

Energy Week 1: Energy and Balanced Effort

Energy and effort are closely related. The term being translated here as “energy” is *virīya*. Besides being a parami, it appears in the Buddhist lists of the five faculties and powers and the seven factors of awakening. It is translated variously as energy, persistence, perseverance, exertion, diligence and effort. Sometimes it can suggest the qualities of strength and even courage. The factor of (Right) Effort in the Eightfold Path is a different term “(*samma*) *vayama*” but with a similar range of translations.

Here is the rousing opening paragraph from Sylvia Boorstein’s chapter on the parami of Energy:

“I feel an invigorating consolidation of my Energy—a striving to *be here now*—each time I realize that *now* is the only time anything happens and the *every now*, disappearing just as rapidly as it arrives, has been shaped and created by a habit and—in its fleeting existence—is shaping and creating habits. I know that my experience of a peaceful happy mind depends on developing the habits that support it. Since habits are, by definition, deeply ingrained patterns, and all moments are immediately lost, I need to enlist every moment to teach me about suffering and the end of suffering. Knowing that I haven’t a moment to lose keeps my Energy level high.”

Sometimes talk of urgency, or the need to keep the energy level high, or the realization that life is short, can give rise to a sort of forced willfulness or pressured feeling that is not at all helpful. Sometimes it inspires a wholesome resolve to find a true way, not to waste our precious human lives. If you find that reflecting on this makes you feel frantic, discouraged, scattered, or planning how to cram in a very long “bucket list” of activities, please don’t take it that way. Taken wisely, it can add depth, focus, meaning, direction and purpose to our lives whenever we recall it.

And consider what this might mean from other angles: bringing in a sense of slowing down, catching the deeper currents of your being, connecting more carefully with the present, no longer postponing facing your difficulties or listening to the needs of your heart, uncovering your truest motivations, or bringing more simplicity, gratitude, appreciation and lightness to your days.

Can we steadily persevere in the moment by moment process of turning our lives toward opening our hearts, minds and bodies, toward inner peace and freedom? This usually means patiently beginning again, over and over. “Small moments many times” as a Korean Zen teacher says. And energy, like everything other experience, naturally waxes and wanes.

Some reflections on wise effort from several streams of human wisdom:

- Paul Fleischman (Vipassana teacher): “Peace is a persevering modulation, a direction recurrently renewed, a devotion and a discipline.”
- Thich Nhat Hanh: “Life is so short, we should all move more slowly.”
- Reminder sign on a work colleague’s desk: “Don’t let the urgent drive out the vital.”
- “We must go deep enough into stillness to allow stillness to inform our actions.”
--Adyashanti

- Rumi/Coleman Barks:
 "Come, come, whoever you are.
 Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving — it doesn't matter,
 Ours is not a caravan of despair.
 Come, even if you have broken your vow a hundred times,
 Come, come again, come."

Here is a parable from Gil on the maturing of motivations for our practice:

<https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/the-many-ways-to-sweep/>

Ajahn Sucitto calls his chapter on Energy "Stewarding our Resources". Again, for those looking for more reading, we highly recommend this chapter from his book (offering an alternative link to the one we've been using):

<https://www.amaravati.org/dhamma-books/parami-ways-to-cross-lifes-floods/>

This idea of stewarding resources points to the wisdom of finding a properly directed form of effort that actually frees up, directs, balances and smooths out our energy. Gil compares well developed meditative energy to the steady brightness of a candle flame when there is no wind.

We've looked at some aspects of the wise intentions that underlie wise effort in our study of generosity, virtue, renunciation and wisdom. All these factors help align our understanding of what we are aiming for so that our effort is not dissipated in trying to grasp at every ephemeral want or in preparing to fight off every imaginable danger.

If we make no effort, we will simply be carried along by the floods of our habits and not much will change for us. However, it is often the case that these very habits involve over-striving, grasping, trying to force things to happen or to stop, so we may need to try to "do" less. What does it mean to "try" to let go, to let be? Maybe we just need to see clearly how clinging is stressful and then trust that Wisdom will naturally let it go when it's ready. What kind of effort does it take to be aware, to be mindful?

How is easeful effort different than collapsing, falling asleep, turning away from difficulty toward pleasant distraction? In our Eightfold Path course reflections, we ask what is the difference between relaxation and ease? How can you make the kind of effort that allows you to keep at raising kids and making a living with a greater sense of ease? We can't always just flop down on the couch when things are challenging.

Please read this very short sutta on this topic of balanced effort called "Crossing Over the Flood":

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn01/sn01.001.than.html>

Note: this website is a goldmine of Dharma resources including sutta translations, books and articles.

Reflection: How do you understand and perhaps experience the two states described in the below quote from the Sutta on Crossing the Floods? What kind of effort is involved in the way of "neither"?

"When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

Alternate translation:

"When I came to a standstill, then I sank; but when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, that by not halting and by not straining I crossed the flood."