

Effortlessness Through Effort

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We hear the ajaans talking about automatic mindfulness: where your mindfulness is so steady that you don't have to make any effort—it's just there. It sounds good. It sounds like the kind of meditation we'd like to have.

But there are two ways of having an effortless meditation. One is not to put any effort in at all from the very beginning, to simply content yourself with whatever comes up, telling yourself, "As long as I'm with the present moment, that's fine." But that's not mindfulness. It's equanimity—and not necessarily skillful equanimity at that.

The other effortless meditation comes after you've actually put in a lot of effort to solve the different problems that come up in the mind until you've worked through the various hooks of the different thoughts and emotions that pull you away from the present moment, so that the next time that particular thought or that particular hook comes up, you know exactly what to do. You don't have to think it through; you don't have to experiment; you've mastered a skill. That's the kind of mindfulness the ajaans are talking about. It becomes automatic because you've gone through all the problems, and you've gotten really good at solving the problems that the mind keeps churning out.

You see why the mind goes for particular thoughts—and the insight has to go into the particulars. You can't just say, "I'm attracted to this thought because of greed, or because of anger, or because of my sense of self." You have lots of different greeds, lots of different angers, lots of different senses of self, and you have to learn how to sort out which are the ones that are coming into play right now.

So you try to get the mind into concentration and then you take on the defilements as they come, dealing with each one on its own terms. Look for what precisely is the allure of this particular defilement. Why does it pull you away? Why does it capture your attention?

Now, "allure" here doesn't simply mean the things that you find pleasing. There are some things that are actually negative, but the mind really goes for them anyhow. If you dig down a little bit deeper you find that there is some pleasure in going for the things you don't like. Someone has mistreated you, and part of the mind says, "Here's a sign that I've been unjustly treated, and that I deserve better. I deserve special treatment." That's where the appeal is; that's where the allure is.

So we're dealing in particulars here: this particular breath, this particular breath, each one as it's coming in. This particular state of the body: What does it need, in terms of the breath? Get used to looking at the particulars as you focus on the breath. And then you'll start getting used to looking at the particulars of the thoughts that pull you away.

This will take a while, which is why we practice. We have to spend so much time because the mind is very complex.

There's a passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer is talking about how easy it is to figure out elephants. He says you get a new elephant and within a week you've learned all the elephant's tricks, you've learned how to outsmart the elephant, and so you can get it to do what you want. But the elephant trainer went on to note that the human mind is a lot more complex—which is why the training takes us more than a week. If it seems like a long and daunting process, think about how much longer samsara is going to be if you don't undertake this training.

What this means is that you've got to be willing to put in the effort and to learn, through trial and error, what kind of effort is useful and what kind of effort is not. All too often you hear people say, "Well, I was trying and trying and trying in my meditation, and then I realized that if I didn't try at all, it was a lot more pleasant."

Think of the Buddha's image of trying to get milk out of a cow. You twist the horn of the cow, you twist, and twist, and twist, and no milk comes. Then you tell yourself, "Okay, I'll stop twisting. It's so much nicer not to twist the horn, it's less exhausting for me, less irritating to the cow." But you still don't get any milk. You have to put in the effort to find out which part of the cow you pull on that allows you to get the milk out. And it may take some trial and error. You may be trying the tail for a while, or pulling the nose. And with some parts of the cow that you pull on, the cow doesn't react too much; with other parts, it's going to react very violently. Until you finally realize, oh, it's the udder. That's what you pull, and then you get the milk.

In the same way, when you make an effort in the meditation, there are going to be times when it seems like the effort is actually getting in the way. That doesn't mean all effort is bad, it simply means that that particular effort is not the right one. The cow is reacting to being forced in that particular way. So you have to look at how you're forcing yourself to do things. You can either be the kind of person who just pushes and pushes and pushes your mind, or you try to figure out ways of making the mind *want* to do this.

The Buddha talks about that as being a sign of wisdom: You learn how to get yourself to *want* to do the things you start out not wanting to do but are going to give good results. You learn how to talk yourself into seeing that it's a good thing. And then you learn to make a sport, say, out of shooting down your defilements, instead of regretting them and feeling nostalgia for them and saying, "Well, as long as they don't do too much damage in the present moment, I'm okay with their being here."

When you let them in that much, it's like the story of the camel that wanted to get out of the sandstorm into the tent. First it said, "Please, just my nose." And then after a while, "My eyes are getting blown by the sand, can I put my eyes in?" So it sticks more and more and more of its head in until the camel is totally occupying the tent and there's no room left for the human beings.

Your defilements say, "We'll be okay as long as you tell yourself that you're practising acceptance. We won't be too bad." But you can't trust them. You can't have any nostalgia for them. After all, they *are* your enemies. They're the enemies of your long-term happiness.

So you have to make it your sport to see these things that you used to identify with as something now that you can shoot down. And you see through them by trying to figure out: Where's their allure, where are the hooks, what's the specific hook for this particular unskillful action? And then you let it go.

And you've gained the strength to do this from the concentration. Without the concentration, this practice gets very wearisome after a while. The mind wants happiness, wants pleasure, and as the Buddha said, if you don't have the pleasure of jhana or something better, then no matter how much you see the drawbacks of sensuality, you're still going to go back to that. And "sensuality" here doesn't mean just sensual desire. It also means the irritation that comes along when you don't get your desires—all the other defilements that revolve around sensual issues. They're going to keep coming back because you don't have any better sense of well-being to draw on.

This is why we work with the breath to make it comfortable. And if the breath isn't comfortable, put in the effort to figure out what kind of breathing *would* be comfortable. Get so that you can read the needs of the body, so that you can tell, "When it's tired in this way, it needs more energizing breathing. When it's tired in that way, it needs more calming breathing." When there's a pain how do you breathe around it? How do you breathe through it?

These are specific problems, and as you solve each problem that becomes one more thing that can be done effortlessly. So this is how mindfulness becomes automatic. *Not* by simply telling yourself, "The present moment is always there,

and I'll just hang out in the present moment and I'll be okay." The present moment has its specific problems and if you refuse to recognize them as problems they'll never get solved. But if you can see that they *are* problems, and you find it interesting to untie these problems, then it becomes your sport.

After a while, when the problems come up, you recognize them: "Okay, this problem is like that problem." It may not be identical, but you can begin to see patterns, and things become more and more effortless. It's easier and easier to cut right through the problem.

It's like becoming good at tying knots: If you know how to tie knots, then you also know how to untie knots. So the next time that you see a knot of a particular kind, you say, "Oh, I know how to untie that one," then very quickly it's done.

In the beginning, it may take a while to figure things out, but that's effort well spent. It's the effort that leads to effortlessness. And that's the right way to get there.