

Persistence

August 3, 2014

Viriyena dukkhamacceti, suffering is overcome through effort. It's a principle you hear often in Thailand, but not so often here. We've heard that there are four ways of practicing—painful and slow, painful and fast, pleasant and slow, and pleasant and fast—and we like to think that we can choose whichever one we want. In other words, the choice is between pleasant and slow, and pleasant and fast. We don't like to think about the painful choices. Who would choose those? But it's not a matter of choice. It's a matter of what you need in your practice. Different people's needs are going to be different—and for the most part, those whose practice is pleasant and fast have already gone.

That means we're going to have to put some effort into our practice. Fortunately, effort doesn't mean that you have to huff and puff a lot. It simply means that you have to be energetic in doing the practice and feeling up for whatever's required.

The Buddha talks about three qualities in the path that basically circle around every other quality, leading to right concentration and enabling right concentration to move on beyond to release: right view, right mindfulness, and right effort. They go together.

We tend to think of mindfulness as simply being with whatever comes up, but the Buddha never defined it that way or used it in that sense. Mindfulness is a faculty of keeping something in mind that you're applying to what you're doing. There are tasks that you have to work at.

Right view is basically what tells you what the tasks are. In this case, we're trying to give rise to concentration. You have to remember how you do that and what tricks you've learned in the past that work: what strategies, what objects you focus on, what ways of focusing, how you look after the mind. Mindfulness keeps that in mind and gives directions to your efforts: What do you need to do right now?

One of the things you learn pretty quickly after you've been meditating is that what you do right at the beginning of the meditation session is very important. If you don't wrestle the mind down or lure it down right away, it's going to take a long time to settle in. You find yourself wandering around for the whole hour and then, maybe at the last five minutes, finally getting a little concentration. It's good to have the attitude that right at the beginning is when you want to get everything

taken care of. Then you can simply stay, and there's not much more you have to do.

So what do you have to do right now? There are certain things you develop and certain things you let go of. Try to stitch everything skillful together with your mindfulness. Keep remembering where you are, what you're supposed to be doing. One of the roles of mindfulness is to notice what good things have not yet arisen so that you give rise to them; and if they have arisen, you maintain them. That's mindfulness working together with right effort. So what do you need to let go of right now? Any thoughts that have to do with anything else but the breath right now, just let them go.

Try to develop an interest in the breath. When the Buddha defines right effort, or the quality of persistence in the path as one of the bases for success, it includes generating desire—in other words, learning to *want* to do what you're doing here, to be enthusiastic about it. Think about it: You've got a whole hour just to learn how to center the mind. It's rare that people have this opportunity.

As for any thoughts that come up to get in the way, remind yourself of why you don't want to get involved with them. You've been involved with them many times in the past, like old acquaintances who haven't really provided that good a friendship. So here's an opportunity to make a new acquaintance: Get to know your breath, get to know the present moment, what it's like to have the mind settle in here and feel really secure, really grounded. Learn what it's like to be sensitive to the breath.

I remember when I was first practicing over in Thailand, I felt as if I was handicapped. People would talk about their experience of the breath in their legs, in their arms, as if it were a very normal, ordinary, everyday thing. That's partly because the culture—especially back in those days—had people attuned to that way of being aware of their bodies. I felt cut off from all that. It took a while to get a sense of what they were talking about—that it's how you feel the body from the inside.

You learn to divide that sense of the body into its different properties: earth, water, wind, and fire. These aren't the medieval elements of medieval chemistry. These are the properties of how you sense the body from within. There's the solidity of the body—you can sense that. There's the liquid aspect, there's the warmth, and then there's the movement of energy, which is the breath. Sometimes the energy moves from one spot to another and sometimes it's just a buzz, but there's the breath. These are all things that you can sense immediately.

So learn to get to know your immediate sensations. Think of this as your opportunity to be acquainted with what's going on in the body and how you can

make a difference. One of the best ways of having a sense of interest in the breath is realizing that it really does make a difference how you get acquainted with the breath and what you do with it. It's good for your health and it certainly makes it a lot easier to stay here in one position for a whole hour.

If you have trouble with your legs going asleep during the meditation, start right now paying careful attention to how the back of your neck feels as you breathe in. Does it feel good? What could you change? Is there any tightness there? See if you can loosen it up. Now work down the spine. You find that by improving the circulation down through the spine, down through the pelvis, it helps to ward off a lot of the numbness and pain that can often occur when you're sitting with your legs crossed like this. That's one of the uses of getting to know the breath.

Another use is that when you get really sensitive to the breath energy, you begin to notice that when a thought forms in the mind—especially when it takes hold—there's going to be a little bit of tension in the body. It's the mind's way of using the body to anchor a thought so that you can look at it and ponder it and continue it and turn it into a whole thought-world. If you're really sensitive to the breath energy, you can notice where that's happening in the body and you can breathe through it. Sometimes it's around the eyes; sometimes it's in one side of the face or in an arm or a leg. It could be anywhere in the body. If you're bothered with a lot of thoughts, it's useful to think of the breath coming in and out through the muscles around the eyes, because a lot of thoughts tend to cluster there.

So there's plenty to learn here. When you think about this, this is one of the ways in which you generate desire to want to stay here. Even if you don't gain any great insights, don't hit the jhanas, or at least not as quickly as you want them, at the very least say, "I'm learning something about how to be on familiar terms with my body and how to use that familiarity for the advantage both of the body and of the mind." That's a lot right there. Most people go through their lives totally cut off from their bodies. Their health suffers, both physically and mentally. Here's your opportunity to learn a little bit about getting the body and the mind together for the benefit of both.

So learn how to generate desire, to want to do this, to put the effort in. The effort here is the effort of persistence—just sticking with it, sticking with it—but it's really helped by a sense of interest, a sense of curiosity. That way, it's not simply a matter of huffing and puffing and straining. It's more getting the mind up for whatever's necessary, so that even if the practice may be painful or long, you realize it's a lot better being on the path than not being on the path, because that's a lot longer and a lot more painful.

As the Buddha said, if you attain the Dhamma eye, the amount of suffering left ahead of you is like dirt under a fingernail, whereas if you haven't, the amount of suffering ahead of you is like all the dirt in the Earth. So which is more painful? Which is longer? Think about these things until you have a sense that you really do want to put effort into the practice, whatever effort is required.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa likes to say, when we talk about the Middle Way, it's not a matter of putting in a middling effort. "Middle" means an effort appropriate for whatever comes up. Sometimes you have to be very delicate and very subtle in what you're doing, because there are delicate and subtle problems in the mind. Other times, as he said, some of the problems in the mind are like a huge pile of shit right here in the middle of the Dhamma hall. You wouldn't be able to take little thimblefuls of water to wash it away. You'd have to take big bucketsful.

And it's the same way with the practice. Sometimes issues come up in the mind that require a lot of push to get them out. Other times the work is a lot more subtle. What's important is that the effort you put in is appropriate for the particular problem—and that you learn how to get yourself up for it. If this is what needs to be done, then you're willing to do it—because the prospect of not getting the job done is terrifying.

That's how you've got to think.