

Stewarding Resources:

Viriya Pāramī



Let's consider energy or *virīya*. Energy is fundamental for all of us and to anything we do. When our energy is bright and steady we feel good and act effectively; when it's low or scattered we feel bad and mess up. So energy is relevant both as the resource of vitality and as the way that we apply that resource.

Why bother?

We all probably recognize that any development is going to depend on the consistent energy with which we apply ourselves. So applied energy is one of the qualities that the Buddha regularly encouraged when he structured his teachings: it occurs as one of the seven factors of Enlightenment (*bojjhanga*), as one of the five support faculties (*indriya*), as well as one of the four bases of any success (*iddhipāda*). For Awakening or Enlightenment, energy is not just a matter of intense effort, it is the wisely applied resource that resists the push of psychological habits (*sankhāra*). Some of these habits build up into programs — such as perfectionism, dependence on others, obsessive self-criticism and addictions — that cripple our actions and well-being, and use up our resources. In theory, being aware of these should lift us out of their grasp. But in practice, it often doesn't because there is a block that stops awareness penetrating them.

These programs of habit are like the HIV virus: they infiltrate our immune system by posing as real and necessary aspects of our

identity. We even defend them: to the workaholic, their efforts are necessary to keep things going; to the alcoholic, liquor becomes a way of finding a fit in the world. These programs offer the security of an identity through a set of habits that kick in by default. So, when the wave of insecurity or loneliness or passion hits awareness, it doesn't face the risk and the discomfort of challenging the self-view and the world view that these programs present for us. Instead, awareness jumps on board the reflex habit with denial, distraction, blame, etc. Surfing on these seems a better option than standing in the tide ... 'and anyway I'm aware of it.'

The point is that awareness has to widen beyond waves and programs. Its default is to be conditioned by the current span of attention and what appears within that, and by intention, the directive of the heart. When a program wells up, it floods attention, and our intentions tend to follow the push of the flood. So energy is needed to resist that flood and direct awareness to firm ground. Rather than brute force, energy is mostly about sustaining wise endeavour. Its chief function is to keep awareness awake at the places where we drift into automatic. Then its gift — of steady vitality — can replace the 'drive and crash' programs of habit.

However, the topic of energy can bring up an uneasy feeling: when I'm already tired, and stressed, do I have the capacity or the interest to exert myself further? Well, that worry itself is another wave that has to be met and enquired into.

A wise response to that worry would be to say that the priority is to learn how to conserve energy and not dissipate it. Also, energy needs to be regulated: many of our problems are connected with either not having enough energy, so that we feel flat, or having too much of it, so that we're overcharged and bursting at the seams. The irregularities are because the mind's natural inclination is to orbit and check out what's happening in its external and internal domain — so its attention gets caught by

attraction, aversion or confusion. These forces can capture energy and overwhelm the mind. So the degree of exertion should be determined in accordance with what we're meeting. When we're tired out, energy is most usefully applied to kindness, and letting go of the need to sort out business. Then we come out of the grip of confused priorities. And in all cases, mindfulness — acknowledging the present state of the mind — is essential.

This brings us to a second response to the worry about whether we can find the energy for Awakening: one of the best ways to use energy is to apply it to investigating the nature of doubt, and stress in general. What is the best way, the most pressing topic to expend energy on? So we use our energy to enquire into ourselves with investigation and perseverance in order that we can put aside the causes that trigger harmful programs.

In summary, the first response connects to wise restraint and calm; the second to enquiry and insight. That's how energy, applied to calm and insight, can free the mind from stress and suffering.

Setting Wise Boundaries

Regulating and directing energy has to do with establishing boundaries. We must consider what is unskillful, what leads to harmful results and should be left aside. And we must consider what is skillful, what channels our energy towards that which is supportive and nourishing. The most obvious area that we should consider is our ethical standards — otherwise we're going to have to deal with the psychological and social mess, the furtiveness, and the guilt that comes from not making our ethical boundaries clear. Following on from that we can consider what we will attend to and act upon, what our priorities are, and what our area of concern is in any particular situation. We can bear in mind the reflection: 'Is this for my welfare, the welfare of others, and does it lead out of stress and towards peace?' Instead of setting up a boundary between self and other, this reflection aims for a boundary between intentions and action. Then we can check before we cross that boundary.

Boundaries around actions are necessary, and it's up to you to establish them. You can't just be passive; some things have to be deliberately left outside: 'No, this is doing me no good.' Or, 'That's not my concern right now; I don't need to do that.' There is a definite 'no' to that boundary. Make it firm, give it some energy, and it will look after you. You can't make much of a boundary out of, 'Well I suppose I ought to give that up, one day ...' or, 'Maybe ...' What does the energy of that feel like? On the other hand there also has to be a 'yes.' For example: 'I'm going to be fully with this. I've made a commitment; I'm going to see this through.' Then establish that with care and give it some energy. And even if you fail from time to time, still come back to those boundaries. Look into how they caved in or where they were too tight, and learn a few things.

Learning to establish a 'no' boundary means practising some restraint. It means following up on the understanding that the mind works better if you don't load it with unnecessary things to look at, buy, have or worry about. If we don't establish that boundary, the mind can get swamped by useless input. So the Buddha advised us to work out what causes unskilful mind states to grow and what causes good mind states to grow, and to establish our boundaries accordingly. It can take determination: addictions like cigarettes, alcohol, or even work often take a lot of careful and repeated 'no's,' as well as the back-up of alternative ways to channel energy. The most important of these alternative ways will be actions of generosity, kindness and calming meditation, to bring healing to the heart that's been abused by these pursuits.

We even need to establish a boundary around our intellectual activity, because intellectual activity can become a vast dimension that floods the mind with restless energy. There are all kinds of things that we can think about, from Aztec pottery to the geography of Venus — there's probably a book or an article on each of these somewhere, written with great enthusiasm by its author. And maybe such information is useful to someone, somewhere. But you have to decide whether it's relevant for yourself or just a distraction from more important issues in your

life. The Buddha himself commented that the knowledge he was imparting was like a handful of leaves in comparison to the leaves that were in the forest. But for liberation from suffering that handful was enough. The rest you can use when and as you like — but you can get lost in a forest and buried under a pile of leaves.

The key point is that wherever your attention gets established then that's where your energy goes. And that energy and focus becomes your world. Whether it's meditation, music or computer science, your heart adopts the concerns, values and energy that go along with that. So is it worth giving yourself to? A lot of people are led astray and sucked dry by worldly values, and then spat out, like husks. They may have spent forty years working hard for a company, and then they are given the sack; so they feel lost and depressed, even suicidal, because they didn't put their attention where it would have served them best. This is tragic, because it isn't that people don't do good things, but they don't put their attention on really knowing themselves and finding inner fulfilment. Instead, it's as if they belong to somebody else.

To summarize, energy has a fourfold application: first, to put aside what you feel is unhelpful, and secondly to keep guarding the mind against such unskilful influences; then thirdly to establish what you sense is good, and lastly to support and encourage those skilful influences. And it requires wise discernment, advice from experienced people and trial and error to know what's appropriate in a given situation.

Getting to Know Your True Interests

Wisdom is an asset for healing and applying energy, because it helps you to know for yourself where your mind gets caught or spins out. In this respect, wisdom operates by means of mindfulness, the function that bears in mind a particular topic, impulse, mood or sensation so that it can be given full attention. With mindfulness we can zoom in on what's affecting or driving us. Then we can get a more tuned in understanding of ourselves

than through the opinions of other people, or even through our own fault-finding attitudes.

This is because the aims and programs that you end up adopting aren't necessarily related to your disposition. In society in general, judgement is made based on current ideas of success, rather than on whether you are fully following your aspiration. For instance, maybe at school you didn't get a thrill out of geometry because it wasn't a passionate concern of yours and so you weren't good at it. So you flunked geometry and consequently you felt you were a failure. Something that you weren't interested in and weren't very good at becomes a problem, and that undercuts your confidence. Along with experiencing the feeling of failing in something, you then start to get the sense that perhaps you aren't intelligent or you're lazy. Because of that you feel more doubtful about your ability to do anything. Then you do all kinds of things to compensate for that, often wildly overreaching yourself, so that you get stressed.

Does your energy come from interest and aspiration, from willingness of heart? Or is it caught up with trying to climb the wrong mountain?

To illustrate this, I'll give you the story of a weightlifter I met at a meditation session. He was a chunky fellow who could rip telephone books apart with his hands. I asked him how he had gotten interested in meditation, and it turned out that he'd had a problem that eventually drew him to looking into his mind. The problem was that he'd get frightened when walking down the street if he hadn't done any weightlifting that day. He'd feel he wasn't in top form, and didn't feel strong enough to be out in public. It turns out that the very urge to build up a muscular body, and all the energy he'd committed to that end, had come from a sense of inadequacy and fear. And his bodily development hadn't cured that. In fact, all the muscles in the world would never have cured him, because muscles weren't the problem. Thankfully by the time I met him, he'd started applying mindfulness to the experience of anxiety, witnessing how it affected him and calming the energy in his body.

The issue here is one of intentions and perceptions. A committed intention and sense of purpose is necessary whether you want to be a ballerina or a computer programmer. And you have to be prepared to do some work and go through some discomfort in order to arrive at the good result. Much the same can be said for a meditator. But in terms of prioritizing how we apply effort, it's vital to get clear as to the perceptions (that is impressions) of the result that we're aiming for. These may be shadowy or unquestioned assumptions that predict a future well-being, approval, companionship or security. 'People will be impressed by me. I will be free from blame. My life will be interesting.' The first may be true for a few minutes, the second impossible and as for the third — anything you work at goes through phases of tedium. Check it out.

To do this before we invest a lot of energy in a vision or a project means bringing mindfulness to bear on the idea or impression that arouses our interest, and on the intentions and actions with which we follow up that interest. We can never arrive at the imagined perception, but we always experience the results of our intentions. So the important thing is to examine, clarify and stay in touch with our intentions — not our imagined goals. When I became a monk, it was along with two others: a man who wanted to live a wandering life free from obligation and tedium, and a man who wanted a life where he could live in harmony with others and be shown proper respect. They had their good reasons. For my part, I wasn't that convinced by monastic life, but felt it could offer me the resources to enquire into my mind. I'm still a monk after thirty-five years; the other two disrobed within a year.

Looking Beneath Thought

In the process of staying in touch with intentions, the thinking mind isn't a great help. In fact it can often get in the way, by adding a running commentary on your moods, along with critiques and ideas of how to fix a problem. However, a lot of the time the thinking mind, with its obsessive energy, isn't the problem. No, what's really driving us is underneath thought, in the domain of

emotional impressions (mental perceptions) and the feelings and self-images they bring up. So you have to pick up the dominant emotional theme of the thoughts — it could be excitement, worry or doubt — and listen to it carefully, attending to what comes up. In this respect mindfulness is backed up by full awareness, which is the sensitivity that assesses the mood or impression, the nature and energy of the response, and the result of the action.

Then stay with the emotional theme, widening and calming your attention so that the energy of application meets the energy of the emotion. Where they meet, where we're not struggling to master our feelings or drifting off to something more interesting, things click. Your awareness comes out of the program by being bigger than it. Probably something very obvious will strike you, something so obvious that you wonder why you missed it. And yet if someone had pointed it out, their advice wouldn't have worked. You needed to look into the disturbance in the heart until what arose was the clear knowing: 'All that disturbance is just thoughts and moods. You're fine. Don't blindly adopt what other people say.'

We tend to judge ourselves based on assumptions or on how others relate to us. Often this is because our boundaries around what we do and don't want to pursue haven't been developed with mindfulness. We've more or less gone along with assumptions rather than checking things out and consciously deciding yes or no. Those assumptions and the consequences of our actions then govern the mind and form who we are. If we don't have clarity over these impressions a lot of our actions end up being like the weightlifter's. So investigate. If it's taking you to suffering and stress, you'd better get to the bottom of it. If it has a true basis, then see what you need to develop or put aside. Otherwise, stop putting the wrong medicine on the wrong spot, and practise saying 'yes' to what is really for you.

Maybe we've lost touch with that. Maybe our boundaries have been broken by sexual, physical or verbal abuse. We tell ourselves we weren't strong enough, and so a sense of personal value has been damaged. The result of this is often that we keep looking to others to tell us that we're OK. And, even when they do, if the

boundary is damaged we still don't know it deeply for ourselves. With that loss of deep knowing, the programs rule. Maybe it's cosmetic surgery or implants; maybe it's athletic performances; maybe it's being number one at business school; maybe it's even getting Enlightened. The thing is that this kind of pursuit will absorb all the energy you can give it and still demand more. It's a hungry ghost. It's a complete phantom, because your sense of your own worth, of who you are, has been established on the basis of an incoherent supposition. The strange thing is that you may even recognize that it's not true. However, self-programs arise at a deeper level than the rational. What's needed is mindfulness-based insight into what makes us tick.

The 'Yes' Boundary

When you want to determine what to apply energy to, establish the 'yes' boundary around that which you truly want to pursue with aspiration, and maintain it with investigation and recollection. Putting appropriate energy into what you know is worthy will give rise to joy. And the most far-reaching results come when we back up our aspirations and actions with mindful investigation, so that we clean out any pride or egotism in an undertaking. Offering service in a selfless way gives rise to confidence in oneself, because one's intention and energy just come down to the love of the good, not the pursuit of prestige or success. It is related to the intimate aspiration of one's own heart. Once we know this, we don't lose it; we have it as a refuge.

The initial element in this process is faith, *saddhā*. *Saddhā* isn't belief, but the intuitive sense that there is meaning; there are aims and energies that are worth more than just getting by. So where does your sense of value and vitality arise? What comes alive for you when you ask yourself that question? Looking after and doing the best for your children? Serving the community? Investigating and developing Dhamma? It's up to you. This faith is brought forth by willingness (*chanda*). When you give of yourself freely and not because of what somebody else wants, says or does, there is beauty in the mind. Aspiration, the healthy willingness to do, is called

‘beautiful in the beginning.’ At that moment, you are not thinking, ‘What will I get out of it? What do other people think? Will I succeed? Am I capable of it?’ If you wait until you think you’re ready, the chances are you’ll be waiting forever. We have to make a leap of faith based on intentions, rather than perceptions of self and other. Then just do it. Give a ‘yes’ to the faith and a ‘no’ to the wavering speculation. The more you doubt, the less steady your focus becomes; the less focused, the more agitated; the more agitated, the more you doubt. You have to break out of the doubt program with an act of faith, a ‘yes’ to good intentions. Sure you’ll make mistakes, but if you stay within the boundaries of ethics and mindfulness, that’s how you learn.

With faith, the energy is an opening of the heart, whereas belief closes the mind by locking it onto an idea or theory. Belief employs energy to defend or attack, and not to enquire. Faith, on the other hand, always benefits from enquiry. When you place faith in someone or something, it means that you will give them clear attention and take seriously what they say. But the Buddha emphasizes that such a faith has to be backed by investigating the truth, and working with it in yourself. This is ‘beautiful in the middle.’ Then it matures into ‘beautiful in the end’: confidence and realization.

If we want to cultivate our potential to its fullest, it needs to be in a process that covers both how we feel and aspire, as well as how we aim and act. Then we can check out where the wrong assumptions or careless impulses lie. We are able to guard ourselves against ignorance and suffering and not increase them. And we can gradually wipe them out. We are able to dismantle the foundations of blame, mistrust, regret, anxiety and aversion, until these programs break down into smaller instances or locations, such as disappointment or boredom, or into deep-seated habits that we have to work through by insightful investigation.

Therefore, there is a path to be cultivated. The more you can value and live the path of clear thought, speech and action, the more you escape from worldly value judgements. You get to know how to investigate your thinking, not in terms of how smart you are,

but in terms of whether your thinking recognizes and shuns cruelty, and whether it recognizes compassion and kindness. You can give some time to such recollection at the end of the day. Perfections don't head the list in terms of worldly values; they won't necessarily get you a promotion, but they will give you inner peace of mind. And the more you value and energize those qualities, the more peace the *pāramī* will bring. Their energy comes from aspiration, and application to what brings the best results. Our concern is: do we act, speak and think in ways that we can look back on with confidence and clear conscience? Do we act with generosity or not? Do we care for other people? We can energize these qualities by putting attention into them, bringing them to mind in recollection and dwelling on them. Again: what we attend to, we energize; what is energized, governs our world.

Directing Energy to the Knowing

Aspiration is a good energy with which to begin meditation. One of the traditional ways of getting in touch with this is called *pūja*, the act of honouring. It's generally associated with offering tokens such as lights, incense and flowers to a sacred image, something that evokes the sense of the good, the true and the beautiful. You establish a shrine, image or devotional object, make such offerings to it, and chant or otherwise bring forth your heart in faith. Such devotional practices can be a source of fulfilling energy. Looking from the outside, people may think, 'What on earth is going on here? Do you really think that is going to do something for you?' This is because people don't recognize that the image is there to represent something deep in your aspirations. You're not worshipping a statue or a god. The image is not for belief or ornamental purposes but to catalyse a sense of offering, faith, trust, confidence and giving of yourself.

An image can't perform any good or bad actions. But you aren't asking it to be an actor; you're only using it as a prop for bringing forth your own energy. So *pūjā* is done with the most genuine sense of trust, love and appreciation for what the image represents — for example the pure, the compassionate, the joyful, the wise. You can also develop the spirit of honouring towards people whom

you respect. The Buddha himself commented that to honour that which is worthy of honour is a great blessing, because of the focus and energy that it evokes. It brings your mind into bright openness and gratitude: the perfect setup for meditation. When you honour the honourable, you take on its aims, values and energy.

The energy of doing things — the energy of arousing and gladdening oneself on the one hand, and disciplining, restraining and investigating on the other — is also aimed towards an end result. Effort is a very useful function of energy; however, effort can never be a goal. The goal is not to keep making more and more effort; the goal is to arrive at emotional stability and fullness of heart. And with that comes a plenitude that doesn't change because it's not supported by actions or mind states. The Buddha called it 'Nibbāna,' 'Unconditioned' or 'Deathless.'

To get to the end of the energy of doing, you can apply mindfulness to the process of how you are aware. What is the basis of knowing anything? And how much of knowing is additional interpretations and assumptions? Can there be a release from those?

For example, I recently had a cold. The symptoms were a feeling that my head was under pressure, with strong sensations around the brain and the eyes. The throat felt rough. The instinctive leaning of the mind is towards getting over this, and curing it: 'How can I fix it? When is it going to go away? How can I get somewhere where the pain isn't happening? Why does it have to be here?' Then one time this thought came into my mind: 'Why do you bring the pain here? Why not leave it there? Why not say that there's the pain, and it's there?' Then the knowing of the discomfort and of the mental responses is right here, and the object of the knowing, the unpleasant sensation, is over there.

With mindfulness, by being fully present with and aware of unpleasantness, we can start to get a sense of it being over there and leaving it there. Then we have an area within which to abide

peacefully, neither blocking nor making a big thing of a feeling. Whereas if we always attach to feeling as here, as mine and what I am, then there comes the emotional battle, the fluster, the attempts to block it, the indignation and so forth. Then, one's energy is all used up in an activity that is pointless. But if the attachment is dropped, one's energy stays in a sense of calm and knowing; and one can enhance that and give it energy by focusing on it.

Physical things are a lot easier to work with than mental things, so one learns to practise with the physical discomforts first. Afterwards, it is easier to distinguish and not get caught in the mind stuff, like feeling one isn't doing very well or can't do this meditation. It becomes easier to step back from the thoughts, and find balance by being aware of them. And over time, with faith, mindfulness and energy, you can do the same with your mental programs. Even if you're following a meditation technique in a workaholic, dutiful way, give attention to how you know this as stressful. That awareness is the key. As you touch into and say 'yes' to that awareness, it will bring you into balance with no further effort. The more you attend to this knowing, the more energy goes towards it; the energy goes away from the mental pattern, physical sensation, mental feeling or emotion, and into a steady awareness of them. This awareness, by standing clear in the presence of pain or doubt or self-image, releases the emotional intensity and proliferation they carry. The struggle and the agitation ceases and the process of being sucked dry by phantoms reverses. You start to fill up with peace.

Sometimes practice is about just holding a place, a point in your body — or a point in your mind — with no aim to fix it, but just to hold it carefully with dispassion. You simply let attention and energy come into that place, so the body is held in awareness-energy, and the mind settles into it. This can flush out the afflictions, the numbness and the hurt places. There is a healing faculty to energy that occurs when you stop 'doing it' and instead allow the energy to accumulate and enrich you.

This is the province of *samādhī* — concentration, or unification — which is a state of stable energy, wherein the body, heart and intellectual energies merge and are at rest. It has the energy of an enjoyment that isn't based on the senses or the intellect, and it allows a resting in awareness.

Energy as a Factor of Awakening

None of us has too much or too little energy; all that we suffer from is imbalance and ignorance about it. So if you are physically not very strong, you make your boundary fit that condition. Staying within that limitation, saying 'yes' to fewer physical activities and 'no' to many more, you will find that your energy will accumulate within the boundary. Similarly, if you are not feeling emotionally robust, form a boundary for your aspirations that enables you to stay focused and mindful with ample energy. Find a way of establishing your boundaries, and then have confidence within them.

However we train in Dhamma, it's destructive to think, 'I'm not as good as' or 'I'm better than,' because if you do that, your mind doesn't stay on its own ground but starts to pick and compare, to fault-find and to slight yourself or others. Instead, realize the potential to end suffering! If your lifestyle can fit a set of aspirations, then say 'yes' to them and the boundary they represent, and give them all your energy! You can change those aspirations if that seems appropriate. But the most important thing is to understand that a boundary is there to assist your Awakening, rather than to give you status or to make you feel inadequate. So if you say, 'I'm only this' or 'I'm one of these,' then you are misusing the boundary, and energy is lost.

In conclusion, we can see there is an energy associated with establishing, with doing and with being. This energy leads towards attachment to a self-image and the burden that image represents. However, we can arouse and nurture a different energy — one that is associated with being beyond any image. If we open up into the silence of the mind, where we are not monks or nuns, men or

women, then there is a beautiful stable energy that supports letting go of burdens. This is why energy is one of the primary factors of Awakening.