

Intelligent Effort

September 27, 2021

There are four kinds of right effort, four ways in which the strength of persistence gets developed: preventing unskillful qualities from arising, abandoning any unskillful qualities that have arisen, giving rise to skillful qualities that are not there yet, and then, once they're there, trying to develop them further.

Sometimes we get stuck on a snag. We've been doing one kind of right effort, as when we're trying to develop concentration, it goes well for a while, and then something happens. That's when you should look around to see what other kinds of effort you might be exerting. An important one that tends to get overlooked is preventing unskillful things from arising. That's what restraint is all about—restraint of the senses. You really have to be careful about what you take in.

This is where our devices are our main enemy, because they make us accessible to all kinds of things. It's so easy to pick them up, look at a headline, look at a website—and then the mind can go running for days.

So you have to be careful about what you take in, because it can destroy good states of concentration. Remember, concentration is something put together. It's fabricated. Its nature is to slip away. So we have to be constantly shoring it up, protecting it. Have a sense of its value. Ajaan Lee's image is of a dish of food. You want to keep it covered. Make sure the flies don't come in and land on it.

So, to protect your concentration as you go through the day, when you look at something, ask yourself: Who's doing the looking? And what's going to happen as a result of the looking?

The same when you listen: Those are the two big ones. Of course, the third big one is what you're thinking about. It's so easy to let just a little bit of a sexual fantasy come into the mind. Or irritation about somebody else can quickly turn into ill will. You've got to watch out for these things, because when they come in, they come in small, but then they grow.

There's a type of voodoo that's said to be practiced in Thailand, where they take the skin of a water buffalo. They'll chant over it and sprinkle water on it, and it shrinks and shrinks and shrinks until it's smaller than your hand. Then they'll send it into somebody, and as soon as it gets into that other person, it expands back to its original size and kills the person.

That's a good image for these little defilements that come into the mind and don't seem too much as they come in. When they move in, then they expand. So

watch out. Have a sense of the value of your concentration, that you want to protect it. And if, as you're looking at your dish of food, there seems to be no food there at all, well, at least keep the cover on, so that when you *do* finally get some new food, you put it in there and it's safe and sound.

In other words, even when the concentration is not going well, you want to protect your state of mind as much as best you can. It's simply that when the mind is concentrated, you should actually be more sensitive to the little things that could set it off. You've got to be careful.

So that's preventing.

Then there's giving rise to. Sometimes it helps to think about the world for a bit. Not the world that you see in your device, but the world that the Buddha taught. There's that tendency to think that the Buddha's worldview was simply something he picked up from his surroundings there in India. But you look at the actual worldviews that were expounded in the Vedas and the Upanishads, and they were very different.

The Buddha's insight on the night of his awakening really was an insight: all those many, many rebirths, and all those many levels of the cosmos in which beings could take rebirth. And the constant shuffle around, like a deck of cards: You deal out a hand, then you take the cards back, you shuffle them again, and then deal out another hand, totally different. There's no rhyme or reason to it. Sometimes it's good just to think about: This is what the cosmos is like. You've been wealthy many times. You've been a deva many times. You've been a hell being many times. Ajaan Mun said that he could remember one period when he was reborn as a dog 500 times consecutively, because his mind got stuck there. Think about that. Just imagine: 500 dogs, one by one by one. You've probably done that, too.

You've been a deva, and you've been a meditator, and things went well for a while. But then they fell back again, and you gave up. You can start thinking: "Do I want to give up again?" Remember Ajaan Mun's statement that what keeps you going is that determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements, ever again. Think about the defilements laughing at you. Do you want that, again? Then think about that image. This is what the world is like.

The world of the media is just a surface show. Underneath it we have all these things going on, beings shifting around. You hope you can get to a secure place, but there are no really secure places anywhere in the cosmos. The Canon tells of Baka the Brahma, who'd been a Brahma, the king of his particular realm, for so long that he'd forgotten that he'd ever been anything else. So he assumed that this was it. He had arrived. This was who he was. He wasn't going to change. The

Buddha had to go and show him that he was wrong, by disappearing to a realm that Baka himself couldn't see, and by pointing out that there was a different kind of consciousness that had nothing to do with any of the six senses at all.

The funny thing is that the sutta doesn't say whether Baka changed his mind. But think about that: You can get to a really high place like that, and think you're secure. Yet then you're going to fall—to say nothing of this human realm where everything is so precarious. So think about the fact that you've got the opportunity to practice now and that you can create some good kamma for yourself. That's your mainstay.

What kind of good karma are you going to create? Well, work on the mind.

We have that blessing every morning: *ayu, vanno, sukham, balam*—May you have a long life, beauty, happiness, strength. *Abhivadana-silissa, niccama vuddha pacayino*: Those who show respect to those worthy of respect will have these four rewards. What does it mean to show respect? In the Buddha's case, he said you show respect by practicing. So as you practice, you're blessing yourself. This is how you create at least something that you can hold on to, as you go through all those many, many realms.

But then you realize that there's got to be something safer. The Buddha saw the dangers in those realms, so he worked on what he could. Think in these ways long enough, and you come to see that anything that would pull you away right now is not really worth it. It's all very ephemeral. It has no substance. The Buddha has this series of images: The body is like a glob of foam on a river. You've probably seen forests where some tree sap gets into a river, it gets stirred up a little bit and fills with bubbles so that it's a glob of foam and gets carried along by the water. There's no substance there.

The bubbles that form on a river by raindrops. A mirage. A plantain tree where you try to find the core, but there's no core. A magic show. These are the aggregates. They're all very ephemeral. There's no substance in any of these aggregates that we use to create our sense of who we are and the world we live in. And, the Buddha said, when you remember all the many lifetimes you've been through, it's just aggregates. That's all it is. And here you are, sitting in your current pile: What are you going to do with them? You can make them into a path. Actually, you make them into a path willy-nilly anyhow, but you can make them into a really good path if you try.

We have the example of the Buddha and his noble disciples. Here again, it's good to use your imagination in the right way. Think of them as ordinary people, because that's what they were when they began. Many of them had deeper

problems than you do, yet they were able to pull themselves together, gain awakening, and find true safety.

So use your imagination to give rise to skillful qualities, to create the mind state that wants to practice and finds it easy to settle down.

The formula for right mindfulness is: focused on the body in and of itself—or feelings or mind states in and of themselves—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. It's good to know, to have a sense of which world you're living in. If you're living in the world of the media, there's so much that has to be done to fix this problem, fix that problem, get upset about this politician, get upset about the other politician. Learn to see through that.

Having that image of the world doesn't inspire you to practice unless you look at it in the right way. And looking in the right way means looking at it from the point of view of the Buddha's world, in which you see how beings rise and fall. Social problems can be dealt with, but then people still die. And then they die again, and they die again. Some things get dealt with, other things are left undealt with, over and over and over again.

When you look around you and see that nothing in the world has any appeal, then it's a lot easier for the mind to settle down.

So use your intelligence. Remember what intelligence is. It's the ability to see connections, but it's also the ability to be selective in what you respond to and how you respond. As I said the other day, restraint is a sign of intelligence precisely for that reason. And the way you use your imagination can also be either intelligent or not intelligent.

Remember that right effort is not just brute effort. It's intelligent effort, using all your mental faculties and tools, all along the path.