

Persistence – Lift Your Heart

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The Buddha noted that we tend to cling to views about the world, to ideas about what should and shouldn't be done, who we are, and the kind of pleasures that are worth going for. But it's very rare that any one person would have a consistent structured view around these things. Our views are more like a big grab bag full of Legos. We reach into the grab bag. We find some bits and pieces that, in some cases, have been put together. Sometimes they're just individual pieces. Sometimes there's half a house, sometimes half a building, sometimes a gun: all kinds of things. And we tend to pick our views at any one time out of the grab bag depending on what we want. That means our desires are in charge, and they can be pretty random.

When we come to the practice, though, the dynamic changes. We're given two sets of views that are categorical—one that skillful actions, skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned; and two, the four noble truths together with their duties. If we have conviction in the Buddha's awakening, we believe these really are categorical. The problem is that they're not truths that just sit there. They have duties associated with them. They tell us what to do, what to abandon, what to develop. And here our old habit of picking and choosing our views runs up against a wall.

Right effort is defined as abandoning what's unskillful. If an unskillful quality hasn't arisen yet, you make sure it doesn't arise. If it has arisen, you try to abandon it. As for skillful qualities, if they haven't arisen, you try to give rise to them. When they're there, you try to develop them as fully as possible. Sometimes we feel like doing that, and sometimes we don't. After all, our conviction, as long as it hasn't been verified or confirmed, is still going to have some holes.

You have parts of the mind that are on the side of the Buddha, and parts of the mind that are on the other side. And a lot of right effort is learning how to convert the parts that are on the other side—either that or to abandon them, and to *want* to do that. This is an important element of having strong persistence, or persistence as a strength. You have to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities, and delight in developing skillful ones. That's one of the traditions of the noble ones. You don't just grit your teeth. You try to figure out ways of making it enjoyable. Find joy in the effort. It's part of the formula for right effort: “generating desire.”

There's another part that's translated as uplifting your intent. Another word for "intent" there, *citta*, can also mean "mind." It can also mean "heart." You lift your heart up, saying, "Yes, I really do want to do this. I'm tired of all the suffering I've been through in the past. I'm tired of looking at my own actions and seeing that they've created suffering. I want something better."

Now, there's some discernment in that desire, and you want to foster that so as to lift up the mind. The Buddha gives the image of discernment as a person climbing up into a tower, with a much larger view of things than your ordinary petty concerns. The pettiness of your defilements begins to seem really small. You tell yourself, "I want something better than that." And then you want to carry through with that desire.

The first step, of course, is to learn how to side more and more consistently with the Buddha, and to see that it's something you want to do, because we pal around with our defilements.

As the Buddha said, we go around with craving as our companion. It's been a long-term companion—who knows how many lifetimes. But we have to realize that this is a companion who's done us wrong many, many times. The reason we hang around with it is simply because we're familiar with it. And it's given us some pleasure in the past. If it hadn't given any pleasure at all, we wouldn't go for it. But we tend not to associate the craving with the pain that comes with the craving. We have a compartmentalized mind. The pain that comes is something separate: something else, somebody else's fault. The craving takes credit for all the pleasure. It's like those theistic beliefs where the god who creates the world takes credit for all the good things in the world, but not for the bad things. That's what your craving is like.

So you have to learn to realize, okay, it's not your friend. You should learn how to see the connection between the cravings and the pain that they create. That's why the Buddha has all those images for sensuality, like a dog gnawing on a set of bones. It has no meat at all. It's just bones, and the dog's not going to get any nourishment from them at all. And as Ajaan Lee says, the reason it keeps gnawing away is that it's just got the taste of its saliva on the bones. That's all. It thinks the bones are providing it with something, but no. It's the saliva that it's adding to the process.

The same with our sensual desires: The objects of the desires are not that wonderful when you really look at them carefully, look at them all around. But we don't look at them all around. We look at them on one side. And then the saliva of our desire, the saliva of our lust, the saliva of our cravings—that gives it some

flavor. If you realize that's all it is, you begin to say, "I want to get out of that. I want to get out of that oppression."

Go down that list of the different images the Buddha gives: The person carrying a torch, and the wind is blowing the flame back at him. The hawk that's got a piece of meat, and all these other hawks and crows and other raptors come to fight it to get that piece of meat. A lot of sensual pleasures in the world are like that. They require that you fight other people off. So learn to look at these things.

As the Buddha said, see the drawbacks of sensuality, see the degradation, anything that will help you change your mind about which side you're on. This is going to be an ongoing process, because the mind is going to keep switching sides, going back to its old friends. But you've got to get quicker and quicker at recognizing what's happening, and which parts of the mind—they all have your voice—but which parts are the ones you can trust and which ones have just learned how to imitate your voice, so that you can change your allegiance.

This is where the other part of the learning how to stick with the duties of right view comes in, and that's learning how to find some joy in doing the practice—as with generosity, trying to figure out new ways of being generous. If your mind likes to be creative, okay, that's a good place to look. Of the various parts of the path, that's the one that allows the most leeway in terms of your creative ideas of what would be a good thing to give to whom.

If your imagination wants some time to run around, let it run around with that: learning how to think about new ways of being generous, taking joy in the precepts, and learning how to hold by them even in difficult situations, taking it as a challenge, realizing it's not simply holding to the rules.

You have to realize that virtue is a skill. There are times when you have some information. Someone else wants it, and you know they're going to abuse it. How do you not give them the information, and yet not lie? That's a good challenge. You've got some inconvenient animals in your hut. How do you get rid of them without killing them? Take that as a challenge. The part of the mind that's up for the challenge: That's the part that you want to lift up. You lift your heart, you lift your mind to really want to follow the duties of right view, because that's what right effort and the strength of persistence are all about

Then when you come to the meditation, here's another area where you can learn how to play. You've got the breath, and you can do all kinds of things with the way you breathe. Think of it as like learning a musical instrument. You go into your room. You shut the door. Say it's a guitar: You play it. At first, it doesn't sound all that good. But then you listen, and then you change the way you play. And then you listen again. You change the way you play. You find you get better.

Then you listen to other people who are really good at it to get an idea of what some of its possibilities are. And you learn how to imitate that. Then you learn how to strike out on your own—the important principle here being that you enjoy the challenges that come as you try to get better and better.

Think about Ajaan Lee working with his breath. Someone was commenting the other day on how Ajaan Lee was very unusual. He'd go to India and he would learn. Of course, his way of learning was to look into his meditation. How is it that these yogis can lie on beds of nails? How is it they can stand out on one leg under the hot sun for hours? What are they doing? He meditated for a while. Then the message came that they were working with their breath energy. He said, "Well, can we do the same thing to help with the Buddha's path?" As I said, he wasn't above learning from anybody who had something good for him to learn. Then he played with it on his own.

When you read the steps in Method Two, those are the ways of dealing with the breath energy that he had learned when he'd had a heart attack up in northern Thailand. As you read some of his other Dhamma talks from later years, you find that he has other ways of dealing with the breath—sometimes just the opposite. In Method Two, he says to get the breath energy going from the neck down the spine. In other places, he says to start with the breath energy in the soles of your feet and have it come up the spine—the point being that your breath needs are going to be different from one day to the next. So you learn how to play with them.

One of the images he uses—he probably borrowed it from the Canon—is the image of the cook who tries to please his or her master by finding different ways of fixing the food, and taking joy in that. You've got a picky mind that has trouble settling down. Okay, find something to please it. What can you figure out that the mind would like? And what kind of challenges does it find interesting?

Sometimes it's simply a question of which direction the breath should go, or where it enters the body. Other times it has more to do with just the whole issue of perception. When you feel tension in some part of the body, is it really in that part of the body, or is your mind lying to you? Is your picture of your body all scrambled? Try thinking of it in other ways. Many times I've found I had a pain or tightness in my chest, but it really wasn't in the chest. It was actually in the back. Or something that seemed to be in the back was actually in the stomach.

You're going to discover things like that only if you play with your perceptions. Turn them around. Turn them inside out, upside down. And find some joy in the challenge. It's in this way that you learn how to lift your heart

instead of just rummaging through your bag and trying to find, “Well, which view will justify what I want to do?”

See here the Buddha’s already thought out the right views that we should take as our working hypotheses. In the case of the mind, what does that mean you have to do? Sometimes it means doing things that you don’t want to do, or not doing things that you do want to do. But if you learn how to take that as a challenge, and find some joy in meeting the challenge, then it really does lift your heart.

So don’t think of right effort or the strength of persistence as burdensome. Think of it as an opportunity to test your practical imagination, and to learn how to side with one consistent view that really is for your true best interest. That way, you’ll get to lift the heart higher and higher to dimensions you can’t imagine. But it does take something of your imagination to figure out the path and figure out a way of enjoying the path to get there.