

Wise Effort

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Tonight's talk is about Wise Effort, the sixth month of our eight month course I've been teaching on the Eightfold Path. The first two sections of the Path prepared us to work with this final section on Practice. The wisdom section, including Wise Understanding and Intention, taught us that dukkha is caused by clinging, and then we formed the intention to end it. We practiced more with Wise Intention in the Ethics section, to cause less dukkha for all beings in our speech, action and livelihood. Those three months of practice with ethics advanced our involvement with the Path from an intellectual exercise to daily behavior, making the dharma an active part of our lives. At this point, we really "get it." Now we begin training our minds, where the causes of dukkha are rooted.

Having a deeper understanding of what dukkha is and how it plays out in the world, many of us have yearned to change our own mental habits. We've all come to see that how we act depends on how we think and feel. I've spent five months saying, "We're getting there." Now we're here. And I want to remind you, this course is for *practicing* with the Eightfold Path. This is especially important now we're in the Practice section, and this might be the best chance you'll get to learn how to use Wise Effort and free yourself from suffering. So I urge you to work with the Practice Guidelines available by the dana basket. They're also on our web site, which I'll mention again.

In last week's talk I gave an overview of the three parts of the Practice section – Mindfulness, Concentration and Effort – and how they have to work together. I did that then so I wouldn't have to take time to do it tonight, because Wise Effort deserves all the time it can get. During that talk, I labeled mental states as either wholesome or unwholesome – leading toward liberation, or more dukkha. For many people, it works better to call them skillful or unskillful. That highlights the fact that everything in our awareness is a process, by using adverbs rather than adjectives that describe nouns. Thoughts and feelings, no matter how habitual they may be, are really more verbs than nouns. Other ways to qualify them are helpful vs. harmful. And yes, mind states can also be neutral. For tonight, though, taking a binary approach highlights what we want to do with our attention.

Attention is really the only force we have to guide our mental processes. Mental habits are like sub-programs, powerful time and energy savers, which can have flaws in them that produce unwanted results. Habits bypass our attention, so we need to use mindfulness and concentration to bring our habits into our awareness where we can re-program them.

There are several ways we are alerted to the existence of unwholesome or harmful habits. We can notice the effects they have in our lives, when we act on them, often unconsciously. It may take other people pointing them out, sometimes painfully, for us to realize we have them. But that only tells us what actions we're doing that they've noticed. It often leaves us unaware of the mental causes and conditions of those actions. Hence the value of understanding that the Path is about dukkha – an internal experience – and actively doing something to reduce it. Our practice with Ethics has taught us how to behave, and now we begin to make all our actions – mental as well as physical – free from dukkha.

In our daily meditation practice, we use mindfulness and concentration to explore the terrain of our inner world. We hang out there for 5 minutes a day, or 30 minutes, or an hour – whatever time we have available. We set the time and meditate that long, every day, getting to know what happens in the mind. There's an invaluable ability we can develop to identify when mental events – thoughts, impulses, feelings – lead to dukkha. All mental activity carries feeling tones that are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. I'll talk about this a bit more next month when we cover Wise Mindfulness.

For now, we need to understand that if a thought or emotion that arises in meditation causes us to have a pleasant physical feeling, then that feeling can grow into desire... if it's not there already. Unpleasant feelings can grow into aversion. Having the ability to notice the feeling tone of our mental activity lets us spot our otherwise unconscious impulses, and their mental causes and conditions. This is our security system ringing the alarm on dukkha before it causes more harm.

Once we discern, or recognize a mental habit that involves some form of clinging, then we can use Wise Effort to curb that habit. There are four instructions in Wise Effort, summarized by Thich Nhat Hahn as “watering the flowers, not the weeds.” People are usually most eager to deal with the weeds, the mind states that cause them suffering, and Wise Effort starts with these. We can **avoid** unskillful mental activities by staying away from what causes, or triggers them. And we can **abandon** or end harmful thoughts and feelings that we're already having. I'll talk more about these ways of dealing with harmful mind states a bit later.

It's also a very important part of Wise Effort to *cultivate* wholesome, helpful mental activity, like feelings of friendliness, kindness, generosity, patience, gratitude, etc. We can **arouse**, or bring them into our awareness intentionally, if only in the form of phrases used to develop metta, lovingkindness. Those phrases by themselves incline the mind toward these feelings and intentions. As we practice this way, we may actually *feel* that warm and positive state of mind arise. Then we want to **sustain** it, make it last. Whenever positive or helpful mental activity is going on, we can give it the energy of our *attention* so it continues longer. That's what watering the flowers is. I do that walking around, when I see any being that triggers a

positive feeling, I try to savor and nurture that feeling. Acting on it reinforces it even more powerfully, although of course I want to use discernment and discretion so I don't end up bothering that person or animal.

These four tasks, avoiding and abandoning the unskillful, arousing and sustaining the skillful, all take some exertion, of course. That usual meaning of the word effort is included in Wise Effort. We need to burn some of the myriad calories the brain uses, to *direct our attention* wisely. It's what we do to achieve mindfulness, getting control of where our attention goes. Many a new meditator gives up because this can be so difficult when you've never tried it before. Either they try too hard or not enough... or they misunderstand what to do altogether. So this part of Wise Effort is about finding the right measure of exertion. As Ajahn Sucitto puts it, "Don't strain and don't lose track."

To find the right balance of exertion we just have to get the feel of it. Think of when you learned how to ride a bicycle. You first get on and it's wobbly and you pump those pedals frantically and jerk the handlebar around trying to stay upright. When you ease up a little the movements start to come together, and then it's a pretty smooth motion with your legs to keep cycling. At some point it just feels like you've got the effort balanced, and you need to trust that.

So let's revisit in more detail a couple parts of watering the flowers and not the weeds, starting with ending troublesome thoughts and/or emotions. Bikkhu Bodhi discusses these in terms of the Five Hindrances, but what people actually tell me about are a much wider variety of thoughts, emotions and other mental activities. There are many ways to abandon unskillful thoughts, and some take more skill than others for various people. In the hundreds of interviews I've had with beginners and more advanced students, most report that it's easiest to put their attention on something else, usually something that carries a positive feeling, like metta or joy, so that's what I usually talk about. Tonight, though, there's time to cover more options.

There's a fun little sutta called The Removal of Distracting Thoughts, No. 20 in the Mahājima Nikāya. It has a great array of similes, analogies and metaphors. It first recommends the substitution method I just mentioned and compares it to a carpenter knocking out a faulty peg with a good one. Sometimes this method uses the opposite mind state, like substituting love for ill will, or you can just use anything wholesome that's easy to summon and can knock out that faulty peg.

The second method in the sutta is to consciously recognize the thoughts as undesirable, and examine the danger in them, saying to yourself, 'These thoughts are unwholesome, they are reprehensible, they result in suffering.' This is compared to a beautiful young person fond of

fine clothes and ornaments who has the carcass of some animal hung around their neck. They would find that totally reprehensible and suffer intensely.

If thinking about how harmful or disgusting the thoughts are doesn't eradicate them, then the third suggestion is to not give them any more attention, and forget them. A lot of people try this as the first approach, and generally fail and feel quite frustrated. Bikkhu Bodhi suggests this technique is effective against thoughts that have just arisen, and not yet taken over your attention. But if you're immersed in the thought and this is the third approach you try, after the soothing mind states and the carcass around your neck, then maybe your mind has been softened up a bit by those efforts and now it will work to just exert a bit more effort.

I like the fourth suggestion because it looks at how your mind got into this train of thought in the first place. Trace back what led to this current state of mind, and what preceded that one, and the one before that, until the trail ends and your mind is still. This way, you learn a lot about the layers of assumptions, values, and attitudes that lead to troublesome thoughts. I'm an advocate for looking at what lies beneath our thoughts and digging ever deeper.

Then in its fifth section the sutta sums up these methods and ends with an image I find unforgettable. It says when a monk, "gives attention to [something] wholesome, ... or When he examines the danger in those thoughts... or When he tries to forget those thoughts and does not give attention to them... or When he gives attention to stilling the [preceding thoughts]..." If he's tried all these methods and is still stuck to those thoughts, then, "with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he beats down, constrains, and crushes mind with mind, [then] any such evil unwholesome thoughts are abandoned in him... and his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. ... He will think whatever thought he wishes to think and he will not think any thought that he does not wish to think." In the way suttas often end, it says that monk is now fully enlightened.

Another approach is similar to the carcass around your neck method, and that's to consider the kind of person that undesirable thought is leading you to become. You may remember that in the month we spent on Wise Action we examined our own sense of integrity. Knowing that thoughts influence action, and determine who we become in the future, do we really want to be entertaining these unskillful thoughts? Does this thought fit with our sense of integrity? This is like the teachings on *hiri*, an innate sense of shame or self-respect, and *otappa*, dread of consequences or respect for the opinions of wise people. The Buddha called these aspects of our sense of integrity the "bright guardians of the world" because they keep people generally from falling into chaos and violence.

Probably the most beneficial technique for ending unskillful thoughts is to turn them into specimens to dissect. Investigate them. Instead of letting them run your mind, pull them out and pin them down where you can look at them, and most importantly observe the way they've made you *feel*. Apply your mindfulness and concentration. Is your belly – or other muscles – tense? Is your face scrunched up, your jaw or hands clenched? Do you feel hot, or cold? Directly experience the dukkha caused by these thoughts as it impacts your body. Get your attention out of the story and into the body, keep it on those sensations of dukkha. Do not return to the thoughts that caused these feelings. Keep your attention on those physical sensations as long as they persist. This method follows the acronym R-A-I-N: *Recognize* the thought as harmful; *Accept* it – don't fight it, just hold it at arm's length; and *Investigate* its effects; without taking it personally. Recognize, Accept, Investigate and remember it's *Not personal*: RAIN.

I'm often asked, "Can't we just go back to concentrating on the breath?" The answer is yes, absolutely. That's a good technique and for a lot of people, when they're not attached to the thought, that works quite well. But some thoughts are *sticky*. I've known people whose minds have a tormenting thought they fall into repeatedly, for decades. These mental habits may take all these techniques, and possibly more. To remind yourself what these techniques are, you can refer to the text of this talk at any time on our sangha's web site, on the page for this course, 2018-19 Eightfold Path Course.

I also want to say a little more about cultivating helpful states of mind. We can do this in meditation and in daily life. Whatever works best for you. I've found real life very effective for developing the Brahmaviharas – metta, compassion, joy and equanimity – especially working for years with people who are dying, suffering from addiction, and incarcerated. For sympathetic joy, I conduct weddings. There are simpler, everyday opportunities to practice being kind, or generous, or patient, or whatever mind states you want to develop. Their benefit is inherent in them; they contain a pleasure that doesn't have any sour after taste but just makes us happy. When they become strong and arise easily, they are powerful protection against harmful mental habits, and give us the strength and clarity to see through those habits and eventually uproot them.

I'm sure you see that just knowing what Wise Effort is will do no one much good without actually *practicing* with it. This is true of the rest of the Eightfold Path. It must be lived to lead us to liberation. So there are handouts with weekly Practice Guides next to the dana bowl, and they're also available on our web site. I wish you the best in your practice, always.

Thank you.

