

Well-armed Efforts

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When the Buddha describes the different factors of the path and their role in the practice, he says that mindfulness should be the governing principle. And he explains that by saying that you're mindful to give rise to skillful qualities, and when they're there you're mindful to keep them going so they can develop. In other words, you don't simply see things arise and pass away, arise and pass away and think you see them happening on their own. You consciously try to *make* skillful things arise and to *prevent* them from passing away.

Because after all, there's nothing in the six senses—things that we know through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—that isn't the result of a process of fabrication, the process by which the mind shapes things. Everything we experience through these senses is fabricated. The only unfabricated thing there is, is nibbana, which is outside of the six senses.

So when people say they're simply watching things happening on their own, on their own, they don't really understand, because what's happening is the result of past actions and your present actions, and if you think it's happening on its own it means you don't know what your past actions were, you don't know what your present actions are. And if you don't know these things, there's no way you can get past this process of fabrication, what they call *sankhara* in Pali. The only way is to try to create a path, which is precisely what the Buddha recommends: that you use the process of fabrication to make something good. And in the effort of doing that, you'll find out which things are coming in from the past that you can't change and which things are coming from your present actions that you can.

This is why we have to put effort into the practice. Concentration doesn't happen on its own. It's something you have to put together. The same way that unskillful qualities: Even though they may eventually run out, you don't want to just sit there and watch when, say, greed or anger has taken control of the mind, and simply wait for it to end. The Buddha says you have to act like someone whose head is on fire. If these things come in, you have to put out the fire, everything else has to be put aside for the time being, because you've got to focus on that one thing. You've got this fire in your head and you've got to put it out.

So when you think in the terms of the Buddha's analogy of the practice as being like a fortress, there are times when the gatekeeper, mindfulness, has a lapse. And you remember the duty of the gatekeeper is to recognize who's a friend, who's an enemy, and to let the friends in, to keep the enemies out. Well, every now and then, mindfulness slips, and the enemies come in. In other words, unskillful qualities take hold of the mind. That's when you've got to use your soldiers, your right efforts or your persistence, to get those things out of the fortress.

Now persistence requires two things. One is the desire to do this. You have to *want* to put an end to suffering for it to happen. It's not going to happen on its own. And then two, it needs

knowledge so that your efforts are rightly directed: You understand what the enemy is like, where the enemy's weak points are, how to take the enemy apart, and how to create a stronger fortress, how to give your mindfulness a better foundation so that it'll be less likely to lapse.

This is why we listen to the Dhamma and read the Dhamma. And one of the things we learn from listening and reading is how this process of fabrication happens in the present moment. The Buddha says there are three kinds: There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation, in other words, the way you talk to yourself; and there's mental fabrication, which are perceptions, the labels you have for things, and then feelings—feelings of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Every mental state is composed of these three things.

So when something unskillful comes in, you want first to see how you've fabricated it. Say, for instance, that ill will comes in. There's somebody out there you want to see suffer. But then you realize that this is unskillful. And yet it's taken control of a part of your mind. You have to take it apart: Ask yourself how you're breathing around that topic. Can you breathe in a more comfortable way? A calmer way?—so that, at the very least, the ill will doesn't get into the body?

And then you ask yourself how you're talking to yourself about the issue. This person that you have ill will for, is he or she totally bad? Try to see if you can think of some good points that the person has. If you think of the good points, then it's harder to feel ill will. If you *can't* think of any good points at all, then the Buddha says to have some compassion for that person. People who have no good points at all are just digging themselves deeper and deeper into a hole. So the right attitude is to have compassion, to feel sorry for them. You don't gain anything from seeing other people suffer—or if you do gain something, it's a pretty miserable state of satisfaction.

And then finally you look at your perceptions around the issue: What kind of monster do you see this person is? You see the person as a devious snake? Or as a spider who's poisonous? What's the perception holding that ill will in your mind?

Usually you'll find that there's a feeling of pain—sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle—that goes along with this. Well, if you can breathe in a way that's more pleasurable, that undercuts the pain. And if you can learn to think to yourself, talk to yourself in new ways about the issue, you can weaken the ill will so that it doesn't have so much power over the mind.

Now, the same three kinds of fabrication also apply to the path. For instance, when you're getting the mind in concentration, you've got the breath, which is bodily fabrication; you've got directed thought and evaluation devoted to seeing how the breath can be made comfortable and how the mind can be made to stay with the breath; and then you have mental fabrication, the perceptions you have around the breath that help you hold it in mind, that can perceive the breath not so much as the air coming in and out of the lungs but as the movement

of energy in the body. That perception allows the sense of ease to spread around. And then there are the feelings of pleasure you can create by being attentive to the breath.

So when you learn about these processes of fabrication, it gives you some focus. You know exactly what to abandon and what to develop; how to take things apart if they're unskillful and how to put them back together to make them skillful.

All this you learn from having listened to the Buddha, listened to the ajaans. And it's important that you listen to the ajaans as well as the Buddha. There are some people who say, "Well, I'll just go only by what's in the texts and won't listen to anybody else." But the Buddha never meant for his texts to be studied on their own. Back in his day, you couldn't read them at all. You had to listen to them from somebody, you learned them from another person. And you wanted to choose the person not only for the person's knowledge but also for the person's character, and for the person's experience in putting those teachings into practice. That was the context in which the Buddha meant for his teaching to be passed down. Because there are a lot of teachings you can misunderstand. But if you see that a person has put them into practice—"Oh, this is how it's done"—you can see which teaching takes priority at which time. Then you pick up a lot of things that simply aren't there in the words.

When the Buddha talks about the aspects of an admirable person, a person of integrity, a lot of the qualities—having a sense of time, having a sense of oneself, having a sense of moderation, having a sense of whom to associate with and whom not to: These things are not in the books. They have to be picked up by example. And even in meditation, there are a lot of things the Buddha tells you to do but doesn't say how. So this is where it's good to learn from someone who's tried bringing those teachings into his or her mind to see what works and what doesn't work, and as has developed strategies for doing what the Buddha recommends.

For example, the Buddha says when you're focused on the breath, try to breathe in a way that's comfortable, breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture. But he doesn't say how. When he talks about getting the mind into strong concentration, he says try to gain a sense of ease and well-being and let it spread throughout the whole body so that it permeates every part of the body. But again, he doesn't say how. Now, if you hold a perception of the body and the mind that the body's just a big solid lump, it's going to be hard to spread ease through it. But if you think of it as being primarily breath energy and that the breath energy fills the whole body, then when there's a sense of ease with the breath, it can spread easily, because breath just spreads into breath.

Now, these are the strategies that Ajaan Lee developed by working at breath meditation. Without him, it'd be hard to figure out what the texts were talking about or how to put the texts into practice. So there's a lot we learn from trying to find people of integrity who've practiced the path and who know the ins and outs of the texts by mastering the ins and outs of their minds. They know which teaching is applied at which time. When we have this background, then our efforts are going to be well-directed.

That way our soldiers have good weapons and they can strengthen the fortress. And at the same time, they can strengthen mindfulness so it's not so quick to let the enemy in.

So arm your efforts well. Because without them, there's no path. Without them, there's no end to suffering. The Buddha didn't teach just suffering. Some people accuse Buddhism of being pessimistic because it talks so much about suffering. But the Buddha's like a doctor: He talks about suffering because he has a cure. And the cure's not simply to watch things come and go on their own and to accept their comings and goings. The cure is to develop a path in the mind, develop good qualities in the mind so that suffering ends.

If you simply sit there watching things coming and going, you're defeated. You can't do anything about it. If that's your attitude, it's a defeatist attitude. The Buddha was never a defeatist. The Buddha said his path was the unexcelled victory in battle. So we're here not just to accept things. We're here to find something that we haven't seen before, to know something we haven't known before, which requires that we do things we haven't done before. In other words, we develop the skills of meditation so that we can bring about the end of suffering—through our desire, through our knowledge, through the persistence of our well-educated, well-armed efforts.