

Strength of Persistence

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One of the lessons of the four noble truths is that we suffer largely because of the way we talk to ourselves, and we can learn not to suffer by learning to talk to ourselves in new ways. This point applies especially to the question of right effort or persistence. You look at what's required by the path, and if all you can see are the dangers, all you can talk to yourself about are the dangers or the difficulties or the hardships or the things you're going to miss as you practice, you're going to make yourself miserable—and you're going to make it hard to practice, make it hard to put in the effort. If, however, you can see the path as something enjoyable, as an opportunity to explore, as an exciting challenge, an adventure, you're talking to yourself in that way actually makes it easier. That falls in part of the definition of the strength of persistence, the part that says you “generate desire.” You learn how to make yourself *want* to do this. And one of the best ways to wanting to do something is to see it as enjoyable.

It's like learning a musical instrument. One way to learn it is to get a teacher who slaps your hands with a ruler every time you make a mistake, who doesn't allow for exploration, doesn't allow for playing around. With a teacher like that, you're going to hate the instrument. If, however, you have some time to explore on your own—and this is a lot of what meditation is, you're exploring on your own—you learn to enjoy the instrument. For instance, you take a guitar into your room, shut the door, and just strum as you like. After a while you get tired of random strumming and you try developing new techniques, new melodies, new chords, new progressions. You find that you master the scales, and you put in the effort without thinking about it as effort.

The same principle applies to the meditation—and to the practice as a whole. If generosity comes with difficulty, if virtue comes with difficulty, goodwill comes with difficulty, try to look at these activities as a challenge, look at them as an adventure. You're going to try something new, and you're going to learn to see satisfaction in seeing your stinginess fall away or the carelessness that would get in the way of virtue: You see that fall away.

The part of the mind that says, “Why put in an effort? Just put in a minimum, what you can get by with”: That falls away, too. That's probably the biggest obstacle in the path—the attitude of “well, just enough to get by.” We may not come to the meditation consciously with that attitude, but if that's the way we live our lives, it's going to creep into the meditation as well.

So the various skills you need around the house, the various skills you need at work: Look at them as opportunities to master something, to do something well. And that attitude will then spill over into the meditation to animate it.

They've done studies of people who are really skillful at something—and here we're talking about not just being good at something, but being especially good. And one of the requisites is that the skill that they're mastering—whether it's surgery or a sport or a musical instrument—captures their imagination. The problems involved capture their imagination. And they go beyond just the problems that have been pointed out to them to look for new problems to solve. That's how they take the skill to a new level. The part of the mind that likes to explore, likes to figure things out: That's the part that will get you going in the meditation and inspire you to be willing to make more of an effort without thinking about its being an effort, without thinking about its being onerous.

So come to the meditation with an attitude of play. Look at Ajaan Lee's descriptions of breath meditation and you'll see that he plays in many ways. He works with breath going down the spine, he works with breath going up the spine, works with the breath energies going around in circles, the breath energies surrounding the body. These are areas you can explore.

For instance, there's a cocoon of energy that surrounds the body and it's related to the way you breathe. It's related to the breath energy in the body. Have you ever looked for it? Have you ever allowed it into your imagination? You can ask yourself: "If the breath energy around the body were smooth, what would it feel like? If it were agitated around the body, what would it feel like?" Think of it smoothing out. Then think of that smooth energy penetrating the body.

Or if there's a pain in a part of the body—say it seems to be a pain in the chest—ask yourself: "Suppose that were actually a pain in the back? How would that change the way you breathed around it?" Or if it seems to be in the back, suppose it's actually a pain from the front. Allow yourself to imagine new ways of breathing, new ways of looking at the sensations in the body and how they're related. Think of it as a game.

In the same way that, when you're strumming your guitar you sometimes come up with sounds that don't sound all that good, when you play with the breath, you'll find things that don't really work. Or at least may not work for you right now. But you just make a note of it, shrug it off, and move on. The people who put the most effort into the meditation, as far as I've known them, are the ones who find it a challenge, see it as an adventure, talk to themselves in a way that makes it an adventure rather than a chore. And that's how they're able to put out the effort without its being a chore.

So look at how you talk to yourself. Talk to yourself in a way that's encouraging. As for the things you miss in life as you practice—or if you look at your life as a whole and say: "I wish my life were like this, like that": Just drop those thoughts. They're not your friends. They get in the way of taking the

hand that you've been dealt and playing it well. After all, all of us have good potentials from our past. If we didn't, we wouldn't be here meditating. So focus on those. Focus on the opportunities you do have and be happy that you have those opportunities. It's not the case that conditions will always be right to meditate, but the conditions are right, right now. So look at this as a wide-open opportunity, and then the persistence, the effort, and the exertion will come on their own.