

Writings from David on Effort in Meditation

Much of what I write here will be from notes from talks by Gil on my last retreat, from notes on talks and my understanding of Ajahn Sucitto's teachings, and my own reflections and practices.

Classical Buddhist definition of effort is to let go of the unwholesome and to sustain that letting go, to cultivate the wholesome and sustain that cultivation.

"Do everything with a mind that lets go. Don't accept praise or gain or anything else. If you let go a little you will have a little peace; if you let go a lot you will have a lot of peace; if you let go completely you will have complete peace."Ajahn Chah

Ajahn Sucitto, when describing right effort, describes it as "turning the Citta thus." Citta is the most frequently used word in all the sutras. It is our sacred awareness, boundless, compassionate, and miraculous. Another way of saying "turning the Citta," would be, relaxing the heart and mind into the dhamma fields, and releasing the kamma fields. It is the opening and emptying ourselves of views, opinions, stories that are erroneous or not useful into the dhamma field of present moment awareness.

Our minds churn the subtle and not so subtle messages about self, what I should do, what I did do that I should not have done, how I can be successful, how can I at least not be criticized. "Beginning-less habit energies are extremely difficult to remove. Hindrances are formidable, and habits are deeply ingrained." Bojo Jinul, Korean Zen Master.

Mental formations arise that question our degree of adequacy, review mistakes, who I am, who I hope I am not seen to be. We are so attracted to these concepts of self, it feels like we are stuck to them. There is a great pull to thought, a powerful attraction to these strong identities that feels so comfortable and familiar to us. We have been practicing them all our lives, and they can remain here for a lifetime, the known, the understood, the safety of this shore of familiar mental formations, over and over and over again. The temptation is to figure this out, to get it right, to fix it, to grab the snake by the tale. Another effort we could make is to dip our toe into the water to cross over to the other side of the river, the unknown present moment. The effort to cross the river, to move through the flows and floods and currents that push us around and catch us, is to **Relax.**

The exhortation by Dogen Zenji, the founder of Soto Zen, to "practice as if your head is on fire," may be appropriate for us at times when we are feeling great enthusiasm. However, many of us are already achievement oriented. We strive so much anyway to solve the painful riddles of praise and blame, reputation and disrepute, suc-

cess and failure, concerns that have to do with belonging, exclusion, social relationships. Relax effort, disengage effort into the open field of awareness is often our wisest effort.

There is a slogan, "Let go and let God." Our slogan could be, "Let go and let awareness." Our effort can be to allow conditions to deconstruct, trust the unconditioned, have faith in our holy and miraculous awareness. Continuity with the breath and the body are powerful supports. Deeper mindfulness is a deconstruction practice of all our stories, views, concepts of self, edifices we have built, and to see more clearly beneath the surface of all these complicated ideas. The dhamma fields receive us and we see---sensations, feelings, thoughts, space, **whatever is immediate and nonconceptual**. Our conditioning relaxes into unconditioned knowing, and to the extent there is space **or even cracks** in the constructions, we can see---and this is the beginning of Vipassana. To see. The "Vi" means "really," to really see.

There can be some despair because "I am always thinking," and in this frame of mind we neglect to see the **intermittent moments** of awareness, of clear seeing of sensations, feelings, space, light, sounds, even thinking, that appear.

Disengagement

Our first effort is to settle the obvious distractions, the five hindrances, so we can see more clearly. There is disengagement and sustaining the disengagement of the unwholesome. We disengage with whatever tools we have at our disposal.

The effort to disengage is counterintuitive. We want to get in there and move through the territory, solve the problem, to not get stuck in why I am this way, how did I get to be this way, how can I make myself not like this, whose fault is this. The doer can get very busy and the result is we get all tangled up. Simple disengagement may sound dry and not so attractive, but it is necessary to step out of the drama. In our disengagement, allow positive energies to present themselves. A memory or intuition of our own ethical behavior, our goodness, our kindness, our generosity, whatever is positive can emerge and should be recognized and felt fully. We don't dwell on thoughts, but the thought may arise, "I am a nice person," and we can enjoy the welling up of lovely feelings that can associate to that thought. This is the direction, from the unwholesome to letting go to stillness to the wholesome heart, to more letting go of selfing that appears, to some sense of liberation, of peace. As the citta, the heart awareness opens, there may be feelings of joy, happiness, contentment, peace, and sublime stillness. Again, continuity with the breath and the body are our powerful supports.

Simplicity

The temptation is to always make it more complicated. The instruction is to turn toward the simple, and keep going toward, shedding automatic ideas, stories, judgements, expectations. Awareness appears intermittently through the cracks in our thinking, or around the edges of it, and we cultivate and sustain these wholesome cracks. We may

notice that there is simply only awareness, and the object of awareness, distinct but joined, which keeps changing. As we notice this paired progression of awareness and the object, and that there is absolutely nothing else here other than the awareness and the known, this insight can allow for a deeper letting go and freedom.

This is not a lot of work. It is what you have already been doing, just more of it. Disengaging, settling, stilling, trusting, resting, centering, and allow contentment to support. This can gradually become a default of the mind, a habit, to allow relaxing into the present moment, a radical simplicity. This is much easier effort than the other way of attacking, reacting and defending. We don't need to manufacture some new way, but reflect on the way we already have, at least partially. *See it more often.*

Sustaining Effort

Bojo Jinul, whom I referenced earlier, believed in the theory of Sudden Awakening and Gradual Cultivation. The insight of the distinct quality of awareness is not so important as is the staying with it, stay with mindfulness. It is not a great effort. Gil compares it to the effort needed to take a driver's license exam. But, like in the exam, we need to stay there, continuity of attention, chewing our food, swallowing our food, the body breathing. Apply and with ease sustain, through our lives, with continuity.

To illustrate the ease of this effort, compare it to the effort of opening the hand and keeping the hand open. The hand is open and sensitive and touches many things. Re-entment, criticism, unfairness, terrible things happen and we close the fist. The fingers curl. It is lots of work to keep a closed fist, 40, 50, 60 years of closed fist is exhausting. It takes some work to avoid the harder work of closing the fist, a little effort to stay soft, relaxed and open. And as our practice becomes more and more continuous, it becomes second nature, we become used to it, thoughts fade, keeping the hand open continuously throughout our lives.

Effort supports the other Paramis

For the peace and happiness of our own minds and those around us, we practice generosity, offer kindness and service, listen and read the dharma and discuss it with friends, practice awareness, and make our way through the world with ease and grace. We are committed to seeing truth, practice virtue in mind, speech and action, and offer good will to all regardless of feedback. Wholesome practices are boundless--- generosity, gratitude, compassion and caring, determination, perseverance, patience, attentiveness. We have an intuition about what efforts are wholesome.

Practice

For a practice this month, please take notes during or after a meditation period, about your process, including issues that are distracting you or with which you are wrestling, and how you worked with your meditation. What kind effort you were making.

Reflection

For a reflection this month, contemplate the rarity of being born and the preciousness of our time here. How can you direct your energy toward fulfilling your highest potential as a human being?