

Self-starting

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One of the really important principles in the practice is learning how to be a self-starter and a self-maintainer, realizing that your goodness can't depend on other people's goodness. Although it's good to have a group of people whose collective strength you can draw strength from, you have to learn how to grow up and be independent so that your determination in the practice is based on your desire for true happiness. It doesn't have to rely on other people's approving or not approving, or other people cooperating or not cooperating.

I received a letter this evening from an elderly woman I've known for many years now. She was the wife of one of my professors at college, and she was commenting on how sad the world is. She's getting old, living in a retirement home. Many of her friends have died. She looks around at the world, and it's insane. She'd done a lot of work in trying to develop international peace, international harmony. And of course, look at the situation now. It's very sad. It seemed like she was really weakened by the state of the world.

Of course, you wonder if the world has ever been in a good shape—a good place to be. There's always conflict some place. There are some horrendous events that we've heard about, and there are a lot of horrendous events that we've never heard about at all: the things that history tends to brush over. There was a rebellion in 19th century China where about 18 million people were killed. Hardly anybody knows about it, at least here in the West. This sort of stuff goes on and on and on. And you can't let the large numbers of evil, or stupid, or both evil and stupid people get you down.

You've got to learn how to be a self-starter, realizing if there's going to be any happiness in the world, it has to start within each individual person. If there's going to be any peace, it has to start within each individual person. So, which person are you responsible for? As Ajaan Suwat used to say, "You've got only one person, and that's you." You can't let the unskillfulness of the people around you affect your own actions.

There's that sutta where Ven. Sariputta hears that a layperson who used to be one of his supporters has fallen under bad influences and is leading a very corrupt life. So Sariputta goes to see him and asks him, "I hope you're still being heedful in the practice?" And the guy's frank enough to say, "Well, how could that be? I've got so many things I've got to look after. I've got to look after my family." And Sariputta says, "What kind of excuse is that? Suppose you were to die, and the hell

wardens were coming to get you. You try to explain, ‘Well, the reason I misbehaved was because I had to look after my wife and children.’ The hell wardens would just throw you right into hell. They wouldn’t even give you a chance to finish your sentence.”

You can’t use other people’s behavior as an excuse for your own misbehavior, whether it’s one other person, two, three, or the whole world. You have to look at your own responsibility for your actions and make sure you do your best, regardless of the people around you. Now, it does help to know that there are other people who are trying to be skillful. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha established the monastic Sangha, to create a community where people can encourage one another in the right direction.

But even if you’re not around the monastic Sangha, or if you happen to be in a branch of the monastic Sangha that’s not all that inspiring, you can think about the fact that there are inspiring people out there some place—that the human race is not a total washout. That can give you some encouragement. Ultimately, though, it has to come down to your own desire to find a happiness that doesn’t betray you—doesn’t turn on you. This was why the Buddha said that one of the customs of the noble ones is to take delight in abandoning and delight in developing. That relates to the factor of right effort in the path.

There are actually four different kinds of right effort that the Buddha lays out. One is if you see that there are some unskillful tendencies you have. They’re not in the mind at the moment, but you know that they could arise, so you do what you can to prevent them. This is an aspect of practice that many people overlook. You’re looking basically at the present, but also into the future, knowing that things may be okay right now, but the mind’s going to be tempted down the line. How do you prevent that from happening?

For instance, lust may not be showing many signs; it may not be stirring at all. But do you know that it’s totally done with? Well, no. You know it’s *not* totally done with, so you’ve got to do something about it, to prevent it from arising. Don’t wait until it’s arisen before you start scrambling to find some way of getting it under control. This is one of the reasons why we have that meditation on the parts of the body and the meditation on the elements of the body: to establish a set of associations in the mind. You look at a body, and you don’t just stop at the skin. You go a little bit deeper and a little bit deeper and a little bit deeper. What’s in there? Look at the whole thing. This applies to your body and other people’s bodies. If you get used to thinking in this way, then when thoughts of lust come up, you’ve got your tools already sharpened.

Or in social situations: You know you're going to go someplace, and there are people there who know how to push your buttons. They know how to provoke you. How can you prepare so you know that no matter what they say or what they do, you're not going to get provoked? Sitting down and planning this out is an important part of the practice. We can plan so many other things. We can plan our itineraries on a trip; we can plan our grocery list. Why can't you plan how to handle a situation skillfully, knowing that there are situations that tend to provoke you and people who tend to provoke you? All this comes under preventing something unskillful from arising.

If an unskillful mental state has arisen, you try to abandon it as quickly as you can. As the Buddha said, treat it as if it were a fire in your hair or in a turban on your head. In other words, you don't just wait around and enjoy the pleasure of the unskillful state before you start thinking about doing away with it. It's interesting that when the Buddha talks about this process, he says you have to arouse your mindfulness here. This is one of those passages in the Canon that show definitively that when the Buddha's talking about mindfulness, he's not talking about a nice broad, accepting, equanimous mind state. You're not equanimous about the fire on your head. You want to put it out as quickly as you can.

So what are your tools? You want to have them sharpened beforehand. But if something totally unexpected comes up, this is the point where it's useful to think about the mind as a committee. Not everybody in the committee is siding with that unskillful state. Make sure at least that you have a couple members that are stepping back and not giving their approval. Even though there's no way that you can immediately stop the others, at least you're not totally going along with them.

That gives you the chance to observe them. What kind of reasoning do they use? Usually it's pretty bad. That's one of the reasons why the members tend to shout, just like those whacko TV commentators. They don't have reason on their side, so they just shout at people. Well, the mind does that, too. But you want to look for what their reasoning is. There's usually something very peculiar and very shortsighted about it. If you can catch that, you've got your weapon.

You have to remember that each member in your committee at least wants happiness, but the different members have different ideas, sometimes very unusual, about how happiness may be found. If you can catch where there's something shortsighted or very, very narrow in some of their ways of thinking about happiness or the ways to happiness, you can point it out to them. Some members of the committee will be willing to listen, but don't be dismayed if you can't get everybody to agree with you right away. They may sneer at you and be

snide and say, “Oh, you’re going to give in anyhow, so why not give in now?” Well, that’s just one of their tricks. Don’t fall for it. This way, you find that you can start putting out the fire. That’s the second form of right effort.

The third form is if there are skillful states that you would like, and they haven’t arisen, you do what you can to foster them. There’s an interesting passage in Ajaan Chah. I was translating one of his Dhamma talks recently. As you know, Ajaan Chah is usually characterized as having one teaching: Let go. Well, there’s a lot more to Ajaan Chah than you might suspect. There’s a monk who’s come to see him and talks about how much he wants to get his mind to calm down. Ajaan Chah doesn’t say, “Well, just learn to accept the fact the mind doesn’t calm down.” No, he says, “Look to see what’s not allowing it to calm down. There’s a reason someplace. Examine. Try to find the reason.”

Ajaan Chah, in the same mode, once said, suppose someone sees you carrying a banana back from the market, and they ask you what you’re going to do with the banana. You say you’re going to eat it. “Are you going to eat the peel, too?” “Well, no.” “Then why are you carrying the peel?”

Ajaan Chah then asked, “With what are you going to answer him?” He answered first by saying that you’d answer with desire: the desire to give a discerning answer. In other words, discernment doesn’t just happen without your desiring it. So certain desires play a role on the path that you have to recognize. There are certain things you can’t let go of right away. There are things you have to develop and hold on to. In the case of the banana, Ajaan Chah went on to say, you tell the other person that the time hasn’t come yet to throw the peel away. You need the peel to hold the banana so it doesn’t get all squishy in your hands. You hold the peel so that you *can* eat the banana, even though you’re not going to eat the peel. In the same way with the path, eventually you do let go of the path once it’s done its work. But you have to develop it so it can do its work to begin with.

So look at what’s missing in your path. How’s your virtue? How’s your concentration? How’s your discernment? What are the ways of developing these things? It’s okay to want these things. If you don’t want them, they’re not going to happen. Remember, an important part of right effort is generating desire. And how are you going to overcome your unskillful desires unless you’ve got some skillful desires? They remind you that there’s a better happiness; there’s a better way.

Then you take those desires and you focus them on the causes. What helps you maintain the precepts? What helps you develop concentration? What helps you sharpen your discernment? Try to give rise to those things. For example, with concentration, you can’t just order the mind to be still, but you *can* find

something you find interesting in the present moment—something that makes it pleasant and intriguing for the mind to be here, i.e., the breath. There's a lot you can do with the breath. You can make it go up; you make it go down. You can make it long; you can make it short. There are many levels of breath energy in the body. Which one would you like to tune into that you find most interesting: the in-and-out breath; the breath that goes through the different muscles or the different blood vessels; or the breath that goes through the bones?

There are lots of levels of breath energy. It's like the ocean. There are many levels of currents in the ocean. There are currents on the surface; there are currents that go deeper. And they go at different speeds. Or take all the different radio waves going through the air right now. There are stations in San Diego, stations in Los Angeles, stations in Tijuana, and shortwave radio stations with transmitters all over the world, with their waves all going through this one spot. Depending on the kind of radio you have and how you tune it, you can pick up all kinds of messages. And it's the same with the breath. To what extent can you detect different levels of breath energy in the body? They're all there; it's just a matter of tuning into them.

It's the same with the different elements in the body. There's earth; there's water; there's wind, fire. There's space permeating throughout the body and going around the body. There's the element of consciousness. Space and consciousness, in particular, require a lot of good, solid concentration for you to be able to stay with them consistently. This is why we work with the breath and the other physical elements first. But as your concentration gets more subtle, you can begin to pick things up that you didn't see before, and they're all right her. It's like getting a better radio that picks up subtle signals from far away.

When you find that you actually can stay with these things, then you try to maintain and develop those skillful qualities. It's not the case that concentration arises and you try to be ahead of the game by saying, "Well, I'll just watch it come, then watch it go, and then I'll be seeing inconstancy or impermanence"—or whatever. That's not right effort. I was reading a book a while back, saying that the Buddha taught two different ways of practice. One was right mindfulness, and the other was right effort, and they're two totally different practices. Well, there's nowhere where the Buddha would separate them out like that.

An important part of right mindfulness is ardency. In the last three factors of the path, you start with right effort, and then you go to right mindfulness. Right mindfulness includes the element of right effort in the quality of ardency. Then as your mindfulness develops, it moves into right concentration. As the Buddha said, the factors of the different establishings of mindfulness are the themes of right

concentration. So as you go through those last three factors of the path, you find that right concentration contains right mindfulness, and right mindfulness contains right effort. They're all part of one another.

So what do you do to maintain the concentration? You've got to value it. You've got to understand the process in order to go through the day and still maintain some contact with the theme of your meditation. That way, it can develop momentum. Keep the breath in mind. And keep in mind the determination that whatever you do, you want to do it skillfully. That helps keep you in touch with the path.

Keeping the precepts, maintaining restraint over your senses: This doesn't mean that you put blinders on. It's simply that if you're going to look at something, ask yourself, "Why am I looking?" If you're going to listen, "Why am I listening?" If you're going to think about something, "Why am I thinking about this? What am I trying to get out of this? Is this motivated by a skillful intention or an unskillful one?" If it's motivated by an unskillful intention, remind yourself that you're going to have to clean up the mess when you sit down to meditate. So why bother creating the mess to begin with?

This is how all four aspects of right effort come together. Preventing and abandoning unskillful qualities makes it a lot easier to give rise to and maintain the skillful ones.

So remember that you've got four duties here—four types of right effort— and you want to learn how to develop them all. That's how you maintain your effort. That's how you become self-reliant on the path. You strengthen the good members of the committee in the mind, and you learn how to sidestep the unskillful ones. Win them over if you can, and exile the ones you can't.

That way, you find when you wake up in the morning, you've got a good group of people to wake up together with—a good group of people to help you start the day right. So even though you may be out practicing alone, you're not really alone. You've got good companions inside.