

Finding Extra Energy

April 16, 2013

The Buddha's discussions of right effort contain two principles for figuring out how much effort is the right amount of effort. One principle you're probably familiar with is the story of the lute: the monk who had been practicing too hard, then got discouraged, and the Buddha appeared in front of him.

He asked him, "When you were a lay person, did you play the lute?" The monk said yes, he was skilled at playing the lute. "What happened when the strings were too tight? Did it sound good?" No. "How about when the strings were too loose? Did that sound good?" No. And the Buddha said, "In the same way, you tune your effort to what you're capable of, and then you tune the rest of the faculties – conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment – to the amount of effort that's just right for you."

So that's one way of figuring out how much effort is the right amount: what you're capable of.

The other method concerns how much effort a particular task requires. The Buddha said that with some of the causes of suffering in the mind, all you have to do is just watch them, and they go away. With others, you have to exert what he calls a fabrication. You have to look at the way you're breathing around the issue. You have to look at the way you're thinking about it, how you evaluate it, how you direct your thoughts to it: in other words, the conversation you're having in your mind about the issue. Maybe that has to be changed. And then finally, there are the feelings and perceptions. These are mental fabrications, and maybe they have to be changed, too. That's the other way of calculating the right amount of effort.

So you've got two different methods, which means, of course, there can be a conflict. Sometimes a particular task requires a lot of effort, but you don't have much energy. This is one of the reasons why, when we practice, we sometimes have to push ourselves harder than we think we're capable of. There are events in life that are going to call for a lot of

effort: times when there's an emergency, times when there's work to be done – a *lot* of work that has to be done in a certain amount of time.

Other times, when overwhelming emotional issues come up, you can't say, "Well, I'm just playing my little tune on my lute today. I can't play that larger symphony, that larger piece of music. It's in the wrong key." You've got to find the resources within you to figure out how much you're going to be able to meet the challenge, be up for the emergency. You can't simply say, "This is the amount of energy I've got, and that's it." You've got to find extra stores of energy. And one of the primary ways where you can tap into these extra stores is by finding where you're wasting energy.

Again, look at those fabrications. The way you breathe: Is the way you breathe energizing you, or is it draining your energy? You have to really acquaint yourself with your breath and the way the breath energy flows in the body so that you can figure out what rate of breathing is just right for right now – or that will give you more energy.

Similarly, the way you think: When a situation comes up that really challenges you emotionally, it's not a time to be getting in touch with your emotions and letting them express themselves. You have to tell yourself, "Look, I don't have the energy to indulge in that particular kind of thinking. Maybe save it for later. But for right now, I've got to drop it."

It's like that story with Ajaan Lee going into the forest with a group of his lay students. First, they were going to take the train up to Lopburi, a town a couple of hours to the north of Bangkok, then go out in the forest from there. They arrived at the main station in Bangkok, and a lot of the lay people had brought *huge* amounts of luggage. I guess they figured they'd find people to carry the luggage for them at the Lopburi train station. Ajaan Lee took one look at them and he just started walking down the railroad tracks. So, of course, everybody else had to walk after him, which meant that they were lugging a lot more luggage than they thought they would have to lug.

They started complaining, "Why are we doing this? Why are you making us walk? Our luggage is so heavy." At first, Ajaan Lee didn't say anything. He just kept walking. Finally, he said, "Well, if it's heavy, throw it away." So they had to stop, and the people with all the extra luggage had to sort out what was necessary and what was not. That was back in the days when there were lotus ponds on either side of the main

railroad line going through Bangkok, and so all the extra bags and the extra stuff within the bags got thrown into the lotus ponds. By the time they got to the next station, at Samsen, Ajaan Lee looked around and everybody had just one bag. That was when they could get on the train.

When something's creating a lot of emotional turmoil in your life, you can't indulge in the emotions. You've got to say, "I've got to drop that. I can't think in those terms. I've got to focus on what needs to be done right now." Trim things down. Look at whatever unnecessary stories you're telling yourself about the situation, whatever issues you're bringing in that are not at all helpful, and learn how to put them aside. They'll be there when you have more time and more leisure to deal with them. But for the time being, you don't have time for them. Other things need to be done.

Then there are the perceptions and the feelings. The way you breathe, of course, has a lot to do with how you feel in the body – the pleasure and pain you feel in the body – and that can give you a huge boost if you know how to breathe properly. Many of the people who worked on the chedi and Buddha image at Wat Dhammasathit noticed that when they stayed with the breath – as they were shoveling sand, breaking up gravel, mixing the cement, carrying the buckets of cement over to the construction site – they could do it all night long. There was another time though when, as a group, they went to help at another monastery. At that place, everybody was chattering – it wasn't a meditation monastery – and they said they got worn out by 10 p.m. even though the work was supposed to last until 3 a.m.

So simply staying with your breath helps to reduce the amount of wasted energy. And holding that sense of well-being with the breath: that can keep you going when food runs out, when otherwise you would feel it's your last gasp. Well, no, you've got another gasp, and another one, and another one, and they feel good. They're not gasps; they're refreshing breaths. And they actually give you energy.

Then there are the perceptions. How do you represent the situation to yourself in your mind? What are the images that underlie your thinking? Are you perceiving yourself as the victim? Maybe you might want to drop that perception and replace it with another one. Instead of being the victim, you can see yourself as the person who's resourceful and has extra sources of energy. This is one of the reasons why the work in the monastery every now and then is a little bit more than just right.

It's not a nice, little tune on your lute. There are things that have to be done, and they have to be done now. They teach you to look inside to see what extra stores of energy you might have that you would never otherwise tap into.

So this is how we put those two principles together – the two principles of discernment in action to figure out what's "just right" and also figure out how you can detect when you're adding unnecessary stress and burdens to yourself and learn how to drop them so you *can* travel lightly. When you're traveling lightly, you can travel farther because you see where you're wasting energy. And that means you've got that much more energy to devote to what really has to be done. As I was just saying this evening: There were times with Ajaan Fuang, when I'd be involved in a project, and all of a sudden he'd have a really bad attack of his psoriasis. He had rheumatoid psoriasis, and the attacks would come every now and then, which meant I had to drop everything and go for days maybe on one or two hours of sleep every night. And it was a really useful Dharma lesson because I found that I had resources I didn't know about before.

This is also why they ask you to really give yourself to the practice. There's that old image in the Canon. The Buddha used it in one way, but I'd like to use it in another: the story of the elephant who goes into battle. He fights with his forefeet and he fights with his back feet, but he holds his trunk back. The elephant trainer sees that and realizes, "Okay, the elephant has not given his life to the king." But when the elephant fights with everything he's got – including his trunk – that's when he knows the elephant has given his life to the king.

It's the same in the practice when you keep holding back, holding back – "Oh, I'll do this, but I won't do that; I'll help here, but I won't help there" – you haven't given your life to the practice. This means that when the times come when you're going to need extra energy – and these are not just issues with work outside, but they're also issues that come up in the meditation when you have to sit with something until you've worked it through because otherwise it's going to keep hassling you – if you're not willing to give that extra amount of energy, the job will never get done.

Again, it's like going into battle. I think I've told you the story of a friend of mine who went for army training. He told me this story about part of the training. They were told they were going to have to run for a

couple miles. So they ran for a couple miles and, of course, everybody was thinking about, “Boy, when we get to the finish line, we’ll be done.” Well, they got to the finish line, and the instructor said, “Okay... Now, another quarter mile.” Of course, everybody complained. He said, “Look, when you’re out in the battlefield, you can’t say, ‘We’re going to fight tonight until 5 p.m., and then everybody can stop and have a nice dinner.’ You just have to keep on fighting until the battle’s won.”

That’s part of the training: learning where your extra resources are so they’ll be there when you need them. And the amount of energy you have will be enough for the amount of energy that particular problem requires.