

Impatience

December, 2002

Right effort is one of those troublesome issues in the practice, partly because of our conception of the idea of effort. We think of stressing and straining and squeezing and forcing things. Whereas, when you read the passages where the Buddha talks about right effort, it's more a question of what works in getting skillful states to arise in the mind, what works in getting unskillful states to go away. Sometimes that does require stressing and straining and squeezing, and other times it requires just looking on.

So the important element in right effort is keeping watch, seeing what works, seeing what doesn't work in giving rise to skillful states. In other words, when you relax and take it easy in the practice, and then find that things are falling apart, that's the sign that you've got to put a little more energy into your practice of right effort. Other times, when you find that you're really stressing, stressing out over the practice—things are getting dry, things are getting unpleasant—it's the time to back up a little bit.

So it's a matter of watching the results, keeping one eye on what you're doing and one eye on your results and making adjustments. This is in keeping with one of the qualities that the Buddha says you should apply to your effort. The Pali word is *citta*, which we ordinarily translate as "mind," but it also means "intentness": the carefulness that you bring to it, the sensitivity that you bring to the process, your ability to govern yourself.

In other words, look at your actions, see what the results are, and learn from them.

So right effort here is largely an effort in the mind. It's a developing of your sensitivity, a developing of your standards of judgment for what's working, what's not working. This is where the path really requires self-reliance. There's nobody who can stand watch over you and say, "You're trying too hard now," or "Now you're not trying hard enough." You're the one who's putting the effort in, you're the one who's getting the results, so you've got to be the one who passes judgment—keeping always in mind the distinction between being judgmental and being judicious. Judgmental is when you come with rather crude standards of judgment or a tendency to make snap judgments. Judicious is when you learn how to refine that judging faculty in the mind so that it becomes skillful.

We've all heard about the evils of being judgmental in meditation, but instead, we need to remind ourselves that it's good to have good powers of judgment.

Learn how to be judicious in what you're doing. That can come only with time, only with practice, and only with a steadiness in the practice. If you practice for a little while and then drop it, practice and then drop it, often you forget what you've learned. You have to come back and start all over again—and it's frustrating.

So try to maintain a steadiness in your gaze—watching what you're doing, watching what's happening. Often we don't like to watch. We'd like to forget about the fact that we're doing things that are shaping our lives, and we'd rather take a holiday, rather take time off. Well, when we take that holiday, we usually end up doing things that are more harmful, that really are detrimental.

When they talk about relaxing your efforts, it means not so much relaxing your gaze or forgetting to look at what you're doing or forgetting to look at the results, but learning to realize that there are times when right effort doesn't mean just pushing, pushing, pushing. Sometimes we have too mechanical a notion, that the more you put your foot on the accelerator, the faster things will go.

The mind is not a machine; it's more organic. Think of it more as a plant. If you want it to grow, you give it water. You give it fertilizer. But you shouldn't give it too much water or too much fertilizer. You need a sense of balance. You'll often learn this by over-watering a plant, over-fertilizing a plant, but with time you get to sense of when that line between just right and too much gets overstepped. The same with the other end of the scale: the line between just right and too little effort or too little attention. That way, you get a better and better sense of "just rightness."

So you want to maintain this steadiness of your gaze. The steadier it is, the more clearly you can see when things are going well in the practice, when things are not going well—and you have a sense of what you did that made the difference. Sometimes it's because of outside influences, but a lot of times it's just a question of your own application: what you've been doing, what kind of momentum has been building up in your mind, whether it's a good momentum or a bad momentum. If you can keep your eye on that, a lot of the issues in the meditation get resolved.

So right effort comes down to the ability to monitor your actions. Often you don't like to do that because you're afraid of seeing unskillful actions, unskillful intentions. Well, what's there to be afraid of? Who are you afraid of having see these things? It's just you. You're ultimately the one who has to pass judgment on them.

Often, though, the problem is that even if we don't look at our own actions, everybody else is looking at our actions and they see them clearly. So why should

you let other people see your own actions more clearly than you let yourself see them? You have to accept where you are and then work from there. When you can maintain this steadiness of gaze, this judiciousness in your actions, then you can go wherever you want. Because that's the principle that keeps things in line. That's the principle that maintains the practice, keeps it going.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a favorite saying, "Wherever there's mindfulness, there's practice. Wherever there's no mindfulness, there's no practice." You can be sitting here with your eyes closed and in the meditation posture for hours and hours, but if you're not mindful, it doesn't count as practice. On the other hand, you can be out walking around doing other things, but if you're mindful, it does count as practice.

What does "mindful" mean here? It means keeping in mind your standards of what counts as a good action and what counts as an undesirable action—in terms of the results that they're giving—and keeping watch on your intentions, keeping watch on your actions, and learning how to make changes when things aren't going well.

Learning theory in psychology keeps stressing this point over and over again. It's your ability, one, to monitor your actions and the results; and two, your ability to make changes in what you've been doing: That's what enables learning to happen. So we want to develop these qualities that allow learning to happen: being mindful, being alert, keeping mindfulness and alertness focused on our actions and their results.

Sometimes this may sound wearisome—that you've got to watch yourself all the time—which is why we practice concentration. Give the mind a good safe place to be, an easy task where it's not so difficult to watch what you're doing, not so difficult to watch the results. You may not like the results at first, but it's a lot easier with this—in this little laboratory right here. All you're asked is to stay with the breath and to notice when the mind has wandered off from the breath, and if you can, bring it back. It's a lot easier watching this than it is trying to keep track of personal relationships, keeping track of all the other things that go on out there in the outside world. It's frustrating sometimes, when you see your own lack of skill, but, hey, if you don't see it, how are you going to learn? How is it going to get better?

So use the meditation, basically, as a laboratory—like a practice room—when the variables in the experiment are fewer and fewer so that it's easier to see what's having a good result. Exactly where your own mindfulness is a cause for something skillful, where your own lack of mindfulness is the cause for something unskillful.

And where something external is the actual problem. Here, “external,” meaning everything from the breath on out.

Give yourself time to meditate so that you can see these things more clearly, more easily. The process gets boiled down to fewer variables. And if you’re willing to watch, willing to make changes, you can learn. Things do get better. The more consistently you watch, the better your powers of judgment. This is how your effort gets closer and closer to right effort all the time, so that you know when you really do have to put a lot of exertion into it and when it’s time to relax a bit. You’re keeping your fingers on the pulse, always making sure that you know what’s going on in terms of your intentions, along with what you’re doing, what you’re saying, what you’re thinking, and what the results are. This is what makes right effort possible. This is what makes right effort *right*: this quality of intentness, being sensitive, really paying close attention right here, right now.

So even though we may have trouble with the judging faculty in our mind sometimes, that, too, can be trained to be more skillful so that it passes judgments skillfully, makes suggestions skillfully. These are all skills that can be learned. We’ve probably picked a lot of the unskillful habits up from people around us but those bad habits can be unlearned. Good habits can be developed in their place if you’re patient, if you watch.

Right effort doesn’t mean impatience; it means trusting the process. You put your trust in the path. You don’t think that maybe there’s something else out there that you should be doing in addition to the path. The path takes care of all these issues. You don’t have to anticipate where it’s going, or try to squeeze it into some sort of preconceived mold. Just take these very basic, basic qualities that the Buddha recommends—being mindful, being alert—and apply them ardently to what you’re doing. The ardency comes in the sensitivity and consistency with which you apply them. When the ajaans talk about accelerating your efforts, that’s what they mean: being more sensitive, being more consistent.

So even though it may sometimes sound paradoxical, that *samvega*, “urgency,” implies patience, sometimes it does—if that’s what’s required to get the best results that open the way out.