

Mindful Effort

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The Buddha says that three factors of the path hover around all the other factors. There's right view, which helps you to know what's, say, right speech or wrong speech, right action or wrong action, right mindfulness or wrong mindfulness. Then there's right mindfulness, which keeps in mind the fact that you want to develop skillful qualities—the right factors—and you want to abandon the unskillful ones, the wrong factors. And then there's the actual effort, a right effort that tries to develop the skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones. These factors are also the first three factors for awakening, simply that they're listed in a different order: mindfulness; analysis of qualities, which is the same thing as right view; and persistence, which is the same thing as right effort. These qualities have to go together because without right view and right mindfulness, your effort goes straying off in other directions. Without right effort, right view and right mindfulness can't accomplish anything much.

So as you put effort into the practice, you have to understand it. Understand what you're doing, why you're doing it and, once you've got that understanding, you've got to keep it in mind. Otherwise, the effort goes in fits and starts. It doesn't build up momentum. Or else it's simply wasted.

There's a series of images the Buddha gives of people who put a lot of energy into the practice, but who do it the wrong way and so don't get results. As a result, they get discouraged. They begin to wonder if effort can do anything at all. You have to remember that there were a lot of people in the Buddha's time who said that if you put effort into the practice, you won't get any results regardless of how much you want them, because human effort is just too weak and ineffectual. Nowadays we've got the idea that any effort is going to get in the way of the unconditioned, so you stop exerting any effort at all. Just sit there and let the mind be like a big open sky with clouds floating in and floating out, without your doing anything at all, and that's the unconditioned.

But that's not the unconditioned, and that wasn't the Buddha's approach. He said that you have to understand where effort is best applied. It's like trying to get milk out of a cow. If you twist the horn, you're not going to get any milk. If you twist the horn more and more and more, and put a lot of effort into twisting the horn, it still doesn't make any difference. You're won't get any milk. And at that point, it's easy to get discouraged and think that maybe effort isn't a good thing.

You stop twisting the horn and you feel much better, more relaxed. But the fact is, you're still not getting any milk. You have nothing to satisfy your hunger or thirst.

The problem is not so much with effort in general. It's with your misunderstanding of where to apply it. You pull on the udder and you get the milk. You don't have to pull hard, either. You put the effort in the right spot and you're going to get results.

You've got to keep this point in mind because it's so easy to forget that you're sitting here meditating and focusing on the breath: You're off someplace else. Or you get distracted by something in the breath itself. Things get nice, things get comfortable, and as Ajaan Fuang would say, your hands and feet let go and you just fall into the pleasure, forgetting that the pleasure has to come from causes, and if you abandon the causes the pleasure's going to disappear after a while.

So that's something you've got to watch out for. It's not the case that only the things that pull you away from your meditation are going to be troublesome. Sometimes some of the good things that come up as part of the meditation can be troublesome, too. Ajaan Lee has a whole list of good things in the meditation that can cause trouble if you don't handle them well. For instance, lots of people meditate so that they can get visions. They want to see something. In fact, that's often one of the first questions you're asked in Thailand when people find out that you meditate: "Ah, when you meditate, what do you see?"—hoping that you've been seeing lottery numbers, or spirits of the dead, or whatever. That's a big distraction.

Even the sense of rapture that can come in the meditation can be a distraction, too. The sense of pleasure and ease can be overwhelming. If you see it coming along and you reach out to grab it, you're going to miss everything that's really good. You'll leave the breath, and your meditation will float around for a bit, and then you'll come out and wonder where you were.

This is why mindfulness is such an important part of the concentration. You've got to remember to keep your breath in mind. If you're not focusing directly on the breath, well, at least keep in mind the fact that you're dealing with feelings and mind states, any one of the four frames of reference. And if you're going to focus on feelings, don't just wallow in the feeling. Remember that you're looking for the cause. That takes you back to the breath on one hand, and to the steadiness of your gaze on the other.

You've got to keep in mind that this is work that we're doing here, even though it can be very pleasant work. You don't want to be the sort of person who does a little bit of work and then, when you get your first salary check, you disappear for a week as you go out to spend all your money. And when you've run

out of money you have to come back and ask for the job again. If you keep this up, you're never going to get a raise.

You have to realize that the progress comes by sticking with the breath in its various manifestations. If you're not sticking with the in-and-out breath, then try to stay with the sense of breath energy suffusing the body. Make sure that every part of the body is nourished by that energy. You stop twisting the cow's horn, but you actually put effort in: You pull on the udder.

Another image the Buddha gives is of trying to get oil. You grind gravel but gravel doesn't have oil. All you get is gravel dust. If you want oil, you can grind sesame seeds or any plant that has oil. The same with the meditation: You've got to know where the effort has to be focused. You focus on the steadiness of your gaze. You don't want to focus on anticipating things.

I got a call this evening from someone who wanted to know how long it was going to take to attain stream-entry. She was hoping that it would be a matter of months. And as I told her, you can't focus on that. Where are you going to look for stream-entry? You've got to look right here at your breath. As with any journey, you have to focus on where you're placing your feet. If you have an imaginary image of what the goal is going to look like, you can't walk on the image. The image isn't going to take you there. It may motivate you, but the actual getting there has to depend on watching where you're taking your steps to make sure you're on course, and that you're not going to step on something slippery and fall.

So you focus the effort right here, on constantly coming back to the breath, to your frame of reference. As for whatever comes up, you want to deal with it skillfully in the context of that frame. This is what the objects of mindfulness are all about. They're not just simply things that you watch coming and going while you don't do anything.

I was reading a book a while back where the author claimed that there are basically two paths. One is the path of right mindfulness and the other is the path of right effort and right concentration. In the path of right mindfulness, you don't do anything aside from watching things arise and pass away, and letting them sort themselves out, whereas in the path of effort and concentration you put a lot of effort into getting the skillful things to come and the unskillful things to go away. The author's idea was that the first path is the one that uses more discernment and is wiser and easier. But I've never seen that path go anywhere. I've never seen the Buddha teach that path. He taught only one path, and in that path right mindfulness, right effort, and right concentration all have to go together.

You remember to apply right effort and remember where to apply it, based on what you've been learning, either from Dhamma talks you've heard, from your own reading, or from your own practice. You learn your lessons and you try to keep them in mind so that you can apply them. Then you gain your own sense of touch as to how much you have to push. Sometimes you're very observant, but you don't do much—you simply watch what's going on. Especially when you can't figure something out, when all the different approaches you've applied in the past don't seem to work, just watch things for a while to understand what's happening. But when you find something that works, go ahead and do it.

Because the frames of reference are there to remind you that these are the things you watch out for. When you see them arise, remember that there's a duty with regard to them. You've got the four noble truths and they're telling you to do this: If you run into any stress or suffering, you want to comprehend it. If you can see what's giving rise to that stress, you want to let that go. As for the factors of the path—everything from right view through right concentration—those are things that you're trying to give rise to if they're not there, and to maintain and develop them further when they are. And in that way you begin to realize what the end of suffering is like.

So there are duties with everything that's listed in the four frames of reference. And you keep those frames of reference in mind so that you can remember: "Oh, when sensual desire arises, that's something you want to abandon. And how do you do it in a way that's effective? When rapture arises, how do you develop it in a way that's skillful? When calm arises, how do you develop *that* in a skillful way? When ill will or sloth or torpor arise, how do you abandon them and not get sucked into them?"

So you maintain your mindfulness in order to remember what's the right thing to do right now. That way, you can apply your effort in a way that really gets the milk or gets the oil—because you're applying the right kind of effort and you're focusing it in the right place.