

Mindfulness of Breathing (45) Effort Factor of Awakening

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today's topic is the third factor of awakening – the effort factor or the effort limb. The word *aṅga* can mean “limb” or “part.” It is a part of the whole. The seven limbs, factors, or parts of awakening can be seen as seven different qualities, practices, or states of one whole – one whole way of being.

One of these ways of being is to engage – to make effort to do things. How we are is not just passive. There is also engagement in our practice and in our world. The word *virīya* comes from the word “hero.” It implies a heroic effort. But words such as “effort” and “heroic” can cause you to feel exhausted when you hear them, as in, “Oh, no. I have to do all this tiring work now.”

Some translators render the word for effort in the effort factor of awakening as “endeavor.” For some of us, the word endeavor has a nicer feeling than the word effort. We endeavor to do something. It is what we’re engaged in trying to do. To make it feel closer in and less about the energetics of effort, I relate right effort to the word “choice.”

Right effort relates to the choices we make as we practice and live our lives. A choice does not necessarily imply that there is a lot of effort, strain, or work. It is just a choice. It is the choice of what we are going to endeavor to do.

The usual definition or description of the effort factor of awakening is the same description for the effort factor in the Eightfold Path. If you take it as endeavoring, the Buddha is teaching us to consider: “What endeavors in our wonderful, precious life are worthwhile? What should we do with our life? Which endeavors should we make?”

Rather than answering that with a particular project, work, or career – the answer has to do with the consequences of what we do and how we do it. Choose those things that lead to what is skillful or wholesome. Do not choose things that lead to what is unskillful and unwholesome.

In the teachings of the Buddha, what is most skillful are those things that avoid causing suffering. Suffering comes with a feeling of being caught, trapped, constricted, clinging to something, or craving. The world has gotten smaller and narrower. Instead, we choose to do skillful things that lead away from suffering. We choose to do things that lead to wonderful happiness and peace – things that go along with feelings of freedom, openness, tranquility, and goodness.

We're not just looking for any old happiness – because some happiness is like the happiness of winning the lottery. It is not a deep, nourishing wellspring of goodness, warmth, and peace. It is not intimacy with the warmth and juiciness of life. This is more a surface joy, exuberance, or a promise of exciting things. It is said that most people who win big in the lottery are less happy a year later than they were before they won it.

So, what is lasting happiness? What gives us lasting well-being? Begin to have a sense of what that is – not in the big-picture sense of it or far into the future – but by recognizing it, moment by moment, in ourselves.

When I'm driving my car and I see a green light up ahead, but I don't know if I'll make it, I might get contracted, focused, and tight: "I better get it! I'll be late for my appointment! My life will be so much more

difficult if I don't make that green light." This feeling of contraction and tightness in the body, mind, and heart may be subtle, but it is not a good feeling. It's not nourishing. It is not one that inculcates goodness, warmth, peace, love, or care for others.

Another choice would be: "I see the light up there. It's green right now, but I probably can't reach it in time. I'm not sure. Rather than racing to see if I can get through it – what if I actually go a little bit slower, take it easy, and give the light a chance to turn red? Then I can be connected to myself in a different way. I can relax and be more open and receptive to the traffic around me. I can *not* be so narrowly focused." Then the light turns red, and I stop and sit there. It turns out that I am quite content. I did a nice thing for myself.

Some of you might think this example is ridiculous. But we make thousands of these small choices throughout the day. To begin to endeavor (right effort) is to make wise choices around these ten thousand things we do. This includes the big choices we make, the big things we do.

This is how we bring mindfulness into daily life. We bring mindfulness to all that we are doing. We're not just aware of what we're doing, but we're aware of the choices we make as we do them. We are aware of the

options we have – of which direction to go – the skillful or the unskillful.

The investigation factor of awakening – the factor that sees clearly – includes seeing the distinctions between what is healthy or unhealthy, skillful or unskillful, beneficial or unbeneficial, and that which leads to entrapment or to freedom. Right effort is the factor of awakening that is constantly turning toward healthy choices— but not because it is a lot of work.

In fact, as we get the hang of it, right effort feels the opposite. This is where the least work is. In some ways, if you are lazy or you find that it is easier to go along with your impulses – it can feel easier to choose the unskillful. But generally, the consequences of that choice require much more work, repair, and stress later. Choose a healthy and skillful approach, and the consequences will tend to be good in the future. No repairs will be needed. You won't have to de-stress or recover from it afterwards.

Getting into the habit and the ongoingness of being present – and making wise, skillful, and beneficial choices – begins to create a life that is less and less stressed. There is less and less need to recover from the stress and tensions of our life. There is more energy and vitality for this life of ours than if we repeatedly choose the unskillful.

The effort factor of awakening is certainly the individual practices and choices we make. But it is more a state, a generalized attitude, or an orientation for how we live, where we are naturally oriented toward the skillful – toward choices leading to our betterment– to ease, peace, and ongoing well-being. There is momentum in that direction. There is strength in that, which follows in the wake of the second factor of awakening becoming stronger – really seeing clearly.

So first, there is mindfulness, which places us in the present moment. Then there is investigation, exploration, or discovery, which helps us see all the choices we have in the moment. When we see the green light or the red light ahead as we're driving, we see, "Oh, there's a choice here."

Then there is the effort factor of awakening, which something inside of you knows with time. There doesn't have to be a lot of reflection and planning – figuring out the calculus of stress vs. freedom. It just feels as if: "Oh, *that is* the natural thing to do. That is the easeful way. That is where the doors are open. That is where freedom is found." And of course, we choose that. The choice becomes more and more effortless, delightful, and joyful.

My hope for all of you is that if you do this, a day will come when the word effort just brings you a big smile. “Oh, I’m so lucky to be able to make this effort. Wow, this effort thing is fantastic!” Wouldn’t that be great?

Along the way, what is happening is that you are beginning to manifest your freedom – your ability to be free. To simply choose to be mindful is an expression of freedom. To choose to discover, look more carefully, and investigate is an engagement with your freedom. To make your choice is an engagement – an enactment – of freedom.

This is very different from being a victim of our experience – carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders, with everything being so hard and uphill. We’re being impacted. We’re being burdened by piles and piles of responsibility. There’s no freedom here.

To *choose* freedom over and over again is not second nature for most people. But this is what we are working with: how we set ourselves free – in the big sense as well – through all these small movements of manifesting our freedom in mindfulness, investigation, and the choices we make.

Thank you and I look forward to continuing this series.