

## *Making an Effort*

*July 30, 2007*

Tonight's the start of the rains retreat.

Traditionally, the three months from the full moon in July to the full moon in October is a time for the monks to stay in residence in one place. But the rains retreat is usually more than that. Staying in one place gives an opportunity to learn from one another and to put special effort into the practice.

The effort is primarily an effort of mind. Right effort is defined as generating desire, upholding your intent, putting forth an effort to abandon any unskillful mental qualities that have arisen, to prevent unskillful mental qualities that haven't arisen from arising, to give rise to skillful mental qualities and, once skillful mental qualities have arisen, to develop them and bring them to completion.

So the effort is primarily an effort in the mind. In fact, in Thai one of the idioms for meditation is "to make an effort": *tham khwaam phien*. And although the term carries the connotations of spending a lot of time doing walking meditation, the primary effort is right inside the mind. As unskillful mental qualities arise, you've got to do what you can to get rid of them, to abandon them, and to make sure that they don't arise again.

In the formula for right effort, it's not just effort. There's the element of desire, *chanda*. You have to realize that the training of the mind is what makes all the difference between being happy in life and being miserable in life. There are people who have all kinds of nice things outside but if the mind isn't trained, they can still be very miserable: creating all sorts of trouble for themselves and for the people around them.

So it's good to reflect on the difference between a trained mind and an untrained mind. With a trained mind, you think about things that are worth thinking about. If anything worthless comes up in the mind, you just let it go. You think about things that are helpful, that lead to happiness. As for issues that are not helpful and don't lead to happiness, you can let them go. They don't take over the mind.

But with an untrained mind, all kinds of things can come in and take over the controls. It's almost as if you're being possessed by alien forces. Greed, anger, and delusion: Even though they come from within the mind, they're alien in the sense that they can cause all kinds of trouble to the mind. We all want happiness and yet we let these things come in and take over our minds. We act under their

power. That's one of the big paradoxes in life.

So in order to ensure the mind doesn't become its own worst enemy, you've got to train it. This is what the right effort is all about.

Once you have the desire, then you work on persistence: The practice is something you stick with over time. And as the formula also says, you "uphold your intent." In other words, you keep focused on the issue of what's going on in the mind, whether it's skillful or not.

Those three qualities—desire, persistence, and intent—are also involved in three of the bases for success. And the ability to distinguish between what's skillful in the mind and what's unskillful in the mind implies discernment, your ability to analyze things as they arise in the mind, which is part of the fourth base of success. So right effort is not that far from the bases for success. In fact, the two sets go together.

The important thing to understand about the effort we put into the practice is that it has to be an *appropriate* effort. It's not the case that you have to exhaust yourself all the time as you practice. It's more that you see what's needed in any particular case and you try to do it.

The Buddha gave so many versions of the path, so many explanations of the teaching, not because he had lots of different paths but because there were the different ways of tackling the path, different issues that come up in the course of following the path that require you to take a slightly different approach from time to time.

For instance, some people will find that the path goes quickly and it's easy. Other people find that it goes quickly but it's hard. Some people find that it takes a long time but it's easy, and for others it takes a long time and it's hard.

Everyone wants to go into the category of quick and easy, but it's not something you can determine ahead of time. You find out in the course of your own practice whether taking the easier way is actually helpful in getting rid of defilements and bringing about more skillful qualities of the mind.

If the easier way doesn't work, you've got to realize that it's not working for you, and you've got to be willing to make things harder for yourself: to go with less food, say, or to push yourself more in the practice.

In other words, a large part of your responsibility in the practice lies in seeing what works for you at any one particular time, by learning how to read the results of your practice and then adjusting it accordingly.

The Buddha also makes the point that there are some unskillful qualities of the mind that will go away simply by watching them. You see greed come, you watch it, and it goes away. And that's it. You don't have to do anything.

Sometimes anger is that way, or fear, lust, passion. Some defilements go away simply through your watching them. You have the ability to step back from them a little bit and just note the fact, “Oh, there’s greed,” and once you recognize it, it’s gone. It fades away.

So there *are* times when you simply have to watch things coming and going, and that’s all you need to do. In fact, if you put too much effort into them, sometimes it creates more problems than it solves.

But that doesn’t work all the time. There are also the defilements that require what the Buddha says, “an exertion of fabrication.” That’s the technical term.

Fabrication is of three sorts: To begin with, there’s the bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath. For example, sometimes when you see an unskillful mental state in the mind, you change the way you breathe, and that unskillful state goes away. If you’re sleepy, it may be because your breath is too gentle, too weak. So you strengthen the breath. That can help drive the clouds of sleepiness away.

Or when you’re angry: The breath can be uncomfortable. It feels as if the anger has gotten into your body, into your nerves, and you’ve got to get it out of your system. But if you change the way you breathe, smoothing out the breath, letting the breath grow more calm, it weakens the anger because the anger now has no place to hold on in the body. Then it’s simply a mental phenomenon, and you can look at it more clearly without the sense of pressure that you’ve got to get it out of your system right away.

So sometimes it’s a bodily fabrication that you exert.

Then there’s verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself about the different things going on in your mind.

There’s one passage where the Buddha talks about how we tend to side with our hindrances. Greed comes up and we decide it’s worth being greedy for that particular object. Or sensual desire comes up and we decide it’s a good thing to have sensual desire for that object because that object really is desirable. Or anger comes up and you get righteous about your anger. You get sleepy and say, “Ah, yes. The body’s telling me I’ve got to sleep now.” And so on down the line.

That’s the main weapon that the hindrances have: We tend to side with them. We give in to them before we even question them. So you have to learn how to talk to yourself about your hindrances in a new way. When sensual desire comes up, you have to remind yourself, “This is not necessarily a good thing.” And you tell yourself, “What would happen if I followed through with this desire?” The same with ill will, sleepiness. Learn to ask questions about these hindrances.

You can also bring in mental fabrication—and in particular, perception. Say there’s an object that seems really desirable. Well, learn how to perceive it in a way

that makes you realize that it's not all that desirable at all, as when we do our contemplation of the thirty-two parts of the body.

So these are some of the tools we use to undercut unskillful mental qualities: bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. And sometimes you have to stick with these fabrications for a long time.

For example, with lust: Many times you have to think about the unattractiveness of the body over and over and over again. It may have seemed as if you've thought about it many, many times, and that that should be enough. But if it hasn't done the job yet, you've just got to keep at it.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa often says, you can't count the number of times you've contemplated that topic. You just keep doing it until it begins to sink in. That's where the element of persistence comes in.

So as you're focusing on the breath you've got all the factors that you need for fabrication if you have to exert them. You've got the breath here and you're getting more and more familiar with it and the different ways the breath has an effect on the mind, has an effect on the body. You get more and more conscious about where you direct your thoughts and how you evaluate things. And you get sensitive to the perceptions that help you stay with the breath, as well as the perceptions that pull you away. Then there are the feelings that come with different ways of perceiving the breath or evaluating the breath.

In other words, as you meditate, you get more and more familiar with these processes of fabrication, so that when the time comes that you've got to use fabrication to undo some unskillful fabrications, you've got the skills you need.

But the important point is that you learn how to read each situation, so that when you're faced with a problem where simply watching the problem isn't enough to undo it, you know how to deal with it. Now, simply watching *is* part of your repertoire, but you can't make that the only thing in your repertoire. Otherwise, the defilements sneak around, they come back and hit you in the back of the head.

If unskillful mental qualities keep coming again and again and again, you can't just watch them again and again. It's a sign that simply watching them is not enough. You've got to do something about them. You've got to look into how you comment about them to yourself; the perceptions that give rise to those unskillful qualities; the question of how the way you breathe contributes to those unskillful qualities. There's work to be done.

This is why it's called effort.

But simple effort on its own is not enough to make it an element of the path. It's got to be used with discernment—the discernment that sees what's skillful

and what's not, what works and what doesn't work. And it's in learning how to be observant about these questions: That's how discernment develops on the path.

So if you're planning any vows for the rains retreat, make sure that you allow for the element of discernment as well. In other words, you see what's working and what's not working to foster more skillful qualities in the mind. Allow yourself some space to make some adjustments in line with what works.

Because it's this ability to read the situation and adjust things appropriately: That's what makes the effort right.