

Vīriya: Effort

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 15:06

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Now, for fear of boring one or two of you, I did this talk at Chrissie's and I forgot how to operate my little recorder, so I just wanted to repeat this talk around effort. It's one of what we call the perfections, which I think you can translate as the seven virtues, but the word *pāramī* just means those things that take you to the other shore, and it's the Buddha's image for Nibbāna to be over on the other side.

The word there is *vīriya*, and you'll get it also in the Eightfold Noble Path where they use the word *vāyāma*. And in the scriptures, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse on how to establish this mindfulness we've just been practising, the Buddha uses the word *ātāpī*. So the first two words, this *vīriya* and *vāyāma*, just refer to effort, but this *ātāpī* is really saying a real consistent effort in the practice.

This effort in the practice is really what Zen calls the effortless effort. And what's meant by that is you're not trying to achieve anything. That is really important. What you're trying to do is establish a way of looking at something, and then you have to have trust that this intelligence we have will actually see. It might not work immediately, so you've got to have a certain confidence. So that's the effort.

The Buddha is quite clear about that. These three words come together: this effort, mindfully and with intuitive intelligence. And this intuitive intelligence manifests as curiosity, as a curiosity of a child. It's coming from a place where you don't know. If you're curious about something and you've got some ideas, you tend to see what you're looking for. But whatever we're looking for is something which is not directly obvious to us, or else we'd have seen it.

So, for instance, in our meditation we've just been trying to look at impermanence. Well, if you said to anybody in the street, "Everything changes," they'd say, "So what? Everything, quite obviously everything changes." But in the Buddha's understanding, this change is quite radical. Everything actually disappears and reappears. It moves into potential and then into actual. And it's that, it's recognising that there's death with every moment, every single moment just drops away and then it arises. And this obviously can be experienced, but what it shows us is a discontinuity. That's the point, the discontinuity.

So, for instance, when you see yourself in the mirror, you recognise that this is the same person that you've always known for all your life. And you presume that it's the same person, it's the same body. But we know that the body completely changed every seven years, all the atoms are completely transferred,

but we don't see that at all. And therefore we live in that comfortable delusion that this is the body that I've had, and that there's somehow some stability to it. So it's really when we get down to understanding these things, then it brings us up against these real understandings of life as to how it rises and passes away.

Now, the point about this right effort in meditation is that we have to be clear that our effort is not to see this. Our effort is to get into a position where this is seen. In other words, we're trying to get into that position of the objective observer, of that place within us like an observation post, and we're just watching.

One of the examples that I tend to use is the twitcher. So they hide, they're in a hide and they look out through this little window with their binoculars, and they just watch the bird. They don't do anything to the bird, this is the point. They don't do anything, they just watch. And then they go away and write their bestseller. Now that's what we're doing. We're trying to find this little hide within ourselves and we're just watching. And what are we watching? We're watching our physicality, the body, and how it manifests. We're watching the heart and how it manifests. And we're watching the mind and thoughts. And it's just in the watching that we come to know ourselves. You don't have to try. It's just the watching.

Now, if you try too hard, if something comes in which makes you strain, then there's something else coming into the equation. You're either trying to achieve something or trying to concentrate. That's a bad one. Concentration comes with relaxation.

So there's a story of Sona, who was one of the monks during the Buddha's time. And he'd given up, and he decided that he was going to leave the monastic life and go back to the ordinary lay life. And when the Buddha heard this, he went to see him. And this was the big problem: he was straining and straining. So he talked about tuning a string on a *vīṇā*. So that's a bit like a guitar. It mustn't be too tight, or else you miss the note, and it can't be too slack. And it's just getting that ability to just get the right effort so that your attention is steady. If you find yourself getting tense, then immediately you pull back and relax. If you find you're falling asleep, you wake up and make an effort. And that moment of being relaxed and yet firm is very difficult for us, because we're always on one side or the other.

Now, when it comes to right effort in daily life, that right effort is, I mean, there's obviously some form of achieving there. Like if you're at work, you've got to do a job. If you're at home, you've got to do this and that. So the achieving isn't the problem. The problem is, or if there is a problem, the problem is your intention. What is your intention? So this is where we begin to develop our personalities and our characters.

It's interesting that right there within the Buddha's eightfold path you have right livelihood. So he's saying that what you do in society is of central importance to your spiritual life. Now if you're doing a job simply to get on, simply for status, simply for money and all that, then obviously those intentions are going to drive you in a way which create what we know these days as stress. But if your intention is service, if you

take your attention to service, then there's a very different feel to what you do. That doesn't mean to say that you can't ask for proper wages and that you can't go for a job which has high status but which you feel you can do. But it's the intention which is going to create either an internal state of stress or not.

Now, when you put right effort into your work, this is obviously to do with mindfulness. Which is one of these buzzwords that you see these days, mindfulness and stress, we've got mindfulness. Mindfulness is all over the place. So this mindfulness is just doing what you're doing. In Zen, they say when you wash the pots, just wash the pots. It's one of these little famous phrases.

And there was a case of a Zen master who would say this. And he was having breakfast and he was eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. So one of his students said to him, "Roshi, I just noticed that you are eating your breakfast and reading a newspaper." He says, "When I'm eating breakfast, I'm eating breakfast. When I'm reading the newspaper, I'm reading the newspaper." It depends where you put your attention.

So when you're at work or when you're doing something, make sure you have the right intention for doing this particular piece of work. And you have to keep stopping to reaffirm it because the old intentions keep creeping in. And then you put your attention into what you're doing.

Now, in our meditation, we've found this place of an objective observer. So there's this feeling of a self looking at, this feeling of an observer looking at things. Now that's actually a false place. It's not the final end that we want to get to. But then we think that's what we've got to do in daily life. So you watch yourself doing something and you think that's mindfulness. Well, you can get away with that if you're doing something physical, but you can't have a conversation and observe yourself speaking. You lose the train of thought. You definitely can't add up your bills either.

So it's a case of when that self-awareness comes, it's there, but you keep putting your attention on what you're doing. As you put your attention on what you're doing, the self disappears because you are absorbed into the task. That's your meditation in action. And you know that you've been there because when you come out of it, into that self-awareness, a certain time has passed where there's been no time and there's been no sense of self. Now what makes that an enlightening experience is the purpose with which you went into it, the intention. So this is all included in this idea of right effort.

And that right effort begins with what the Buddha called *cetanā*. It translates as will. And in the standing meditation we came to that point where we could see intentions arise. So just before we sat we noted intending to rise, intending to sit. Now we could have stayed there, we could have kept standing. You don't have to obey an intention. But as soon as you moved, you empowered that intention. And as soon as you do that, you create a conditioning. You've created what in the language is called a *kamma*. You hear this word *kamma*, which normally means your comeuppance, but actually in the original literature it's what you do, it's your action. There's another word for your comeuppance.

So as soon as you've put your will into something, that's it. You can't stop it. That's it. It'll have an effect. It'll have an effect internally, and it'll have an effect externally. And you don't know what's going to happen either way, because it moves into conditions over which you don't have control. So it's good to know what your intention is, because even if it turns out wrong, at least you feel good in yourself. So you might do something for the benefit of somebody else and they hate you for it. Occasionally happens. But you feel good within yourself because you did it with the right intention. There's that feeling of goodness in you. You can't stop people reacting from their position. So that's the important thing about effort.

Wherever you put your effort, you're going to create the conditioning. So once you begin to know that, then you do bring this mindfulness into your life, because putting in right effort is going to create happiness. Putting in wrong effort creates unhappiness. Simple as that.

And finally, there's this whole business of getting lazy, which is the opposite of effort. And when we do things and we're lazy and you feel guilty, that's good. You should feel guilty. You should be guilty and shameful that you've been lazy. And then you should give yourself a little exercise or something to increase your effort. And one of the things that the Buddha advises to create this sense of urgency, sense of urgency that's not stress, it's a sense of getting on with the job, is to contemplate on the negative side: sickness, old age and death. If you haven't got that long to live, it doesn't matter where you are, you don't know when you're going to go, so better make best of the circumstance you're within.

And the other one is to contemplate the benefit of mindfulness and how it can actually radically change your life, radically change your relationships. And it doesn't mean to say that life gets that much easier, but at least we're here, at least we're aware.

So right effort is really central to the Buddhist teachings. It's right there, right within virtually everything he says, right effort. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated because of your unending efforts towards your liberation, sooner rather than later.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

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