

Energy Week 3: Energy/Effort in Daily Life: Clear Comprehension

Most of our time is spent in daily life activities. How can we use this huge amount of our time to deepen our practice of the parami of Energy, to let the idea of “stewarding our resources” inform both *what* we’re doing and *how* we’re doing it?

When we even briefly awaken into the here and now from the trances of absorbed activity, mental planning and imagining, or strong reactive emotions, then there is a precious opening to recollect, settle more deeply and perhaps recollect or discover our wiser intentions.

How can we best use those moments to check in with ourselves, notice how we’re using effort and rebalance our energy? The more we get used to checking in with our energy state, the more it will become a mindfulness bell that helps to wake us up when it gets out of balance.

This week we will look at this in terms of four aspects of Clear Comprehension. This term (*sampajañña* in Pali) is often paired with the word for Mindfulness (*sati*), especially when talking about daily life practice. It refers to bringing wisdom to bear in the space provided by mindful awareness. The commentaries on the suttas discuss this expression in terms of four factors: *purpose, suitability, domain of practice, and non-delusion*. Let’s look at each of these as ways of checking in and looking at how we are using energy and effort wisely in the moment.

Purpose

Here’s a definition of this term: **Clear comprehension** of purpose is to be aware whether one’s physical, verbal and mental actions are skillful, useful and beneficial to one’s spiritual path of liberation. If they are unskillful, irrelevant or not beneficial to the path then one can refrain from performing them.

What are we doing? Why are we doing what we’re doing? What is our motivation or intention? Are we in touch with our deeper aspirations?

We can refresh our hearts by recalling the higher purposes of our lives even if the current task is more mundane. Even the most ordinary tasks can become meaningful again if we use them as opportunities to cultivate awareness and wholesome mind states, to engage with the Paramis.

How does purpose affect energy? What’s the energetic experience of acting with an intention or motive that is in accord with the Paramis we’ve looked at so far: generosity, virtue, renunciation and wisdom?

If it’s a difficult but necessary thing to be doing (or refraining from doing), when you clearly acknowledge the wholesome purpose behind it, you may be able to sense a gathering coherence, or a sense of support that is strengthening and energizing. Acting in harmony with what is for our long-term benefit, and the benefit of others is a non-conflicted use of energy, it feels good. Something in us knows that we are

strengthening our wisdom and courage, laying the conditions for future confidence and freedom from remorse.

Conversely, we can become more sensitive to the effect on our energy when we divide our hearts by acting a way that runs counter to our deeper sense of morality, or when we are grasping every which way by imagined pleasures or fears. We can perhaps feel our energy becoming hard and strained, or scattered and exhausted. Our confidence and self-respect is slowly eroded as we continue to reinforce these habits.

If we've been trying to force something to happen, or chasing something unnecessary, and we can shift our intention to patience or renunciation, we may be able to sense a reclamation of wasted energy, a settling and calming or opening to what is truly needed. And we know we are learning to live in a more sustainable way.

Suitability

The second factor in the commentary on Clear Comprehension is called *suitability*. This is a more subtle level of sensitivity to both our surroundings and our inner state that reveals the appropriateness of our effort.

Even when our basic intentions are wholesome, we often squander our energy by making effort in unskillful ways. *How* are we doing what we're doing? What is the effect on our energetic state?

This is a large topic, but you might assess the suitability of your effort in terms of these related aspects: speed, force and timing.

Paul Fleischman discusses the topic of speed in terms of a sense of pace:

"Pace: appreciating what you have or do, and not having or doing more than you can appreciate. ... Our lives are our feelings, and feelings unfold slowly, cued by their invisible tempo. The most obdurate obstacle to peace in the lives of many people today is the rate at which they move and think, without allowing time for the glow of peace to filter up and pervade their pauses. The punctuation-less, run-on sentence of modern life derives not only from obligations in work and family, but ironically from the harried pursuit of pleasure too."

It's so valuable to learn to sense when we are forcing things. Ajahn Sucitto calls this pushing the river or trying to stop its flow. It's possible to discover a deep sense of flow in experience that can carry us a long at a natural pace.

A sense of timing is another aspect of this. The more sensitive we can become to our own intentions and to the moods and concerns of those around us, the more we can sense whether this is the appropriate moment to make a comment or send an email or take on another project.

We will be looking more at these considerations when we take up the parami of Patience next month.

Domain of Practice

“Domain” refers to the foundations of mindfulness: breath, body, feeling-tones, emotions, thoughts and mental processes. So are we mindful? Being unmindfully caught up in the mental/emotional proliferation of endless worries, wants, resentments and fantasies with their attendant bodily tensions is the essence of how we waste our energy.

Throughout the day, we at least check in with the basics of mind and body. We can return over and over to re-grounding ourselves in our breath and body. Take just a moment to shift position: stand up if you’ve been sitting, stand or sit still if you’ve been running around. Try to contact and feel feet, legs, buttocks, belly, back, heart/chest, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, face and head. Taking a couple of slow breaths. Notice if this has the effect of down-shifting away from the speed of thought toward the natural tempos of the body by a gear or two.

We can try to step back and clearly recognize the current state of mind. What mind state is there anger, frustration, disappointment, anticipation, enjoyment? How is this mind state affecting our perceptions and thus our intentions and how we are using our energy?

Non-Delusion or Wisdom

Recall the themes we discussed under the parami of Wisdom: being with the simple, direct experience of what’s happening, seeing the suffering in clinging and resistance to change, and unhelpful self-ing. This aspect of Clear Comprehension refers to bringing to mind whatever wisdom we have, making the wise effort to view experience from the simple, flowing, unentangled, unself-conscious perspective.

Here is a little story (adapted from one by Ines Freedman) that illustrates the way preoccupation with self-image scatters and divides our energy:

Scenario 1

I have a deadline tomorrow, and before the deadline I have to complete 22 items. I have several hours to do so. This is an important project that many people depend on. Understanding this, I feel determined to do my best in the short period I have. Determination is a feeling of steadiness and strength. I know that learning to work in this calm and steady way is of long-term value and more within my control than the particular outcome. I focus on doing my tasks one step at a time. I may or may not finish on time.

Scenario 2

As in Scenario 1, I have a deadline tomorrow with 22 items to complete. I imagine what people will think of me if I fail. I begin to dwell on doubts about my abilities, wondering why I am like this. I try to turn my attention to my tasks, but I feel unsettled and tense. I can’t stay focused. My mind rushes back to the images of disappointing others and wondering what’s the matter with me. I begin to think I’m really incompetent and that further agitates me. I try to force myself back to the task

at hand, imagining how it will please everyone if I succeed. I may or may not finish on time.

“Live in the gap between the mind’s stories, and the mind will come to see that being in harmony with life is far easier and more benevolent than living in opposition to it.”
--Adyashanti

Reflection: take some time each day to reflect back on some time during that day when you felt “off” in some way. Try to look back on that time and examine it from the perspectives of the four aspects of Clear Comprehension (purpose, suitability, domain of mindfulness, non-delusion). Which of these aspects were out of balance? Of course, if you are able catch yourself in the moment and take time to reflect right then, so much the better.