

Dimensions of Right Effort

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We're working on a path to a goal. It's important that we keep reminding ourselves of that. All too often we want the goal right away and would like to dispense with the path as quickly as possible, to get straight to the peace and freedom that the Buddha promises. But his promise is dependent on the path. The path is a series of qualities you foster in the mind and then you follow them to see where they take you as you foster them.

And just as a road to the ocean doesn't look like the ocean, the path doesn't look like the goal. The path is something you have to fabricate, something you have to put together. The goal is unfabricated. And the path requires a lot of things that you're going to abandon once you reach the goal.

Like desire. The Buddha's definition of right effort is that you generate the desire to do what's skillful and to abandon what's unskillful. There's nowhere where he denigrates the role of desire in the path. In fact, there are many places where the role of desire is actually emphasized.

There are two suttas where Ven. Ananda is talking. In one case, a brahman comes to see Ananda and says, "Where does this path go? What are the results of this path that you're following?" And Ananda says that one of the results is that you go beyond desire. The brahman says, "Well then, what is this path to the end of desire? How do you get there?" And Ananda says that you give rise to the four bases of power, one of which is based on desire.

The brahman immediately complains. He says, "How can you use desire to get beyond desire?" And Ananda in turn asks the brahman, "When you came here,"—Ananda was staying in a park—"when you came here to this park, before you got here, didn't you have the desire to come here?" "Well, yes." "If you didn't have the desire would you have gotten here?" "No." "And then what happened to the desire once you got here?" "Once I got here, there was no need for the desire anymore."

It's the same way with the practice. You use the desire on the path. It's like driving your car down the road to the ocean. Once you get to the ocean, you don't drive the car into the ocean. You leave the car there at the end of the road. It's delivered you to the ocean, it's done what it had to do, and that's when you don't need it anymore.

There's another case where Ananda is talking to a nun and he makes a similar point. You practice to put an end to craving but you need craving to get to that point. In other words, you hear that other people have done this and you want to have the same results. That desire is what motivates you to practice.

So it's not that desire is bad, it's just that you have to learn how to use it properly. There are skillful desires and unskillful desires. The skillful desires are focused on the path for the sake of the goal.

To make another analogy, it's like driving to a mountain on the horizon. If you spend all your time looking at the mountain while you're driving, what happens? You drive off the road. You have to focus your attention on the road. And even though the road doesn't look like a mountain, it'll take you there.

So there's work to be done on the path. We can't let our impatience get in the way. This is one of the problems of our American educational system: It rewards people who get everything right the first time. For those who don't get it right the first time, there's not much explanation. You're just marked down. That makes you impatient. And it doesn't teach you the steps: How do you get it right if you didn't understand it the first time around?

The people who got the Buddha's message right the first time around have all gone to nibbāna. They've all succeeded on the path. We're the ones who are left over, which means we're the sort of people who have to follow the path step by step by step. Because the steps are important. They teach us sensitivity; they teach us understanding. If you try to rush through them, you're missing the two big qualities you need in order to gain awakening: sensitivity and understanding. So focus on the steps.

And work on developing that sensitivity. This relates to the fact that this path is a middle way. If it were an extreme path, pursuing an of extreme sensual pleasure or an extreme of self-denial, it wouldn't require that much sensitivity. You'd just push, push, push in whichever direction is extreme and that would get you there. The middle way, though, requires a lot more precision, a lot more sensitivity. What is just the right amount of effort?

This is another aspect of right effort. It's interesting: When the Buddha talks about right effort in different contexts, he emphasizes different issues. Sometimes the issue is how much effort is appropriate. You can push yourself until you're ragged and not gain awakening. And then go swinging back in the other direction, saying, "I'll just hope for an effortless path," and that doesn't work, either. And most people give up right there. They've tried the two extremes, what they think are the only two alternatives, and they haven't explored that murky land in the middle, where you can negotiate the issue: "Okay, what is precisely the right amount of effort right now?" In some cases, it's a question of, "What kind of effort is appropriate right now?" Other times it's: "How much effort is appropriate right now?" Those are two different questions.

The how-much effort: In some cases, all you have to do is look at an instance of greed or anger or delusion in the mind and as soon as you see it, it withers away. You don't have to do anything. All you have to do is just see it.

The seeing is the doing and that's all the doing that's needed. Other times, that doesn't work. You have to take the defilement apart. This is called exerting a fabrication. And this requires that you understand the different elements that go into this process of how the mind fabricates something.

On the one hand, there's the breath, which is bodily fabrication. This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath. The breath is an intentional process, and we look at the breath so that we can gain a sense of our own intentions. Then, when we learn how to modulate them and adjust them so that we can breathe in way that feels really good, that feels refreshing to the body, that's the right use of desire. You want the body to feel good inside: to strengthen it when it feels weak; to relax it when it feels tense; to wake it up when you feel sleepy. The breath has those potentials. And you have to explore them and learn from trial and error until you can arrive at trial and success.

This is where the quality of patience comes in, your ability to judge the results of your efforts and notice, "Okay, this is not what I want. What can I do to make it more like what I want?" This takes time, but it develops sensitivity. After all, how can you know what kind of breathing is good unless you compare lots of different breaths, and lots of different ways of focusing on the breath? That's called physical or bodily fabrication.

Then there's verbal fabrication: the things you choose to think about and the comments you make on them. In formal terms, it's called directed thought and evaluation. For instance, if you see greed arising, you can ask yourself, "Why am I focused on that particular object? And why do I keep telling myself that it's really desirable?" Try to change your attitude toward it; look for its undesirable side. Or if you find yourself wanting to run away from the world, saying everything in the world is horrible, that's unskillful as well. There's lots of delusion right there and lots of aversion. So you have to ask yourself, "Is everything really horrible?"

The Buddha said there are four noble truths. There is suffering but there's an end to suffering and there's a path to the end of suffering. Those are the good things in the world. And the path involves right action, right speech. It's not just a matter of sitting here meditating with your eyes closed. It also involves engaging with other people in a skillful way. Again, this requires sensitivity, and there's going to be lots of trial and error, but you have to learn to be patient with the trial and error. That's how you learn.

And finally there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. The perceptions are the labels you put on things, "This is good. That's bad. I like this. I don't like that. This is permanent. That's impermanent." Sometimes the trouble comes from putting the wrong labels on things. So ask yourself, "Well what precisely is the perception I'm worked up about?" If you see, say, an object that you think is going to make you happy or a person who's going to

make you happy, just ask yourself, “Where did I get that label? Is that a genuine, true label or description of what’s actually going on here, of what this person is, or what this thing is?” If the label is causing greed, there’s something wrong with it. Can you label things in a way that doesn’t cause greed? Learn how to change the labels around until you’ve got something that doesn’t get the mind all worked up.

All of this is called exerting a fabrication. This is how you make an effort to disentangle yourself from unskillful states of mind. You see the way you’re breathing around it, you see the way you’re thinking about it, evaluating it, and then you look at the labels that give rise to pleasure or pain around that thing. That’s the kind of exertion that sometimes is needed to disentangle yourself from an unskillful state of mind. So that’s one issue: how much effort is needed.

The second issue is *what kind* effort is needed. Some things the Buddha said you simply have to learn how to comprehend. In other words, sit with them long enough until you understand them. For instance, with the four noble truths, you have to learn how to sit with suffering, sit with stress, sit with pain until you understand, “Exactly what is it about the pain that’s so burdensome? And where is it coming from?” Here we’re talking mainly about pains in the mind, thoughts that make you uncomfortable, thoughts that make you suffer. Look for the suffering and then ask yourself, “What is it about this that’s actually causing the suffering? Is it the thought itself or is it the way I relate to the thought? Is there any craving in the way I relate to it? What comes and goes with the suffering?” Because the suffering doesn’t stay all the time. Sometimes it comes; sometimes it goes.

“Stress” might be a better word here than “suffering.” “Suffering” makes it too big, too romantic. But there’s stress coming and going in the mind all the time. Notice when it’s there, when it’s not—until you can see what comes with it and is causing it. You let *that* go. You don’t let go of the stress, you let go of the cause: the ignorance and the craving and whatever else is causing the clinging.

Now, to do this requires patience and strength, and this is where the path comes in. You’re trying to develop qualities of right mindfulness, right effort, right concentration as you’re sitting here. Right speech, right action, right livelihood: Those are taken care of simply by the fact that you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, so those factors aren’t issues at the moment. The real issues are how you’re able to generate persistence so that you can stay with the stress long enough to watch it and see how it’s connected with its cause. That requires concentration, because concentration is what gives you a sense of well-being inside, so that you don’t feel oppressed or threatened by the stress. When you feel oppressed by it, all you can think about is either pushing it away or

trying to run away from it. And in neither way do you understand it. If you don't understand it, you can't let it go. Even though you try to run away, it follows you, like your shadow. You may not like your shadow, so you run away from it, but it stays right there at your feet.

So we develop concentration along with all the desire and clinging that goes around mastering concentration. Because it does require desire. You have to *want* to do it; you have to learn how to hold on to it once you've got it so that you can use it as your foundation. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said you need desire on the path, because you're not going to develop good solid concentration without desire. So that's something you develop.

Again, you don't just watch concentration come and go. When it's not here, you ask yourself, "How can I give rise to it?" Once it comes, you ask yourself, "How can I maintain it?" And maintaining sometimes involves going through the boring sections. The concentration's there, and all of a sudden you say, "Well, enough of that. What's next?" That's when you've got to learn how to question the voice that says, "Enough of that." Why do you believe that voice? That voice is part of the cause of suffering, so you want to see it in those terms.

This is another area where the question of right effort comes up: Exactly which kind of effort is called for right now? If you apply the wrong kind of effort to the wrong place, you end up not getting results at all.

The Buddha has a nice analogy. He says it's like trying to milk a cow by squeezing its horn. You squeeze it a little bit, and the milk doesn't come out. So you squeeze it harder, and the milk still doesn't come out. You squeeze it still harder, and all you're doing is harassing the cow. You're never going to get any milk that way. You have to apply the right effort to the right place. In other words, you squeeze the udder, the milk comes out.

So right effort is a matter both of the right amount of effort and the right type of effort directed to the right place at the right time. All of those factors come together to create right effort. They involve the desire to focus on developing the path properly; the persistence to stick with it, to be patient, to take the time that's needed; and then the intent to be really sensitive to what you're doing and what results you're getting. All of that together is right effort.

It requires time and sensitivity. This is why we have to be patient with the path. If you're not patient with it, you just run roughshod over it and nothing happens. You've destroyed it.

It's like coming to a spot in the road saying, "I'm tired of this road, I want the ocean," so you stop and dig a big hole in the road. Well, one, that doesn't get you to the ocean. And two, even if water does appear in the hole, it just makes it that much harder to get across that patch of the road.

So if we want peace, we have to work at the path. Sometimes the work is

peaceful, sometimes it's not. But it's always good work. And if you approach it with understanding and patience, you find that it really does get you to where you want to go.

We're here on land. We can't take the ocean to get to the ocean. But you can take road to get to the ocean. So learn to have a desire for the road.

Try to know when you've gone off to the left, gone off to the right. There's that famous passage from Ajaan Chah: He says sometimes he sees people going off to the right of the road, so he says, "Go left! Go left!" Other times he sees people going off to the left, and he says, "Go right! Go right!" The words seem contradictory but they're for specific people with specific problems at specific times.

So our duty as meditators when we listen to the Dhamma is to figure out, "Where am I? Which part of the Dhamma talk do I need to listen to right now? And which part can I save for later?" It's all aimed at the path, and your job will be to figure out when you're falling off to the right, when you're falling off to the left, and when you're turning around and heading backwards. That way, you can become our own self-corrector and keep heading forward until you finally get to the goal.