

To Be Determined

Jon Yaffe – May, 2019

I want to offer this talk as a complement to Resa's recent talks on the broad topic of "Letting Go". Letting go is a vital principle. Letting go of unnecessary, distracting or unwholesome objects, attitudes, thoughts and views is critical to our well-being. And when I say I'd like to offer some complementary discussion, rest assured I won't be arguing for adopting the simple opposite life strategy. I'll not be touting blindly "Holding on!"

But to the extent that a casual understanding of "letting go" implies disengagement, backing off from effort, perhaps even adopting a posture of indifference, I do want to talk about healthy, dare I say awakened, aspects of striving, determination, effort.

Letting go and applying effort may seem like opposite forces, opposing strategies; but from a dharmic perspective they work together hand in hand.

- We let go of the unwholesome, and this frees up the mind and frees up energy to apply ourselves to cultivating what *is* wholesome.
- And, these work together in the opposite direction as well. We *apply* ourselves to cultivating wisdom, morality, mental clarity and discipline, and these reveal the true nature of things to us. We come to *see directly* what is wholesome and promotes well-being, and we come to see directly what is unwholesome, which mires us in suffering, and thus we learn what to abandon, and we naturally let go. Why would we hold on to what hurts us? Why, when we see our connectedness to others, would we say or do what hurts others, and thus ultimately ourselves?

If you look for it, determination and effort – the Buddha often uses the term *ardor* – are implicit in all eight of the Noble Eightfold Path elements, but these are core to two of them.

- The second path element, immediately following Right View, is Right Intention
- The sixth path element, leading off the set of three that deal with cultivating a clear-seeing, disciplined mind, is Right Effort

Right Intention has to do with effort on a broad or macro level, adopting a wholesome overall approach to life. Fueled by Right View - our growing appreciation of the interconnectedness of all things, especially all beings, of the nature of four noble truths and the workings of karma – we fashion the intention to avoid and abandon cruel or harmful thoughts and deeds; to cultivate kindness, compassion, open-hearted joy and equanimity; to renounce obsession and greed, and so forth.

Right intention offers us a set of goals for wholesome living, and seeing these, coming to know in every fiber of our being that these bestow life with nobility, and that they are attainable – if not in totality than still to a significant degree – we become motivated and empowered to “do the work”, to practice with determination, ardor, to develop the skills and mental muscle memory – the positive conditioning – to take the step after step after step that makes-up the journey that lets us reach our goal. We’re moving, now, into Right Effort.

So, Right Effort is elemental, describing how to work skillfully with mental states as they present themselves in the present moment, ideally recognizing these in each instant of awareness. Both wholesome and unwholesome, both fully arisen/fully manifest and also when these are, so to speak, pre-emergent – mere urges and dawning possibilities.

Definitions of Right effort are presented in many suttas throughout the Pali Canon. Here’s a stand one, from the *Sacca-vibhanga Sutta (MN 141)*

And what is right effort?

Here the monk (dedicated one) arouses (his) will, puts forth effort, generates energy, exerts (his) mind, and strives - to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome mental states that have not yet arisen.

Here the monk (dedicated one) arouses (his) will, puts forth effort, generates energy, exerts (his) mind, and strives - and strives to eliminate evil and unwholesome mental states that have already arisen.

Here the monk (dedicated one) arouses (his) will, puts forth effort, generates energy, exerts (his) mind, and strives - and strives to generate wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen.

Here the monk (dedicated one) arouses (his) will, puts forth effort, generates energy, exerts (his) mind, and strives - to maintain wholesome mental states that have already arisen, to keep them free of delusion, to develop, increase, cultivate, and perfect them.

This is called right effort.

There are a couple things to say here. First, notice how prominent determination and effort are in all four of these formulations. In most translations of the suttas – possibly all, but certainly most – the translator saves time, ink and paper by adopting the convention of removing repeated phrases, such as “arouses his will, puts forth effort, generates energy, exerts his mind, and strives”. I think it was Gil Fransdal who pointed out that in many respects this publishing convention inadvertently strips the sutta of its essential emphasis – in this case the overarching importance of skillful determination and effort. The Buddha doesn’t emphasize thinking; he emphasizes practice!

This is especially important because the targets of all this effort are not that obvious. Certainly, for those new to this teaching the whole business of recognizing the quality of our impulses – are they wholesome or unwholesome - *before* they are fully arisen, is very challenging. Admit it, it sounds like crazy talk!

Yes, we *are* being asked to cultivate awareness and recognition of subtle states of being, so subtle that it’s hard to get our heads around them. So here’s the deal: it’s only through maintaining determination and effort that we are present enough, on an instant by instant basis, to get out of our heads – our thinking-limited heads - and attend to other sense-realms that operate more directly and cleanly, and do a better job of revealing the quality of our impulses.

Here’s an example: If an impulse towards anger or resentment arises, and we remain in our heads, we may immediately kick-off into stories that justify this and magnify that state, leading us to fantasize about how to get revenge, crush the offender and so forth. But, if we stay present and aware of moment to moment experience, we have the opportunity to note tension, tightening and a sense of heat arising, we feel and recognize this disturbing our peace of mind, beginning to grow into suffering. Seeing this, we *recognize* the germinating seed of the unwholesome, and we can abandon the conditioned tendency to feed it with the “unwise attention” of all that story-telling. We lose the drama, and stick with the dharma!

If you are familiar with the seven factors of awakening, you will see in this process the workings of the first three factors: mindfulness, investigation, and effort. What is happening – what do I sense arising, in the absence of commentary and story-telling, right now? (mindfulness), is its nature wholesome or unwholesome (if you don’t know, give it some more time (that’s

investigation), and now that I know it's nature, what if any skillful action shall I take? (that's Right Effort).

What comes to my mind is the considerations of a gardener. For the garden just planted, the challenges include how to cultivate the soil to keep weeds from growing, and how to nurture and protect the tender shoots of germinating seeds I value and want to encourage. For plants growing but not yet ready to harvest, how to keep them growing straight and true, keep them free from pests, fertilized and watered. At harvest, there's the challenge of knowing when the fruits are ripe for picking. Harvest too soon and the crop is immature, the fruits not yet sweet. Harvest too late and fruits may be mushy or fibrous. Forget or get lazy, and fail to look under the leaves of your zucchini plant, and you will find a zucchini the size of a baseball bat – and what will you do with that? Maybe aunt Betty will want to make two hundred loaves of zucchini bread from it. Maybe...

In the garden, in life, if you stay present and pay attention – if you sustain determination and effort – you will figure everything out. Not all at once, and you will make mistakes; but you will learn. You will catch your mistakes sooner and sooner, and make them less and less often. The garden, life, will talk to you, and you will realize that you have learned how to listen to it.

Here's another of the Buddha's teachings, This one offering a bridge between the quantum awareness level which is Right Effort and the grand life sweep of Right Intention. This is from *Instructions to Rahula at Mango Stone* (MN 61)

"What do you think, Rahula: What is a mirror for?"

"For reflection, sir."

"In the same way, Rahula, bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions are to be done with repeated reflection.

"Whenever you want to do a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I want to do — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with pleasant

consequences, pleasant results, then any bodily action of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you are doing a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I am doing — is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

"Having done a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I have done — did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

...

"Thus, Rahula, you should train yourself: 'I will purify my bodily actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my verbal actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my mental actions through repeated reflection.' That's how you should train yourself."

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Rahula delighted in the Blessed One's words.

A couple comments on this, and then I have one more thought to share, and I'll be done.

This teaching is like a 2x2 matrix, each with three elements. One dimension of the matrix is the realm of the activity (coarse to subtle) – bodily action, verbal action, or purely mental states. The other is timing (before the action, during the action, after the action). This dimension too has a subtlety gradient to it. As a simple truth of human nature, for most of us it's easier to note the gross than

the subtle. And thus our progress may well look and feel very stumbling and clunky at first. When cleaning-up our act, so speak, we're likely to first note what's gone wrong after the event is over (in part because that's when we relax, and become more open to seeing). We say our apologies or leave town, and start over. Later, we develop the ability to monitor our progress as we go, and develop the integrity and confidence that allows us to make mid-course corrections. Still later, we develop the ability to examine our intentions before we act, and abandon what experience tells us simply doesn't work out.

Similarly, many of us find that initially we are much better at examining the consequences of actions. Later, we become adept at seeing the impact of our words and recognizing their great power. And only later do we understand the harm and danger implicit in unwholesome thoughts, and appreciate that we can indeed develop a degree of control over these.

This leads me to stress that patience and compassion, with other but most certainly for ourselves, are critical supports for determination and effort. We grow wise and skillful over time and through the working of kindness.

And the final thought – which on reflection has to do with patience and compassion – to recognize that effort can be overdone, and must, in effect, be right-sized. In another sutta the Buddha counselled a bhikkhu who had so over-emphasized effort that he has in a state of nervous exhaustion. Knowing the bhikkhu had been a musician before becoming a monk, he reminded him about the importance of having his instrument well-tuned. If the strings are too slack they will make a limp dull sound, if any at all. Over tighten the strings and they will be shrill, and possibly break from the excessive tension. So, our mindfulness needs to extend to monitoring the effects of our effort, assuring it serves both our long term goals and immediate circumstances. Better to turn a door knob than knock down the wall.

Thanks for your attention. I hope you've heard something helpful in this. And now, for your thoughts?