what’s the hair on your feet?” So he did. So the king talked with Sona for a while, along with a few other people. And then finally he said, “Okay, that’s what I’ve taught you. It’s about worldly aims and worldly benefits. Go see the Buddha. He’ll talk to you about benefits in terms of the Dharma.” So they went. Sona listened to the Dharma and he was inspired. So he asked permission of his parents to ordain. They gave it. He was doing walking meditation, but because his feet were so tender, they started to bleed. And he wasn’t getting his mind into concentration. So he got discouraged. He sat there thinking, “Maybe I can disrobe and go back to being a layman. I can make merit.” And just then the Buddha was reading his mind. He disappeared from Vulture Peak and reappeared in front of Sona. He said, “Were you thinking of disrobing?” You can imagine, here is the Buddha suddenly appearing in front of you. Imagine this right now. You’re sitting here and your mind is wandering someplace else and all of a sudden the Buddha, bang, right in front of you. You’re thinking about what? You’ll be really embarrassed. But Sona was honest. He said, “Yes, I was thinking about disrobing.” So the Buddha said, “Back when you were a layperson, did you know how to play the lute?” “Yes,” he said, “I was skilled.” “When the strings of the lute were too tight, how did it sound?” “It didn’t sound good.” “When they were too loose, how did it sound?” “They didn’t sound good.” “How about when the strings were just right?” “That’s when it sounded good.” And the Buddha said, “In the same way with your mind.” Back in those days, the lute must have had five strings, because he takes the five faculties as an example. He says, “You tune your persistence to your level of energy.” In other words, what you’re capable of right now. Then you tune all the other remaining four faculties, i.e., conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, to that first string. Then pick up the theme of your meditation. He’s playing with a lot of words here. Picking up the theme is the same as picking up a musical theme. That’s what Sona did. He picked up, he figured out what level of energy was appropriate for him, and then tuned in his conviction, his mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, and was able to gain awakening. So that’s one of the lessons of figuring out how much effort is needed. What are you capable of right now? On days when you’ve had a long day of work, and you come to meditate, you don’t sit down and say, “I’m not going to get up until I’ve achieved an excelled awakening.” You basically tell yourself, “I’m going to do my best to get through the hour, as awake as I can.” Other times, though, when you do have that, that energy, you don’t want to quit too early. Put in extra time. You set the alarm for one hour to sit, the hour is up, and your mind is going well. Okay, stick with it. Stick further. And John Fuhring once told me that this was the secret to his meditation. They would have a group meditation from six until ten, with some chanting, dhamma talk, dhamma reading meditation. For most people, four hours is plenty. They go back to their rooms and lie down, go to sleep. But he went back to his room and he continued meditating. So when you have the energy, don’t just put in a minimal amount of effort. Realize here’s your opportunity to do a little bit more. That’s one issue, how much energy you have. The second issue is what kind of defilement are you dealing with? As the Buddha said, there are two kinds of defilements. Some of them will go away, all you have to do is just look at them, and they go away. Those are cases where a defilement comes into the mind and you’re not really paying attention. Because you’re not paying attention, this defilement takes over. But if you look at it straight, you realize how stupid it is. It’s like it’s embarrassed and it’ll just stop. There are other defilements, though, that are not easily embarrassed. In other words, you just look at them and they’re going to just keep on going. In those cases, the Buddha said, you have to exert a fabrication. What this means is you have to think of the three fabrications, the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, and the perceptions and feelings you hold in mind. Anger comes into the mind. How are you breathing? Are you breathing in a way that aggravates the anger? Breathe more calmly. Breathe in a way that’s soothing. Breathe in a way that allows you to step back from the anger and not feel that it’s gotten into your system. Then ask yourself, how are you talking about the situation? Is what you’re saying true? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time and place for that inner conversation? How else could you look at the situation in a way that would not provoke your anger? Because even in situations where something has to be done, the anger is not going to help get it done. We sometimes think that anger gives us energy, but it also blocks out a lot of our shame and compunction, because we start doing and saying things that in our right mind we wouldn’t do or wouldn’t say. So you realize you’ve got to get rid of the anger. So you think about the good points of the other person. You think about how if you act on your anger, you’re going to do things that an enemy would enjoy seeing, because you’re going to be harming yourself. Here again, you have to think in ways that can get you out of the thoughts that revolve around the anger. And finally, what perceptions are you holding in mind? One perception that’s all too common is that someone does something repeatedly and you just tally up, tally up, tally up, add it on, add it on. You say, “Why is this person always doing that?” Well, the person isn’t always doing that. They may do it repeatedly, but they’re not doing it all the time. And just because this happened many times in the past doesn’t mean that those things have to weigh your mind down. So change the way you perceive the situation. As the Buddha said, you see somebody who’s got you angry. Think of yourself as being like a person going through a desert. You’re hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You come across a little pool of water in a cow’s footprint. Now the water’s clear. But you realize if you tried to scoop it up with your hand, you would make it muddy. And when it’s muddy, you can’t drink it. So what do you have to do? You have to get down on all fours and slurp it up. Now you wouldn’t want somebody coming along with a camera and taking a picture at that point, putting it on Instagram. But you realize this is what you’ve got to do. It may be undignified, but for the sake of your own survival, this is what you need to do. The same way the Buddha says, “Think about someone who has you angry.” You have to think about their good points. What’s beneath me to think of their good points? But then remind yourself, your goodness needs nourishment. And the nourishment comes from looking at the good side of other people. This is not to deny the bad side, but at least give some space to the good side, to calm your anger down. And then you can think about what might be the appropriate thing to do or say. So these are some of the things that you need to use your discernment. You need to use your wisdom. To inform your efforts as to what’s skillful and what’s not, what the proper type of effort is, how you motivate yourself to do that appropriate type, and then knowing how much effort needs to be put in, what kind of effort. So when the Buddha’s talking about persistence and effort, he’s not talking about brute effort, where you just strain and strain and sweat and sweat. He’s talking about effort that’s informed by wisdom, informed by discernment. That’s the kind of effort that would actually lead to awakening.

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