

Skillful Effort

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One of the Thai terms for meditating literally means making an effort: *Tham khwaam phien*. I've noticed when I mention that here in the West, I often get some raised eyebrows. There's a very common line of thought here saying that there are two ways of approaching the practice. One is trying very hard, exerting an effort, and being miserable, with all your thoughts focused on the future. The other is relaxing into the present, into the Dhamma that's already here. Now, if those were the only two choices, it's obvious which would be the wiser choice. Everyone likes the idea of relaxing. It seems to be built into American culture.

I was reading a biography of William James recently. It turns out that there was a movement during his time that he called the Gospel of Relaxation. There was a woman—I've forgotten her name—who wrote a book on the topic of what she called repose, saying that American culture is much too tense. What everyone needs to do is learn how to lay back and systematically relax all the muscles in your body that you're not using. Then you just try to maintain that sense of relaxation as you go throughout the day. That was in the 19th-century. Things haven't changed.

People are relaxing and they're still miserable, which goes to show that there are actually four choices: You can relax and be happy, you can make an effort and be miserable, you can relax and be miserable, and you can make an effort and be happy. So tonight I'd like to focus on that fourth alternative: how to find joy in effort. As the Buddha himself said, there are two kinds of causes of suffering, the ones that will go away if you simply watch them with equanimity, and those that will go away only when you exert a fabrication or sankhara against them. That phrase, "exerting a sankhara," sounds kind of strange, but it's actually pointing us to where some very useful tools are.

In the Buddha's analysis of the causes of suffering, sankhara or fabrication comes right after ignorance. We tend to fabricate, we tend to create intentions out of ignorance, and that's why we suffer. But if we learn how to do those fabrications with knowledge, that leads to the end of suffering. These are our tools.

So what are the tools? There are three altogether. There's bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. Mental fabrication is feeling and perception. These are tools for overcoming the causes of suffering.

The question, of course, is whether we use them ignorantly or with knowledge. And the knowledge is not simply book knowledge, it's the knowledge that comes from actually doing. It's the kind of knowledge that comes from developing a skill.

This is why it's useful. when you meditate, to reflect back on the skills you've mastered in the past, things that you've enjoyed doing that you've learned how to do well, where you've enjoyed the process of learning how to do well, whether it's cooking or carpentry or sport, or music. If you learned how to do it well, you've mastered a lot of the skills you're going to need as a meditator.

One is that you have to deal with desire in a skillful way. We often hear that desire is the bad guy in the Buddhist teachings. But when the Buddha talked about the causes of suffering, he mentioned only three kinds of desire: sensual desire, desire for becoming, and desire for non-becoming. Becoming means wanting to take on a particular state, and non-becoming means wanting to annihilate the states you've got.

But there are lots of other kinds of desire. In particular, the Buddha has you, instead of focusing on wanting to be an enlightened person or to annihilate yourself, just get your "self" out of the picture for the time being. Simply look at where there's stress, where there's a cause of stress, and what you can do to put an end to that stress by putting an end to the cause. The desires that are focused around that are actually skillful desires—especially when you're focused on the causes.

If you spend all your time focusing your desires on what you want to gain out of the meditation, without paying any attention to the causes, it's like driving down a road toward the mountain. If you spend all your time looking at the mountain on the horizon and forget to look at the road, you're going to drive off the road and run into people. You never get to the mountain that way. But if you focus on the road and every now and then make sure to check in your rearview mirror to make sure that the mountain is not in the rearview mirror, you're going to get to the mountain. That's how you use desire in the practice. Without that desire, you're never going to get anywhere.

Then there's persistence, the ability to stick with something over time.

Intent: Your ability to focus lots of attention to what you're doing, and the results of what you're doing.

And finally there's a quality in Pali called *vimansa*, which translates as analysis, discrimination, the ability to notice what's working and what's not working, and also the ingenuity to come up with new ideas about what might work when you find yourself banging your head against the wall.

These are the qualities that help, that are necessary for developing a skill. You should bring them to the practice.

Particularly this element of desire: Ajaan Fuang often used to say, when you meditate, to play with the breath. Now, when he said *play*, he didn't mean playing around in a desultory way. It's more like the way, say, Michael Jordan would play basketball. In other words, you keep doing it, keep trying to figure out new ways of tackling problems but at the same time enjoying what you're doing, making a game out of it.

This relates particularly to that first kind of fabrication: the breath. You can use the breath in lots of ways to deal with the causes of suffering. If you know that breathing in ignorance leads to suffering, well, try to breathe with some knowledge. Notice what you're doing as you breathe. Where does the sensation of the breath come in, and where does it go out? What kind of breathing feels good? What kind of breathing maintains a sense of good energy in the body? What kind of breathing wastes away the energy in the body? Have you ever stopped to notice?

If you pay attention here, you begin to see that there are a lot of things hard to explain, hard to put into words about the breath, because it is such an immediate, visceral experience. But if you pay attention, you began to notice that when you breathe comfortably, there can be a sense of ease in different parts of the body. Well, take that sense of ease and allow it to connect up. There'll be a sense of fullness, so allow that sense of fullness to connect the different parts of the body, so that as you breathe in, the whole body feels full, the whole body feels at ease.

In this way, you're engaging all three kinds of fabrication. You're focusing on the breath, you're directing your thoughts to the breath, you're evaluating it, you're maintaining that perception of breath in mind, and you're trying to induce a feeling of ease. You're working with whatever feelings of blockage or discomfort there are. Try to see whether different ways of breathing will help. In this way, you're fabricating with knowledge. And it's a very useful tool to use against a lot of unskillful mind states.

Say, for instance, that lust has arisen in the mind. A standard way of dealing with it is to focus on the 32 parts of the body, and we'll talk about that little bit later. But you can also say, "Hey, wait a minute, what do you lust for?" You lust for pleasure. Well, can you create a sense of pleasure in the body right now? When lust is filling the body, where do you feel tension? Some people feel it in the back of their hands, and then spreading from the back of the hands up the arms, throughout the body. So how about relaxing the back of the hands? Breathe in a way that feels full and at ease in the back of the hands. In that way, the sense of

immediate visceral pleasure helps take away some of the charm and appeal of that feeling of lust. You say, “Why would I bother with lust when I’ve got pleasure right now?” Sometimes you find the lust goes away. This doesn’t uproot the lust, but it gives you some ammunition to use against it.

The same with anger: When anger arises, sometimes you feel tension in the middle the chest. Okay, breathe around that. Breathe through it. Develop a sense of fullness and ease, and then ask yourself, “Do I really want to indulge in anger? What kind of pleasure do I get out of it? Maybe it’s better just to have a sense of ease right now.” This helps to take that edge off the anger, the part of the anger that says, “I’ve got this horrible feeling in my body and I’ve got to get it out of my system.” Well, you can get the tension out of your system by breathing, again, down through hands, out the hands, out the feet. You’ve weakened a lot of the power of the anger right there.

Then you can look at the anger with a lot more equanimity, a lot less sense of urgency that you’ve got to act on the anger. You can ask yourself what’s actually wrong in the situation right now, what would be the skillful thing to do, what would be the skillful thing to say. You’re in a much better position to think of those things, and then to decide whether you need to act right now or whether it’d be better to act later.

What you’re doing is that you’re using this process of fabrication as an aid in overcoming the causes of suffering. So it’s good to think these of things: breath, directed thought and evaluation, feeling and perception. These are tools you can use in almost any situation, not only in creating a state of concentration in the mind, but also in turning them on the objects of your anger, the objects of your lust, whatever the unskillful mind states may be.

For instance, with the body: If you’re feeling lust, you can ask yourself, “What’s the perception you’re holding in mind about that body that makes it attractive?” Learn to analyze that perception. You’ll see that it’s focusing on only certain details. There are big blank spots, such as everything inside the skin. So you want to ask yourself, “What if I were to allow myself to hold those perceptions in mind as well?”

Now, I know a number of people who say that analyzing the body in this way creates a negative body image, but there are unhealthy negative body images, and there are healthy ones. Unhealthy ones say, “My body is ugly, everybody else’s body is beautiful.” Healthy ones say, “Everybody’s bodies are ugly.” Even Miss America: If you asked her to take out her liver, what would it look like? We’re all pretty much equal in that area. If you lined our livers up on a stage to see who’s got the best looking liver, nobody would come. Nobody would even turn on the

TV except for a few psychos. So you ask yourself, “Is that what I really want?” Well, no.

So again, this is where we’re using perception to help deconstruct the causes of suffering.

Or you can focus on your perceptions around feelings of pain. How do you perceive pain? Have you ever stopped to analyze it? First it’s good to get the mind into as much concentration with a sense of ease as you can around the pain, so that when you look into the pain, you’re not looking with a sense of desperation or with the desire to make it go away right away. You’re looking from a position of strength. You’ve got the body at ease with the breath, but there’s a section where there’s pain. When you’re not feeling threatened by the pain, then you can look at it in the right way, which is to try to understand it.

This is what the Buddha said: Your duty with regard to suffering or stress is to try to comprehend it. So you might ask yourself: What are the perceptions you have around the pain? This is an excellent way of seeing what’s going on in the mind. Some people object to the Buddha’s focus on suffering and pain as giving a really negative outlook on life. But he’s not trying to give a total outlook on life, he is trying to focus on where the real problem is, and to give you skills for overcoming suffering.

He’s like a doctor. When you go to the doctor and the doctor says, “Where does it hurt?” you don’t accuse the doctor being negative. The doctor is doing his job or her job. In the same way, you learn how to focus on pain, say, in the body, because lots of interesting things come up around the pain.

There’s that image in *Still Forest Pool*, where the translator quotes Ajaan Chah as saying that when you get the mind very still, all sorts of rare and wonderful animals will come around this still pool of water you’ve got here. Actually, though, those rare and wonderful animals are all your crazy neuroses that have gathered around pain. The pain is the watering hole where all your strange and weird ideas about pain and suffering come gathering. And you get to watch them.

After all, when was your first experience of pain? It was as you were born. Actually when you were in the womb, it was pretty bad to begin with. Then suddenly you get pushed out and find yourself in this air that you’ve never experienced before, and someone pulls you up by the feet and spanks you, and you have to deal with it. For a lot of your first couple years, before you could even learn how to speak, you had to deal with pain. So you came up with lots of pre-verbal attitudes toward pain, many of which are still hanging around.

So now you learn how to focus on the pain and look at what’s coming around the watering hole. You see lots of strange perceptions, strange ideas. And you can

ask yourself, do you still believe that? Especially if you see that those ideas are adding more unnecessary suffering onto the pain, you learn how to drop them.

Take, for instance, the perception that you're on the receiving end of the pain. You can switch that perception around: How about perceiving the pain in a way that, as soon as you perceive the pain, you're seeing it going away, so that you're not on the receiving end. It's like sitting in the back end of a car, with your back to the front, facing the back, and watching things pass by as the car drives down the road. As soon as you see them, you're watching them go away, go away, go away. What if you were to have that attitude toward the pain? You'd find that the mind immediately would feel a lot less stress around the pain because you're not the target. You're not on the receiving end.

Or you can ask yourself, where is the sharpest point of the pain right now? You watch it move around and you begin to detect variations in the pain, some of which are caused by the physical causes of the pain, but some that come from variations in the mind. When you begin to see those, that sense of being oppressed by the pain will go away for a second, and then it will come back. What happened when it went away? What was the change in the perception? What was the change in the thought? Sit there and watch, and it'll come back again. So you watch it come and go, come and go, and after a while, you begin to realize that there was a certain perception you held for a while that carried the physical pain and made it a burden on the mind. When the perception stopped, the sense of burdensomeness stopped as well. What was that perception? The next time it comes up, can you drop it immediately?

Or you can analyze the pain. Say there's a sense of pain in your knee. How do you perceive that? Is it a sense that the pain is eating up your knee or is occupying your knee? Or that the whole knee is pain? There are actually lots of different sensations going on there. There are the body sensations—the breath, the other elements of warmth, coolness, solidity—and then there's the pain. Can you separate them out?

What often happens is that the sense of solidity and a sense of pain get glommed together, which makes the pain seem a lot more permanent and lasting than it actually is. If you learn to hold a perception of the earth to apply to the solid sensations, and the pain as just a sense of sharpness around it, you see that that sense of sharpness flips around. It's not nearly as solid and lasting as you might have thought.

So in this way, you get to play with your perceptions. And you play in a serious way. Again, it's like Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan plays to win. You begin to see the power of your perceptions, you can change your perceptions, and that's going

to change the amount of suffering you feel. This gives you an excellent tool to use against the causes of suffering.

So as you're working with the breath, you've got all those forms of fabrication working together. You've got the breath, you've got directed thought, evaluation, perception, and feeling. As you develop your concentration based on the breath, you're working on developing the skills you need to learn how to use these things in a knowledgeable and helpful way rather than as part of the cause of suffering.

This is one of the reasons why there's no clear distinction between concentration and discernment, or concentration and wisdom in the teachings of the forest masters. The skills you develop in the course of concentration practice are precisely the skills you're going to need to turn around and look at pain, the tools you're learning to master these processes of fabrication in the mind. Prior to your practice, they were done in ignorance, which is why they contributed to the pain. But when you learn how to use them with knowledge—trying to develop an attitude of joy working on a skill and learning how to master it, learning how not to get discouraged by failures—you can use them as an opportunity to gain new knowledge.

I had a friend once who was learning to be a potter. She had the opportunity to go to Japan to study with one of the living national treasures they have over there. At first she found the experience very discouraging. She would throw her pots, put on the glaze, get them into the kiln, and the next morning they'd come back all broken or burnt or destroyed one way or another. Whereas the living national treasure would put his pots in, and the next morning they came out looking perfect. Until one morning, they opened up the kiln and his pots were burned and destroyed. She noticed that he didn't get upset. He just went into the kiln and tried to figure out what had happened. She realized: That's how you become a living national treasure. You don't beat yourself up over your failures. You try to use them as an opportunity to learn.

So you have to realize as you approach this problem of suffering in the mind, that some of the causes will go away simply by watching them. Those are the ones where you can relax and just watch and they just go away. They've been allowed to fester because you simply haven't looked at them. With others though, you need to exert certain a fabrication. Now, exerting, here again, doesn't mean simple brute strength. It means learning how to master these tools you've got. As you master them through concentration, you begin to see their power.

At the same time, you will, of course, be running into the limits of concentration. Because after all, what are you doing as you get the mind concentrated? You're pushing against the three characteristics. In other words,

you're taking things that are inconstant and trying to make them constant. You want the mind to stay still. You take things that are stressful—this body here has lots of stress—but you're learning how to make it pleasant, by the way you breathe, by the way you relate to the energy flows in the body. And you take things that will ultimately be out of your control and you try to exert some control over them.

And you find that you can do it to a certain extent. This is important. If you simply say, "Well, it's inconstant, stressful, not-self, I'll just give up," you're never going to get anywhere. You've got to push against the three characteristics. Of course, you find that they push back, so notice where they push back. That's where the skill comes in the practice. You're not trying to make them absolutely constant, absolutely pleasant, absolutely totally under your control, just enough to give you the strength you need to let go. But first you have to learn how far that strength can go by pushing it as far as you can.

Remember, we're trying to let go out of strength, not out of weakness. If you let go of weakness, it's out of desperation, and there's a sense of sour grapes around the whole thing: "I could never get my mind to settle down," you say, "well that's simply because the mind is totally out of control, so I'll let go." Letting go like that, as Ajaan Lee said, is letting go like a pauper. The pauper doesn't have anything to let go of to begin with. But if you learn how to develop a sense of ease and well-being, you know it may not be absolute but it's relatively strong enough and pleasant enough so that when you do begin to see the things that are totally out of control, you let go not out of frustration, but out of a sense of contentment, a sense of balance.

So you try to use the processes of fabrication even though they're stressful, inconstant, and not self, to gain a sense of ease that can come from the concentration. Then, from that vantage point, you can use your tools to uncover something that lies deeper still.

This relates to another common misconception. I was reading a book one time where the author said there are two ways of approaching awakening. One is try to create the unconditioned through your practice, and the other is realizing that the unconditioned is already there and all you need to do is relax into it. This ignores a third possibility, which is that the unconditioned is already there but it's not attained simply by relaxing.

The image Ajaan Lee gives is of saltwater. As he says, there's freshwater in saltwater. But if you simply took the salt water and let it sit in bowl, you could come back a hundred years later and it still would be saltwater. It wouldn't separate out. You have to distill it. The effort we put into the practice is the

distilling. Sometimes it's simply the effort of watching something with equanimity, sometimes it's exerting a fabrication—the breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings and perceptions—but if you learn how to take joy in the process of learning how to be skillful with these fabrications, finally you do realize that there's something unfabricated here as well. What's where it gets really good.

So when you think about the issue of effort, don't think about that poor neurotic person who's trying, trying, trying and never going to get there because he's so miserable in his efforts. Think instead about the person who's learned to master a skill that's taken effort, taken time, but in this particular case, the results more than repay all the effort put in.

So make your effort with a sense of good-heartedness, good humor, and you'll find that this path of fabrication really does lead to the unfabricated. That's the Buddha's promise, and he wasn't a sort of person to make promises in vain.