Finding Right Effort

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 40:37

Tonight we're going to talk about right effort, finding right effort, because the whole question of the effort that we make in meditation is a very vexed one.

When the Buddha talked about meditation practice in the Eightfold Path, which is his basic template, he talked about it in terms of three qualities that have to be cultivated: sammā vāyāma, sammā sati, and sammā samādhi. Sammā vāyāma, usually translated as right effort, could also be translated as right energy or right commitment. Then we have right mindfulness, and then right concentration or unification.

If you look at these three qualities, right effort or energy represents the active side of meditation practice. This is the "do it now, do it now, do it now" aspect of practice—the continuity of the practice without taking any break. On the other end, you've got right concentration or unification, samādhi, and this represents the peaceful, receptive side of meditation. Samādhi, concentration, unification, doesn't do anything. It's just stillness. Then in the middle sits right mindfulness, and it balances the two of them. One of its functions is balancing the active with the receptive aspects of the practice.

A great deal of the practice, like most of our experience, involves finding a balance between the active and the receptive. With sammā vāyāma, right effort, we can have too much energy and effort. This is where we get really tight and tie ourselves up in knots and eventually our head explodes. I do have an old meditation friend who once advised me that you haven't really seriously begun your meditation practice until your head explodes. So there's that aspect. And of course we can have not enough energy and effort, and this is when we're having a nice peaceful meditation spiritual holiday and nothing much is happening.

Notice the difference between that quality and the next one, right mindfulness. We can have not enough mindfulness, and if we don't have enough mindfulness, we're in trouble. But we cannot have too much mindfulness—that's just impossible. Vāyāma, energy, effort, commitment, that one we can have too much of, just as we can have not enough of.

Finding a balance between too much effort and not enough effort, too much energy and not enough energy—this is crucial for the meditator, and for most people it's quite difficult to find that balance. It can take a great deal of time and a great deal of experimentation to actually get it right. But if we're struggling with this, we can comfort ourselves with the thought that we are not alone in being affected by this problem. The Buddha himself had this problem, and in fact, he had it seriously badly. Tonight we're going to have a look at what his problem was, how he faced it, and how he overcame it.

We're going to do this by looking at two texts that are largely parallel. Each comes from a different discourse, a different sutta. Both of them show the Buddha speaking to his students, reminiscing about the bad old days before he was the Buddha, and in particular, when he was doing ascetic practices. In one of these texts, he describes the problem that blocked him in his practice. In the other, he describes the solution he discovered to overcome the problem.

Because we're talking about the Buddha before he became the Buddha, we shall call him by name: Gotama. He was an aristocrat of the Sakya Republic. Gotama was his family name or his clan name. In the early discourses, there's actually no mention of his personal name. A number of the characters who appear in the discourses have that characteristic—we know their clan name, but we don't know their personal name. Sometimes we know their nickname, and sometimes we get a personal name. But in the case of the Buddha, we just know him as Gotama. That's how people who were not his students addressed him: Mr. Gotama.

As a young man, he left home in search of awakening. He did so because he thought he had a problem, and he thought that awakening or enlightenment would solve his problem.

So he went out in search of it. And clearly he must have been a pretty macho young bloke, just refusing to listen to anybody and determined to do exactly what he wanted to do, exactly in the way that he wanted to do it.

Anyway, he embarks on his meditation career and ends up going down a blind alley, as it were, getting stuck in his practice. At first he practiced yoga and meditation in what was then the Vajji Confederation, the largest of the tribal republics in North India at the time. Two or three centuries before, it had been the kingdom of Videha, and it was the center of yogic and Upanishadic teaching and practice. This is roughly what would be North Bihar state today. But it didn't work out for him. So he went south, crossed the Ganga, and ended up in the Gaya area in what is now South Bihar state. But again, a dead end.

Now, at this point in the South, he's doing extreme practices. He's part of an extreme ascetic tradition, which was quite strong in that area. Not only did his practice come to a dead end, but he almost came to death himself because he was abusing his body so much.

This brought him to a stop where he started to seriously reflect on what he was doing wrong, because he was clearly doing something wrong and his whole project was about to collapse. He thought about it, and he located his problematic relationship to the practice in terms of the stress that was brought on by it—in particular, the stress that he felt in his body.

Now decades later, when he's the fully awakened Buddha and a highly successful teacher who's built an international empire, this is how he describes the practice of his immature youth to his students. This comes from Majjhima 36, if you want to look it up, the Mahāsaccakasutta. He says: "Although I generated lively energy and established continuous mindfulness, my body was agitated and disturbed because I was

overwhelmed by the painful striving."

This is how he sums up his practice then. It describes Gotama's approach to the practice in his ascetic phase. Notice what he's doing: he's striving for awakening. He wanted something. He wanted it really, really, really badly. He threw away everything that he had and gambled it all in order to get this one thing he really wanted, which was enlightenment, awakening. And he saw his body and his mind as instruments to get that something he wanted. He had a very instrumentalist relationship to his body and his mind. If he flogged his mind and body hard enough, he could drive them onwards to awakening and get what he wanted.

It's rather like the relationship a dedicated athlete has towards his or her body. Often athletes have terrible injuries because they've just trashed their bodies, driving them in order to get what they want. Gotama seems to have had the same relationship to his body and his mind.

So he's describing his practice and he says he had high energy effort, *vīriya*, and he had continuous mindfulness, *sati*. Two big ticks. He's doing really well—very high energy, continuous mindfulness. That's pretty good. But he's making a crucial mistake, and in his obsession, he's completely blind to it. The mistake is that the power of his mind is being used to overwhelm his body and drive it towards a goal. There's an imbalance between mind and body.

This comes about because, in terms of the meditation practice, when we talk about the path factor of *vīriy a*—driving, effort, energy, however you translate it—these are mental activities. They are not physical activities. But in the way that he was pushing himself, Gotama's mental energy bled into his body, and his body became agitated and disturbed. In other words, he lost touch with the delicacy of the practicing mind, the mind that is doing the aware-ing. He lost touch with how delicate and sensitive that mind is. His mind was clear, strong, awakened—but his body was overwhelmed by agitation. His mind and body were at war with each other, and this war was the expression of his delusion.

A question came from the group: "If he had this really good mindfulness but was disconnected from the sensitivity of the body, isn't that kind of a gap in the mindfulness itself? Isn't that part of the work?"

Yes, it's part of mindfulness applied skillfully. But consider this: when you meditate, you can be really focused on something—let's say the breathing—and you're really absorbed in it. You're not noticing certain things, and therefore you're staying in the sitting posture for a long period of time.

And you don't notice that your left knee is screaming out in pain. So you're mindful of the meditation object, but you've blotted out everything else.

"So isn't that samadhi?"

It is, but samadhi is supported by mindfulness. Yet it's mindful of simply one part of experience, blind to the others—not the whole picture. When you focus on something, it can be like wearing blinkers, like

shining a spotlight in a dark night.

"I thought the whole idea of mindfulness was that it kind of balanced things out."

Exactly. That's the mistake he was making.

"I don't understand why you can say he had good mindfulness if he wasn't actually—"

He said his mindfulness was continuous. But he didn't have what he later came to call sammā sati, right mindfulness. He didn't have what he later came to call sammā vāyāma, right effort. So in the path, he qualifies each of these qualities with "right" as opposed to wrong—because you can have them but completely screw up the whole thing, depending on how you're doing it, depending on your relationship to it. I think this is part of the reason why the Eightfold Path has that emphasis on "right." And in his younger days, he was definitely getting it wrong. But there's also the impression that he was not a man to actually listen to anybody else. So he had to make the mistake.

Now, this is a rather extreme example. Again, I get the impression he was a pretty extreme young character. But this is the problem we have when we struggle in our practice.

The practice demands effort. Many years ago when I was resident teaching here, sometimes people would ring up and say, "Oh, we hear you're a Buddhist meditation center and we'd like to come up and just meditate for a while." "Oh, we don't want to join an organized retreat. We just want to come up and meditate." "Okay, are you an experienced meditator?" "Oh yeah, I've done a bit." "So what do you think you would be doing when you're up here?" "Well, I thought, you know, me and my girlfriend could give each other massages. We just relax, and you've got vegetarian food." Basically, they wanted a spiritual holiday. Because this is what they thought meditation was.

The practice does demand effort. And sometimes, if people expect to spend a meditation retreat relaxing, they get a complete shock when they actually come here and start doing it. The problem is that if we're working really hard and making great effort, we end up feeling stressed. And when we're stressed, we cannot settle. We're agitated. We might be suppressing the agitation through our effort, but we're agitated. And this agitation gets in the way of the practice.

The way Gautama articulated this problem was: How can we make mental effort with the body relaxed? How do we do that?

When Gautama worked out the solution to his problem, this is how he expressed it. This comes from Majjhima Nikāya 4, the Bhaya Bhairava Sutta. He says, "I generated lively energy and established continuous mindfulness. My body was calm and peaceful and my heart was settled and unified." This is one occasion where I would translate *citta* as "heart" because I think it fits.

So at this point his mind had high energy and mindfulness as before. Now, this involves a highly active state of the mind. Highly active. When we develop samādhi—let's say we really start to develop samādhi

concentration, the mind really settles, becomes still, very clear—it's very peaceful, and it's easy to miss that this is actually a high energy state. But the energy is flowing completely freely, and so it just disappears. It vanishes from view because there's nothing disturbing it.

So his mind had high energy and mindfulness, while his body was calm and peaceful. This is a very interesting state of balance, because this is what we're trying to achieve. We want an active, energetic mind in a body that is calm and peaceful. This is a big challenge for anybody, and it's something that, as practitioners, we need to explore in our practice.

So what's central here is the interconnection between mind and body, the networking between them. We want the mind to put out maximum energy while the body relaxes, and therefore does not distract or get in the way of mental activity.

To understand what this means, let's look at a very mundane example of when this does not work—when body and mind are feeding each other's stress.

Let's say you're doing something very simple, everyday, straightforward—something physical with your hands, like buttoning a shirt. And let's say the context is that I'm buttoning my shirt because I've got to go out somewhere where I have to look respectable, and time is short. I've got to get out the door soon. So I'm doing it perfectly routinely, except for that last button. And that last button is recalcitrant. It will not go into the buttonhole. Have you ever had buttons like that? Buttons that turn on you?

So I'm getting frustrated as I'm wrestling with this button, this final button. My energy rises. I try harder to get that button into that buttonhole. But the very act of trying harder causes my awareness to slip away from the physical delicacy of touch sensations in the hands and fingers, which is where the work is actually being done. The awareness slips into the mind, into an inner determination to smash through this job and get it done.

Stress pushes awareness away from the body into the mind, and that mind is becoming increasingly agitated and frustrated. This determination to get the job done is expressed physically throughout the body as tension and hardness, and it's expressed mentally as a separation from the actual physical activity—into an inner sense of frustration and striving. Mind and body are fighting each other in a kind of vicious feedback loop. Each is feeding the stress and tension of the other, and the whole situation is rapidly escalating.

Now, if we get back to meditation—have you ever found yourself struggling in your meditation practice?

Let's say I am struggling in my meditation. How do I experience this sense of struggle? Well, in part it's a sense of hardness and pushing in the body. There's tension throughout. Sometimes in breathing meditation, it expresses itself by the breathing itself becoming much stronger and harder. We might discover, for example, if we're in the habit of struggling in our practice, that we have a special meditation breath. My breathing is operating in a certain way, I sit down, construct my meditation posture, decide

now I've got to start meditating, and immediately the breath goes zoom, zoom, zoom—loud and clear. This is my meditation breath, which is actually harder and more escalated than my normal everyday breath. And as soon as I decide "that's it, I'm getting out of here," my breath calms down. Has that ever happened? Maybe it's just me.

The physical sensations in the body which indicate stress are signaling back to me that I am trying hard in the practice. And that must be good, surely. So I should keep going. But my mind has lost its engagement with the present—partly because it's overwhelmed by the distress signals from the body, and partly because it's taken over by a concept, a concept of a future result, of what I'm going to get out of this sometime in the future. Basically, my attitude to the practice becomes "I have to get from here to there"—from here, which is bad, to there, which is good—and as soon as possible. The days are ticking by. I've got to generate that samadhi.

But if the body is relaxed while the mind is working, then mind and body come together in a harmony which one can feel. There's no threat. There's no danger. There's no stress. There's just something to be done. Body and mind settle together. And when that happens, the heart opens.

Remember what the Buddha said: "I generated lively energy and established continuous mindfulness. My body was calm and peaceful and my heart was settled and unified." This is the samadhi aspect.

In other words, in wrong effort we have a two-fold process. In right effort, it's a three-fold process. In wrong effort, we have mind and body in conflict, fighting each other. The mind is using willpower to try to force the body to be still and force itself to be still.

And this creates conflict. Because if we're trying to force mind and body to be still, we're trying to suppress our obstacles, our impulses, with willpower. We're trying to crush our obsessions and our impulses with the power of the mind. And this creates strain in the mind, tension in the body. And even if we succeed, we can't get any further. We're blocked.

But in right effort, mind and body are working together. This is the twofold aspect. And when mind and body work together, the heart can settle. The heart can open and settle and unify. This represents the affective aspect of the person. The effort that we're making is conative—it's the willpower aspect. But here, we're talking about the heart aspect. That settles. And it opens up. And then we can become absorbed into the present.

We've talked about how the mind loses its engagement with the present when it becomes overwhelmed by distress signals in the body. And we also said that the mind loses engagement with the present when it's taken over by the concept of a future result. "I've got to get from here, which is bad, to there, which is good. And as soon as possible, thank you very much."

This brings us to the problem of time. And the problem of time is intimately bound up with the problem of effort. Here we will look at another discourse, Majjhima 36, the Mahasaccaka Sutta, where again the

Buddha is reflecting on the mistakes that he made in his youth. When he was practicing wrong effort, this is how he described his meditation practice:

"I thought, suppose I clench my teeth and press my tongue against the roof of my mouth, then beat down, control, and crush mind with mind. So with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, controlled, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

This is why, you may wonder, in interviews I sometimes ask, "Are you sweating from your armpits when you meditate?" And why I look disillusioned when you say, "No, I haven't noticed any."

You could sum up Gotama's practice at this point as crushing mind with mind. Now, if you engage in this kind of practice, you have to be looking for a result, something that will happen next, in order to justify what you're putting yourself through now. Gotama clearly had an image of himself at some time in the future as finally awakened. And if only he could work hard enough, then he could fulfill that ambition. And if he was not yet awakened—which he wasn't—then it's obvious he's not working hard enough. So he has to work harder, and he has to work harder, and he has to work harder, and he has to work harder.

He goes on to say: "I thought, whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion practitioners have experienced in the past, in the future, or in the present, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. Yet I have not attained any states surpassing the human by this wracking practice of austerities—any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones."

This is what he was thinking about when he was reflecting that he had completely stuffed up the whole project. What he was doing was going nowhere.

So what went wrong? Notice that in his description of having done his best—that anyone had done in the past, or anyone will do or could do in the future—Gotama was caught up in the reality of time. Past and future were real to him. And this meant that he was caught up in what he later came to call papañca—conceptual proliferation or complication.

Because time, in the sense of an experience of time, the felt reality of past and future, is real only in the world of concept. It's not real as a direct experience. Past and future are real only as concepts. So he's allowing the world of concept to dominate the agenda. He's allowing concepts of past and future to dominate the agenda, which means he's not actually fully present.

When we step out of the realm of concept, when we step out of the river of stories flowing through our minds, what do we actually experience? Or more intimately, we could ask: right now, what are we experiencing? Are we experiencing the past? Are we experiencing the future?

In reality, in actual experience, all we have, and all we can ever have, is the present.

Now, the present is very wide, and it includes everything that we remember from the past and everything

we anticipate for the future. Because after all, when we remember the past, when do we remember it? We remember it now. When we anticipate the future, when do we anticipate it? We anticipate it now. What we've got is now. And we haven't got anything else.

So right effort, if we're looking for it, is found in the commitment to recognizing the felt present. It's all about recognizing what's happening now.

If I'm here meditating because I want to get something else, what is it actually that I'm trying to get? What I'm trying to get is a mental image. It can't be anything else, because it's not actually here. And if I'm constantly reaching beyond, past, what's actually happening now in order to grab hold of an image of what I want to happen sometime in the future, then I'm missing what's happening now. I'm pushing past it as fast as I can to get to where the action takes place. So my relationship to what's happening now is that basically it's not important. It's important only as a step on the ladder that I want to climb, and I want to move past this step as quickly as possible.

This is how we practice when we're caught up in the reality of time and we're motivated to really do the job. And this is why we talk about relaxation and why it's so important.

I want something to happen, something that is not happening now—that's why I came to the retreat. So I work hard to make it happen. But because my view is projected forward to some imagined destination sometime in the future, what I'm actually trying to do is trade in my current experience for what I imagine is going to be more satisfactory. And that very struggle blocks my progress. Because when I struggle, I feel under threat. And when I feel under threat, my body tightens and my mind resists what's happening now.

But let's say I do not want something else to happen, and I also allow myself to be intimate with what's happening now. When I'm fully committed to being aware of what's happening now, then I'm not struggling. Why should I struggle when whatever is happening now is already available? When I recognize that there's nothing to strive for sometime in the future, then I can relax. Even while the mind is dynamic and active, still it's not striving for something else. It's just fully engaged with the present.

In that state of relaxation, my body opens, my mind is calm. There is pleasure in that opening. And the energy of the mind is devoted to exploring what's going on right now, including that pleasure. I experience ease. The heart opens and it settles. And I'm curious about that ease. I'm interested in the experience. So the mind is very sharp and very alert.

This is what we're looking for if we're looking for right effort. We could sum it up as: How do I maintain maximum commitment in the mind while keeping the body completely relaxed?

One way of experimenting with this, which we've already talked about, is using the lying down posture. Because here we can really get into the experience of the body relaxing while the mind is working. And as we've discussed, and as some of you have already experienced, the movements of the breathing become

very clear in this posture. So breathing meditation in the lying down posture can be very satisfactory. As you breathe out, you sink into the floor, the body becomes relaxed. And as this happens, one of the things which will occur is that you will feel very strongly all those parts of your body where you store habitual tension. Then you can just accept this tension, relax into it, and settle into the breathing.

Now, as we said, the disadvantage in lying down meditation is that one can fall asleep.

This could happen simply because we're tired, but let's assume that's not the case. What's happening then is that the relaxation in the body is bleeding into the mind. When we're in the sitting posture, if we're working hard, the effort in the mind can bleed into the body and we become tense. In the lying down posture, the relaxation in the body can bleed into the mind and we fall asleep.

So no situation is perfect. It's always a matter of maintaining a balance and becoming sensitive to the movements—as we go into balance, out of it, lose it, get it again, lose it again, get it again. But the lying posture allows us to explore the question: what does it feel like to be mentally active and awake while physically relaxed? What does that actually feel like? How can I get a felt sense of it so that when I'm sitting, standing, or moving, I know how it feels? The mind knows how to get there, and I can recognise it when it happens.

So experiment with the lying posture. One thing to try is doing a session of lying meditation followed immediately by a session of sitting meditation. Some people find that there's a lot less tension in the body during that sitting period. The body is much more relaxed, and so you can get a sense of what it feels like to be sitting upright with the body relaxed.

As you sit, if you start to feel tension, be aware of it and relax. You might feel tension popping up somewhere else. Be aware of it, relax. It might pop up somewhere else again. Be aware of it, relax. This is another way to get a sense of this balance.

And another thing to check: when you feel the arising of tension, just ask yourself—do I want something to happen? Am I looking for a future result? Is this experience right now not good enough? Just check that. And if that attitude is there, drop it and just be present.

So the project is how to make mental effort while the body remains relaxed. You might try it out particularly in the lying down posture, but then export it to the other postures—any posture. How do I make mental effort while the body is relaxed? This provides a whole field of experimentation, something to get interested in and to explore.

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