

Joy in 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 firmly set on the time someday in the far distant future when you'll finally become awakened. The other approach is to realize that the Dhamma 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 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, and actually get there. You realize that, yes, the experience of 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.

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 and relax for a long while is not going to get the salt to separate out. You have to distill it. 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 fresh water out of the salt water. But the trick is learning how to *sustain* effort, so that you don't give up when the going gets tough.

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 it actually gets results.

The best way to develop this sort of joy is to regard the practice as a skill that challenges your ingenuity. One of the qualities I've noticed is common among all the forest ajaans—in spite of all their different personalities—is that they all like to use their ingenuity to figure things out. They're not the type of people who 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 of the process, like luncheon meat 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 figure out a problem. When

they found a problem of this sort, they liked to find the most effective way 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 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 spread 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 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 that relate to issues that really concern you. Learn 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 you're simply told. The other reason is that many 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 idiosyncratic questions and then come up with answers 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'll end up at the point where you tell yourself that this isn't working at all. You'll want to go back to what people in the 19th century 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 that if only we could learn how to relax, everything would be okay. We've been at this for more than 100 years, and even though it still hasn't worked out, the idea hasn't lost its appeal.

And it's certainly not the Buddha's take on the problem. In his analogy, if you haven't gotten results from making an effort, 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 and what you actually do. 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 relaxing is not the whole solution; it's just the first step. After all, you still haven't gotten any milk. The next step in actually getting the milk 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 engaging 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 joy in the effort. And the more you find joy, the more you're energized to try to figure things out at even subtler levels.

So to do well at the meditation it's a matter, one, of being willing to put in the effort, and, two, of 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 approaches are simply mindfulness exercises, but people tend to do them mindlessly—i.e., without asking any questions. Actual insight comes not by pummeling the mind with a technique but 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, it'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 some trick to all this." They try to figure it all out beforehand, to clone an awakened view 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 until you arrive at 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 in helping right concentration, they were right view, right effort, and right mindfulness. These are the most important helpmates or requisites for right concentration. These 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 irritated cow besides. So take the Buddha at his word. And be up for the challenge—because it can be a lot of fun.