

## *Every Little Bit*

*October 1, 2014*

I know of a person one time who had a difficulty in having a daily meditation practice. It just seemed pretty daunting. When he came back from work, the idea of sitting for an hour defeated him right there, so he wasn't even sitting for a minute.

So he asked his teacher what to do. And the teacher said, "Well, make a vow that every day you're going to get into the meditation posture. As for the amount of time you're going to stay in meditation, that's really up to you. But the vow is to get into the posture."

The guy tried that and found that he could actually sit for quite a bit longer than he thought. Some days his meditation was just a matter of getting into the posture and then getting out. But other days he found that he could sit quite a lot longer – sometimes even longer than an hour. Once you get into position, and the mind settles down and feels good, you realize you don't really want to get up again.

This reflects a teaching the Buddha gave one time, which is that when the mind is in an unskillful state, just giving rise to a finger-snap of a skillful mind state has value. If the idea of trying to maintain it is too much or seems too daunting, at the very least allow yourself to think that one skillful thought.

Or develop a good quality in the mind. However long you're going to be able to stick with it, that's another matter. But at the very least get started.

When you find you can do it, then you start again and start again until grows more frequent, as in Ajaan Chah's example of pouring water from a teapot. If you tip it just a little bit, there'll be just a drop... and then a drop... and then a drop... As you tip it a little bit more, and there's drop, drop, drop. Tip it a little more and the drops get so frequent—dropdropdrop—that they become a continuous stream of water.

So don't look down on those little efforts to give rise to skillful qualities. Even if it seems that unskillful qualities of the mind are overwhelming, over time those small skillful qualities begin to gather.

In the Buddha's image, it's like a water jar. Even though the water's falling in drops, drop by drop, the jar eventually becomes full.

This comes under the heading of right exertion, in the part called the exertion to give rise to skillful qualities.

There are basically two levels: One is when you know that the mind is immersed in an unskillful state, and you're discouraged at the thought of trying to turn it around—which of course is what your defilements are telling you, trying to keep you discouraged so that they can stay with whatever course they've already determined.

This is where it's important to remember that just a moment of mindfulness or a moment of goodwill has its value. At the very least, you have a brief respite and gain some perspective on things. Also, it overcomes the mind's tendency, once it's started on an unskillful course, to tell itself, "Well, I'm committed to this, so I'll just have to follow it

through.” You’re not committed. You haven’t made a promise to anybody that you’re going to think in unskillful ways or indulge in unskillful habits.

So to put a little stop to that, even if it’s just a momentary stop, remind yourself, “Okay, what would Ajaan Mun say? What would the Buddha say?”— any ajaan that you respect, any teacher you respect. That little bit of mindfulness, that little bit of alertness can help pull you out.

Sometimes just the moment is enough. You realize, “Oh my gosh! I don’t want to continue in this state. I want to get out. And I’ve got the right to get out.” That becomes the impulse to let go.

There are other times when you’re not conscious of the fact that the mind is in an unskillful state. Things seem to be going pretty well, everything seems to be pretty innocent. But you’re not sure, “Is there something more?”

This is where it gets more difficult. Because the mind does have its rhythms. Sometimes what seems like a plateau or a stagnant period is just a time where your mind is gathering its forces. There’s been an arc to your practice and it’s gotten to a higher spot but then the foundation isn’t there. The mind’s got to fill things in, or things are going to have to be reorganized like the shifting of bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. Things like that take a while to fall into place.

But there comes a point where you begin to wonder, “Okay, is this getting stagnant?” You can test it. Some of the tests are to sit for longer than you normally do, take on a precept that you haven’t been practicing. Push the practice a little bit.

Try to get more interested in the breath for instance. Try to be more precise in your observation of the breath. If things are getting stale, often it’s a sign that you’re not paying careful attention—because the breath, when it’s good, is *really* good. It really is nourishing. There really is a strong sense of well-being that comes as you settle in and allow the breath energy to surround you.

You want to feel nourished by the practice. If there’s not a sense of nourishment, something’s lacking, something’s missing. And often it’s just that the practice has gotten mechanical. You go through the motions but you’re not really paying close attention.

In the context of right exertion, paying close attention is called “upholding your intent.” The word intent, *citta*, there, can mean the intentness with which you’re doing this. You’re paying close attention to what you’re doing each second that you’re aware of. If you’re doing the practice with one eye on the practice and another eye someplace else, you’re not going to get the full results because you’re not paying full attention.

So with the least little thing coming up, you want to be alert to it, you want to be alive to it. There are times when it doesn’t seem that anything really unskillful is happening in the mind, but there are little blips, blips, blips here and there. And if you’re not paying careful attention, they don’t seem like much at all. But they add up.

When they talk about the subconscious or unconscious processes in the mind, it’s not like they’re totally buried. They show their shadows, they show little images, little flashes here and there. If you’re really, really still you can see them. They’re like the subliminal

messages they sometimes send over TV stations. If the mind is really still, it can see them. If you're not still, you just run right past.

So the little things matter—both the good ones and the bad ones. So pay careful attention to what you're doing, careful attention to what's going on in the mind. Get the mind really, really still. Have a strong sense of being really nourished by being here. If the breath isn't nourishing, okay, experiment. Don't let things get mechanical.

In this way, you can give rise to skillful states that haven't been there before, and get rid of unskillful things before they gather their forces. And both those activities are an important part of right exertion.