

The Faculty of Effort (*virīya*)

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-21-13.

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Connected Discourses, the Buddha said:

"... there are these five faculties. What five? The faculty of faith, the faculty of energy, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of wisdom. ...

"... one who activates them fully succeeds fully; one who activates them partly succeeds partly. The five faculties, ~~bhikkhus~~, are not barren, so I say." — SN 48.17,

trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi

So last week I began exploring these five faculties, and I noted that when one has faith in the Buddha's teachings it naturally leads to the faculty of energy or effort, because the Buddha tells us that to find peace and freedom from suffering in this life, we have to do the work ourselves.

So what does the Buddha tell us about energy or effort? In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Connected Discourses, he is recorded as saying:

"And what, ~~bhikkhus~~, is right effort? Here, ~~bhikkhus~~, a bhikkhu generates desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. He generates desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. He generates desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. He generates desire for the maintenance of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecay, increase, expansion, and fulfillment by development; he makes an effort, arousing energy, applies his mind, and strives. This is called right effort." —SN 45.8, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi

So, in short, don't give rise to what is unskillful.

If it arises, abandon it.

Give rise to what is skillful.

If it is present, support and increase it.

But what is skillful? Skillful qualities are the ones that lead to generosity, non-harming, goodwill, compassion and wisdom.

The Abhidhamma tells us that in each skillful moment of thought, word or deed there are certain factors of mind that are always present: faith, mindfulness, non-greed (which includes generosity), non-hatred (which includes *mettā* or goodwill), neutrality of mind (or equanimity), self-respect, respect for others, tranquility, lightness, malleability, wieldiness, proficiency, and rectitude. And if one of these is present then the others are all present, to some degree, in the mind and heart.

So as mindfulness strengthens, we can also experience greater goodwill and generosity of the heart, a greater sense of tranquility and lightness of mind and heart. We find it easier to work with the mind and to direct it towards more skillful factors as our mindfulness grows. And we feel more respect for both ourselves and others. Have you noticed this in your own practice?

So part of working with effort is this matter of cultivating and strengthening the skillful factors of mind and heart while letting go of the unskillful ones. But how we go about that strengthening is also an important part of Right Effort. And the Buddha presents that through the story of Soṇa and the lute.

Soṇa was a monk, a bhikkhu, who hadn't awakened but really wanted to. He tried really, really hard. Like many of us, he would look around at his fellow monks who did seem to be making a lot more progress than he was, and he became discouraged. He began to doubt himself and began to think about giving up and going back to being a layperson.

The Buddha became aware of Soṇa's frustrations and doubts. So he approached Soṇa and said:

"Tell me, Soṇa, in the past when you lived at home, weren't you skilled at the lute?"

"Yes, Bhante."

"What do you think, Soṇa? When its strings were too tight, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?"

"No, Bhante."

"When its strings were too loose, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?"

"No, Bhante."

"But, Soṇa, when its strings were neither too tight nor too loose but adjusted to a balanced pitch, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?"

"Yes, Bhante."

"So too, Soṇa, if energy is aroused too forcefully this leads to restlessness, and if energy is too lax this leads to laziness. Therefore, Soṇa, resolve on a balance of energy, achieve evenness of the spiritual faculties, and take up the object [of meditation] there." —AN 6.55, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi

This is important because if we are striving too tightly, we can end up with restlessness and agitation that interferes with our ability to be present with our lives. And if we are too lax in our effort, we end up with sleepiness—either literally falling asleep, or figuratively falling asleep to what is arising in our lives because we're not giving it enough attention.

So in order to find and maintain this balance of effort, we need to bring mindfulness and investigation to our efforting. We need enough mindfulness to directly know whether what we are doing is skillful or not, whether our efforting is not too tight and not too loose, and what the effects of our actions are. But I'll talk about the faculty of mindfulness in my next talk.

