

Persistence

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Usually when we hear the phrase, “making an effort,” we tend to think of brute force. When the phrase is applied to the meditation, it sounds like sitting for long hours, walking for long hours. And often a long sit can be very instructive, but the real effort, of course, is in the mind. That’s the kind of effort you can exert continuously in all your postures, all your activities. And it’s good to remember that, because that’s where the real effort of the practice lies. After all, right effort comes under the section of the noble path dealing with concentration. And externally it doesn’t look like much at all—here we are sitting with our eyes closed, not doing much—but there’s a lot going on in the mind.

At the same time, you’re giving the mind something really simple to do, and that should be easy—you might think. But then the mind makes things very complex. It seems to be sending scouts out in all directions trying to check out this, check out that, listening to the reports. And we’re saying No to those scouts. We’re going to stay right here.

Notice where you feel the breath as it comes in. When we talk about being with the breath, it’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the movement of energy in the body. This becomes especially important when the movement of the air in the nose becomes very, very soft and gets harder and harder to follow. It’s very easy to get lost. But if you’re with the body—your sense of your hands, your feet, your legs, your arms, your torso, your head, all the parts of the body—those parts can be very quiet and yet you can still feel them from the inside nevertheless. So move your focus there.

And ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good in those parts of the body. You can make a survey: Start down around the navel, watch that part of the body for a while, and see what kind of breathing feels good there. Then move up the front of the torso, section by section, into the head, then down the back, out the legs. Back at the neck, then down the shoulders, out the arms. Get acquainted with this territory, and then see if you can put your awareness of all those pieces together.

The effort begins in trying to maintain a very continuous focus. We hover around the focus as we try to adjust it. That’s what the terms “directed thought” and “evaluation” are all about, trying to adjust the mind and the breath to get them just right. And you need to maintain a sense of the observer that’s watching what’s going on, even as things get very, very still. Otherwise, the sense of ease gets very strong and you’ll just slide into it.

So that’s one of the first lessons you’ve got to learn: Things can feel good but you can’t go wallowing in the ease, because the sense of ease comes from being with the breath. If you drop the breath, you’ve abandoned the cause. The ease may continue for a while, but as it gets very fuzzy you get into a state called delusion concentration, where you’re sitting here very still but

not really alert. Sometimes, when you come out of it, you're not even sure of whether you were asleep or awake. It's hard to tell. That's not the kind of concentration that leads to discernment.

The kind of concentration that *does* lead to discernment has some discipline to it. That might be a good word to think about as you're meditating: discipline. You have to keep the mind disciplined. You can't go off running after your likes and dislikes or random impulses right now. You have a bigger Like that you're working on, something that's not random at all. In other words, you would *like* to get the mind to settle down, and that's a desire to respect and to be loyal to. So as thoughts of sensuality come up, you have to say No. Interesting thoughts about your work, interesting theories about the world, about politics: You have to say No to them right now. Your ideas may seem very intelligent, very insightful, but they're not what's wanted right now. You've got to work on this other skill, the skill of being very still, because there's so much that can be seen when you're still that you can't see when the mind is not still.

So you hover around this for a while and then finally gain the confidence that you can just settle in. Then, as you're maintaining that sense of settling in, watch out for the voices that say, "This is stupid. This is dumb. There's not much intelligence going on here." Remember, there are many different kinds of intelligence. The intelligence that can think clever thoughts and say clever things is only one kind. There's another kind of intelligence, though, that thinks strategically—that says, "I have a goal. I want to do everything needed to work toward it."

When Ajaan Lee talks about the different factors that go into the practice of mindfulness, one of them is ardency, *atappa*, which is basically the same thing as persistence and effort. And for him, ardency is the insight factor in mindfulness practice. The Commentary, though, identifies *sampajañña* as the insight factor. People who follow the Commentary translate *sampajañña* as "clear comprehension," because the Commentary says that it's the factor that sees things as inconstant, stressful, not-self—the factor that basically applies the three characteristics to things. But when the Buddha himself is describing *sampajañña* in the Canon, he's not saying that at all. For him, *sampajañña* is a matter of knowing what you're doing while you're doing it. That's why I translate the word as "alertness."

When the Buddha explains ardency, it's a matter of trying to do things well, realizing that there are going to be results that come from what you're doing and so you want to make sure those results are good. That's the wisdom: a pragmatic kind of intelligence that goes into right effort. You're wise enough to realize that this is not something you simply study and think about. It's something that's meant to make a difference for the better in your life, and you've got to *do* it if you wisely want to experience those better results.

Think about the old classical division of knowledge into two kinds: There's scribe knowledge, which describes things, has names for things, a knowledge that's expressed in definitions. And then there's warrior knowledge, the knowledge that comes from developing a

skill and then using it in various situations, getting really good at it, learning how to apply it to whatever happens. We're working on warrior knowledge here.

So the wisdom in warrior knowledge lies in the persistence—and that doesn't mean just sticking at it. It means realizing what *kind* of effort and what *amount* of effort is needed right now. Sometimes, when something bad comes up, you've got to abandon it. Sometimes you've got to comprehend it. Sometimes you've got to work at making good things come up. Sometimes the effort needs to be pretty heavy-handed; sometimes it has to be very light as you zero in on the sensation of the breath and then just hover around it, watching out for any little movements in body or mind that might pull you away. This, too, is right effort.

It's hard to say that right effort is any particular amount of effort. It has to be the effort that's just right for the situation. Ajaan Fuang made a comment one time that “The effort that goes into the meditation is not all that much, but you have to make it constant. That's where the real effort is, in the persistence.” And because it is an effort in the *mind*, it's something you can do in all kinds of situations.

At his monastery, we had construction projects, and there were two kinds: the ones that would go on for months and months at a time, and the ones that happened on the spur of the moment. Ajaan Fuang would sometimes say after the meal, “Okay, today we're going to do x.” He hadn't said anything about doing x to anybody before that. All of a sudden: Meal's done, okay, we have to do x. We wouldn't stop doing it until it was done. And it wasn't the case that you'd put your meditation aside while you worked. That wouldn't have worked at all, because sometimes the projects would go on for hours. We had one project that started at 8 in the morning and didn't finish until 4 a.m. the next morning. If you didn't have an internal resource to draw on, an internal strength of mind, you'd get worn out pretty quickly. So you had to stay with the breath while you worked.

This is where you have to remember that the effort of the practice is an effort of the mind. You can be doing physical work while the mind is alert to the breath, maintaining a sense of your center. If the center gets a little blurry, you can start using a meditation word that you repeat to yourself. In terms of the physical effort involved, it's not that much. But there is a mental effort in trying to stick persistently with what you've decided you're going to stay focused on. In the beginning, it seems to require a lot out of you, but you gradually find with practice that you can stick with it for the sake of the long term much more easily.

This is another aspect of the wisdom of right effort: seeing that maybe what you want to do right now is not what's going to be good for you in the long term, and figuring out how to effectively say No to your immediate likes. This is a lesson we all had to learn as kids, and it doesn't change when you come to the Dhamma.

Some people like to think that when you come to the Dhamma, the rules change and you can think in non-dualistic terms, with no good or evil, no right or wrong. But the Buddha never said anything about not thinking in dualities. I mean, all thinking is in dualities—even the word

“nondual” implies a duality between dual and nondual. Just learn how to choose the right dualities. Number one is: What’s the difference between skillful and unskillful? It depends on the result. There’s a principle we learned as kids: You do something well, and the results may not happen right away, but when they do come you’ll be glad you did it. Basic Wisdom 101. Delayed gratification. And it’s one of those things you should not forget.

I remember the story of a tennis pro whose game went into a slump. He could not figure out what had gone wrong. He changed his racket, changed his coach, tried all different kinds of things. Finally, after many, many months of trying to figure out the problem, he realized he’d forgotten Rule Number One when you play tennis: Keep your eye on the ball. So here the rule is: Keep your eye on the breath, on the sensation of the body here. Whatever sense of energy you feel as the breath comes in and goes out, focus on that. And don’t let yourself get waylaid. Any visions that come up in the course of the meditation, remind yourself: We’re not here for visions.

Ajaan Lee has a good way of dealing with visions. He says that if you’re experiencing a vision you don’t like, just breathe deep down into the heart three times and it’ll go away. In other words, the visions come because your mindfulness goes into soft focus. So by breathing into the heart, you’re reestablishing mindfulness clearly. Some people are afraid of visions when they meditate, but it’s not the case that genuine concentration is going to bring them into the mind. They usually come from the kind of concentration where you begin to wallow in the sense of ease and forget the breath. And in those periods where mindfulness is weak, that’s when the visions come. So reestablish your mindfulness and they’ll go away.

The trick lies in maintaining this very refined but continuous awareness. It’s like following a wire and not letting your eyes leave the wire at all no matter what happens. Then around that wire you can develop a sense of well-being and let that well-being spread to fill the body, but there’s still going to be that one spot where you stay centered. Don’t let there be any jumps or gaps in your attention, no matter what.

That’s when the effort becomes right. Now, sometimes it’ll require a lot of energy to stay and sometimes just a little bit. But you apply whatever effort is needed and, with practice, you learn how to read the needs of the body and the mind. If your focus loses track, don’t get upset, just reestablish it. Have a very matter-of-fact attitude toward this. You find that as you develop your discernment to the question of what is the just-right amount of effort, the effort becomes right.