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'I'm Not Getting Anywhere with my Meditation …': Effort, Contentment and Goal-directedness in the Process of Mind-training

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This article draws on the teachings of the Pali Canon and the contemporary lineages that are guided by its principles. In particular, reference is made to the author's mentors in the Thai Forest Tradition. It explores the respective roles of goal-directed effort and contentment in the process of meditative training, and skilful and unskilful variations on these. Effort is needed, but can be excessive, unreflectively mindless, unaware of gradually developed results, or misdirected. Contentment can be misunderstood to imply that skilful desire has no role in practice, and lead to passivity; though it is needed to dampen down an over-energized mind, or motivation rooted in aversion or ambition, and comes from insight-based non-attachment. Right effort avoids the craving to become or to get rid of, but is associated with a skilful *chanda*/desire that is an aspect of the *iddhi-pāda*s, the Bases of Spiritual Power. Mindfulness aids the balance of energy and concentration in the Five Faculties, and the energizing and calming qualities in the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. In the end, from practising Dhamma in a way that is truly in accordance with Dhamma (*dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti*), progress naturally flows from seeing and becoming Dhamma.

1. Introduction

The words that form the start of the title of this article will be familiar to most people practising meditation as well as those who are also teaching it in the West. We are a pragmatic and goal-oriented culture, in the main part, so we put effort into our jobs, our education, even our holidays and we expect to get certain results. We can even assume that such results are our right: 'I've paid my fee, now I want my product.' In many circumstances this is a fair enough assumption, but when it comes to mind-training things are far less predictable. We can put in years of effort,

faithfully and with vigour, yet feel that we are 'not getting anywhere'. Our experiences fail to match the glorious simplicity and fluidity of the stages of accomplishment as described in the *suttas*, or the colourful and insightful stages of realization as described by our mentors or by contemporary popular authors. 'What's going wrong?' we ponder, 'why am I still struggling with *x*, *y* or *z* after all these years?'

As this is such a common experience it seems worthy of exploration and elucidation. This essay will investigate some of the aspects of the relationship between Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), and the related qualities (at least within Buddhist practice) of being focused on and directed towards a goal (*niṭṭhā*), and contentment (*santosa*). Both halves of this pair have positive and negative characteristics, according to the Buddha's teachings, thus it will be helpful to begin by clarifying what these various attributes are.

2. The positive aspects of exertion and goal-directedness

2.1. *Sutta* quotes regarding striving

Throughout the *suttas* of the Pali Canon there are abundant passages that highlight the fact that the Buddha's Path is one pursued through making effort. For example (at S 43.12):

> And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu generates desire (*chandaṃ*) for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; he makes an effort (*vāyamati*), arouses energy (*viriyaṃ*), applies his mind and strives (*padahati*) ... for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states ... for the arising of unarisen wholesome states ... for the continuance of arisen wholesome states, ... he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind and strives: this is called the path leading to the unconditioned.
>
> (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 1376, Pali added)[1]

There are these four right strivings or exertions (*sammā-ppadhāna*); they are the four qualities that constitute the fabric of Right Effort. In another discourse (S 49.1), after describing these four, the Buddha uses the compelling image of the sloping of the River Ganges inexorably toward the sea: 'Bhikkhus, just as the River Ganges slants, slopes and inclines towards the east, so too a bhikkhu who develops and cultivates the four right strivings, slants, slopes and inclines towards Nibbāna.' (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 1709).

In the *Cetokhila Sutta*, 'The Wilderness of the Heart' (M 16.26 (M I 103)), the Buddha describes the energetic engagement required in the development of the 'Four Bases of Spiritual Power' or 'Roads to Success' (*iddhi-pāda*):

> He develops the basis for spiritual power consisting in concentration due to zeal (*chanda*) and determined striving (*-padhāna-saṅkhāra-*); ... consisting in concentration due to energy (*viriya*) and determined striving; ... consisting in concentration due to [purity of] mind (*citta*) and determined striving; ... consisting in concentration due to investigation (*vimaṃsa*) and determined striving. And enthusiasm (*ussoḷhi*) is the fifth. (Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 197)

1. Except where otherwise stated, translations are the author's own.

2.2. 'Just do it!'

As a more colloquial expression of the same principle, of the necessity for application of effort in the realization of one's spiritual aspirations, here are some words from Ajahn Chah, one of the 20th century's masters of Buddhist meditation:

> So, do it. Follow it until you know in pace with the breath, concentrating on the breath using the mantra '*Buddho*'. Just that much. Don't let the mind wander off anywhere else. At this time have this knowing. Do this. Study just this much. Just keep doing it, doing it in this way. If you start thinking that nothing is happening, just carry on anyway. Just carry on regardless and you will get to know the breath. ...
>
> Our practice of the heart is like this. After a moment, it's thinking of this and thinking of that. It is agitated and mindfulness is not continuous. But whatever it thinks about, never mind, just keep putting forth effort. It will be like the drops of water that become more frequent until they join up and become a stream. Then our knowledge will be encompassing. Standing, sitting, walking or laying down, whatever you are doing, this knowing will look after you.
>
> Start right now. Give it a try ... if you try too hard, you won't be successful; but if you don't try at all, then you won't be successful either.
>
> (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah,* pp. 259-262)

3. The negative aspects of exertion and goal-directedness

The application of energy and goal-directedness are, accordingly, shown to be essential elements of the Buddhist Path, so why do so many long-term meditators report disappointment with their efforts in their practice?

3.1. Excessive 'wrong striving'

A pertinent example to begin this section is the story of Bhikkhu Ānanda. On the eve of the First Council, he needed to be liberated himself before he could attend, and he had not yet attained full liberation. So he meditated strenuously in order to end all traces of greed, hatred and delusion. Though, try as he might, he could not do so. So he decided to lie down to sleep. Before his head hit the pillow and after his feet left the ground, in the few moments when he had relaxed his trying-too-hard mind-set, he attained liberation (CV XI.1.3.6).

The first problem is thus that of attaching to the idea of liberation, and 'trying too hard' to achieve it. The Buddha described his own zealous but ultimately fruitless efforts (for example at M 36.20-30 (M I 242–246)), culminating in the insight that:

> I thought: 'Whatever brahmans or contemplatives in the past ... in the future ... in the present are feeling painful, racking, piercing feelings due to their striving, this is the utmost. None is greater than this. But with this racking practice of austerities I haven't attained any superior human state ... Could there be another path to Awakening?' (Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro trans.)[2]

2. https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.036.than.html

In a similar vein there is the story in the Vinaya discipline (MV V.1.14–17) where the delicately reared Soṇa Koḷivisa goes at his walking meditation with such gusto that his feet are torn open and bleeding. The Buddha summons him to offer advice and uses the example of tuning the strings of a *vīṇā*:

> '[W]hen the strings of your *vīṇā* were neither too stretched nor too loose, but fixed in even proportion, did your *vīṇā* have a good sound then ...?'
>
> 'Yes, venerable sir.'
>
> 'Just so, Soṇa — too eager a determination conduces to agitation, and too weak a determination to slothfulness (*accāraddhaviriyaṃ uddhaccāya saṃvattati, atilīnaviriyaṃ kosajjāya saṃvattati*).
>
> Therefore, Soṇa, be steadfast in cultivating evenness of determination, establishing harmony of your mental powers. Let that [balancing] be the object of your contemplation.'

Venerable Soṇa realized arahantship after receiving this teaching.

Even though roughly 2,500 years have gone by since that incident, we are still making the same mistakes. Here is some advice from some experienced teachers of this era, addressing the area of misdirected urgency and enthusiasm. Firstly, Ajahn Mun, the reviver of the Forest Meditation tradition in Thailand, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

> Wanting what's good, without stop:
> That's the cause of suffering.
> It's a great fault: the strong fear of bad.
> 'Good' and 'bad' are poisons to the mind,
> like foods that enflame a high fever.
> The Dhamma isn't clear
> because of our basic desire for good.
> Desire for good, when it's great,
> drags the mind into turbulent thought
> until the mind gets inflated with evil,
> and all its defilements proliferate.
> The greater the error, the more they flourish,
> taking one further and further away
> from the genuine Dhamma.
>
> *The Ballad of Liberation from the Five Khandhas*, (Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro trans.)

And then his student, Ajahn Chah:

> [W]e're all impatient, we're in a hurry. As soon as we begin we want to rush to the end, we don't want to be left behind. We want to succeed. When it comes to fixing their minds for meditation some people go too far. They light the incense, prostrate and make a vow, 'As long as this incense is not yet completely burnt I will not rise from my sitting, even if I collapse or die, no matter what, I'll die sitting.' Having made their vow they start their sitting. As soon as they start to sit, Māra's hordes come rushing at them from all sides. They've only sat for an instant and already they think the incense must be finished. They open their eyes for a peek, 'Oh, there's still ages left!' ...

> Actually it isn't necessary to go through all that. To concentrate means to concentrate with detachment, not to concentrate yourself into knots. But maybe we read the scriptures about the life of the Buddha, how he sat under the Bodhi tree and determined to himself:
>
> 'As long as I have still not attained Supreme Enlightenment I will not rise from this place, even if my blood dries up.'
>
> Reading this in the books you may think of trying it yourself. You'll do it like the Buddha. But you haven't considered that your car is only a small one. The Buddha's car was a really big one, he could take it all in one go. With only your tiny, little car, how can you possibly take it all at once? It's a different story altogether.
>
> Why do we think like that? Because we're too extreme. Sometimes we go too low, sometimes we go too high. The point of balance is so hard to find.
>
> (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, pp. 281–282)

Lastly Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Chah's senior Western student, offers his perspective on this area:

> The religious journey is what we call 'inclining to Nibbāna': turning away, inclining away from the sensory world to the unconditioned. So it's a very subtle kind of journey. It's not something you can do as an act of will; you can't just say, 'I'm going to realize the truth' or: 'I'm going to get rid of all my defilements and hindrances, get rid of lust, hatred, all my weaknesses!' — and actually do it. People who practise like that usually go crazy. ... (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology,* Vol. 1. p. 75)

3.2. Mindless/unreflective 'wrong striving'

The second aspect of what can be called 'wrong striving' is not trying too hard but rather making effort in an unreflective, unmindful way. In this mode, persistence is applied in a more balanced way but it is non-reflective insofar as it is based on obedience to a method out of blind devotion: 'The teacher taught me to do mindfulness of breathing so I have been doing it this way for twenty years, even though I don't see any benefits'; or 'I have been a monk now for thirty years so I must be closer to liberation, mustn't I? After all, the Buddha said, "Patient endurance is the supreme practice for incinerating defilements"' (D 14.3.28).

There is a laudable patience and well-intentioned subservience to a system but, lacking wise reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*), investigation of qualities (*dhammavicaya*) or examination of results (*vimaṃsa*), those patient efforts can well be experienced as fruitless. To use the Buddha's words, when describing the fruitlessness of his own ascetic practices (at S 4.1):

> I know these penances to gain the deathless —
> Whatever kind they are — to be as vain
> As a ship's oars and rudder on dry land.
>
> (*The Life of the Buddha*, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli trans., p. 36)

It is like the gentleman who recently spent many hours driving round and round the M25 (the 117 mile long motorway that circles London) whilst believing he was on his way from London to Liverpool; he kept waiting for the familiar signs of

approaching home territory but lacking them he just kept going until exhaustion overtook him. He failed to notice that the signs were repeating themselves. It is very easy with meditation practice to be similarly driving long and hard down the wrong road, failing to read the signs and taking appropriate action.

Another example is diligently boiling sand in the hope of getting rice; no matter how much effort we expend, or how careful we are in measuring it out and placing it on the hob, the efforts will not produce rice because the ingredients do not provide that possibility.

Thus if a meditation practice is labelled 'liberating' or if a teacher tells us 'this is right for you' or that 'this is the best method for the development of insight', it should be recognized that these are only words. It is up to the individual to test them out and see if the process does indeed work that way — is it rice or sand in the packet?

3.3. Perception of poor or absent results

The third aspect of 'wrong striving' is believing in the perception of having received poor results, or indeed that the mind is worse since beginning to practise meditation. A frustrated or disappointed meditator can judge their practice as having been fruitless when, without their realizing it, the truth is far from that. As a culture we have strong habits of self-deprecation, and anything like acknowledging one's achievements or reflecting on one's success (as in *cāgānussati,* recollection of one's generosity) is regarded with suspicion and looked upon with distaste as self-praise, inflatedness or pomposity. For example, there was a dedicated and long-term practitioner in the UK who habitually introduced himself as 'a failed Buddhist', albeit with a smile.

The Buddha, however, pointed out that progress can be happening without our realizing it. He gives a telling simile for this of the impressions slowly formed in the handle of a tool (at A 7.71):

> When a carpenter sees the impressions of their fingers and their thumb on the handle of their adze, they do not know, 'I have worn away so much of the adze handle today …' but when it has worn away, they know that it has worn away. So too, when one is intent upon development, even though one does not know, 'I have worn away so much of the mental outflows (*āsava*) today … but when they are worn away, one knows that they have worn away.'

One of the key elements in this simile is the noticing of the marks on the handle; it seems we fail to appreciate these, usually because we are too busy attending to the affairs of the day. For a meditator who makes the judgment that, 'I'm not getting anywhere in my practice', it is often enough to ask them, 'If you think back five years, ten years, and you compare how you receive criticism, or how you deal with angry feelings now, as compared to then — how do they compare? Has there been a change?' It is like asking the carpenter to look at the handle of the tool that they have used for many years; they usually see at once, 'Oh yes! I am much less defensive/reactive than I used to be.' It can be as obvious and distinctive as the fingermarks pressed into the wood.

Another common experience is: 'Since I started practising my mind has been getting worse.' Here is Ajahn Sumedho giving a description of the effects of meditation in the opening stages of a year-long solitary retreat in Thailand:

> I remember an experience I had in my first year of meditation in Thailand. I spent most of that year by myself in a little hut and the first few months were really terrible. All kinds of things kept coming up in my mind; obsessions, fears, terror and hatred. I'd never felt so much hatred. I'd never thought of myself as someone who hated people, but during those first few months of meditation it seemed I hated everybody. ... Then one afternoon I started having this strange vision — I thought I was going crazy, actually — I saw people walking off my brain. I saw my mother just walk out of my brain and into emptiness, disappear into space. Then my father and my sister followed. I actually saw these visions walking out of my head. I thought, 'I'm crazy! I've gone nuts!', but it wasn't an unpleasant experience. The next morning, when I woke from sleep and looked around, I felt that everything I saw was beautiful. Everything, even the most unbeautiful detail, was beautiful. I was in a state of awe. The hut itself was a crude structure, not beautiful by anyone's standards, but it looked to me like a palace. The scrubby-looking trees outside looked like a most beautiful forest. Sunbeams were streaming through the window onto a plastic dish, and the plastic dish looked beautiful! (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol. 1 p. 157)

Such accounts demonstrate that the process of spiritual development can be a struggle, but its fruits, in a mind-clearing letting go, can arise when one does not expect them.

3.4. Misdirection of effort

The last of the negative aspects of energy and goal-directedness to address is what might best be termed 'misdirection of effort'.

3.4.1. 'I shouldn't be experiencing anger etc. ...' — the need for peaceful coexistence/ radical acceptance

This misdirection has a couple of different dimensions, the first of which is more mundane and can be summed up in the assumption, for example: 'I shouldn't be experiencing this anger, this restlessness, and busy thoughts; I have to get rid of them so I can practise properly. After all, it says this in the *sutta*s repeatedly ...'; such as in the many passages describing the mindful overcoming of the five hindrances and entry into the four *jhāna*s (e.g. at M 27.18 (M I 181)).

Essentially what we are doing when we formulate such intentions ('I have to get rid of the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) so I can practise properly') is that we are endeavouring to climb over *this* in order to get to *that*; that is to say we unconsciously cultivate fear and aversion towards the hindrances that we think of as 'ours', with the aim of overcoming them and becoming a 'me' in some imagined better place beyond 'them', purified, happy and free.

This rejection based on fear and aversion tends to exacerbate and reify the perceived obstacles. In contrast, ironically, the best way to respond to the arising of the hindrances is to begin by radically, whole-heartedly accepting their presence — essentially to have loving-kindness (*mettā*) for them. In understanding the use of

the word 'accepting' here, it is important to distinguish between 'liking' and 'loving'. Ajahn Sumedho speaks on this issue thus:

> *Mettā* means you love your enemy; it doesn't mean you like your enemy. If somebody wants to kill you and you say, 'I like them', that is silly! But we can love them, meaning that we can refrain from unpleasant thoughts and vindictiveness .... That's what we mean by *mettā*.
>
> *Mettā* means not creating problems around existing conditions, allowing them to fade away, to cease. For example, when fear comes up in your mind, you can have *mettā* for the fear — meaning that you don't build up aversion to it, you can just accept its presence and allow it to cease. ...
>
> But with *mettā*, you are not blinding yourself to the faults and flaws in everything. You are just peacefully co-existing with them. You are not demanding that it be otherwise. So *mettā* sometimes needs to overlook what's wrong with yourself and everyone else — it doesn't mean that you don't notice those things, it means that you don't develop problems around them. You stop that kind of indulgence by being kind and patient — peacefully co-existing. (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol. 2, pp. 33–36)

Such peaceful co-existence, not dwelling in aversion, is an embodiment of the radical acceptance of the way things are in the present (*paccuppanna-dhamma*). Again ironically, it is through this kind of radical acceptance that the hindrances seem to be most effectively met, counteracted and transcended.

3.4.2. 'We are not doing something now in order to become ...'

The second type of misdirection of effort has a more supramundane focus, to do with attachment to and identification with time, place and feelings of self (*ahaṃ-kāra*, 'I-making', *mamaṃ-kāra,* 'mine-making'). It can be best characterized by the idea that: 'I need to do something now in order to become enlightened in the future'. Ajahn Sumedho reflects on this area:

> 'If I practise hard, I might get enlightened in the future' is another self-illusion, isn't it? ... This is a creation: words, concepts about me as a person, what I think I am and what I should do in order to become. This is all about time and personality, not Dhamma. When I get caught in personality and the sense of time, there is no *sati* anymore, but there is judgment, hope, despair — all this arises. So then *sati* is the gate to the Deathless. That is why learning to recognize, to realize this natural state of being, isn't about becoming enlightened in the future. It is about being: being the light itself, being awareness itself now, recognizing, not trying to become someone who is aware anymore, but just this, this sense of openness, receptivity, attentiveness. (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol. 4, p. 90)

4. The negative aspects of contentment

4.1. 'Buddhists shouldn't have desires'

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (S 56.11), and in many other places, the Buddha points to craving (*taṇhā*) as being the cause of suffering, the painful and stressful (*dukkha*):

> This is the Noble Truth of the cause of *dukkha*: it is craving that leads to new birth and is bound up with pleasure and lust, ever seeking fresh delight, now here, now there; namely craving for sense pleasure, craving for existence/becoming, and craving for non-existence/annihilation (non-becoming).

On account of *taṇhā* being named as the cause of *dukkha*, the erroneous message gets transmitted that all forms of intending, directing of attention, desiring, choosing, initiating of action, decision-making, indeed goal-directedness in all its forms should be demonized; they are all grouped together as aspects of *taṇhā* and thereby condemned as part of the problem of suffering. It as if by getting involved and choosing some action one pollutes reality; as Shelley puts it in Adonaïs:

> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
> Stains the white radiance of Eternity

Or as in T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock':

> Do I dare
> Disturb the universe?

It is a commonplace for teachers of Buddhism to be asked, often with plaintive earnestness, 'Buddhists shouldn't have desires, should they? I'm not supposed to want anything, isn't that right?' Or in the workplace, when one's colleagues are aware that one is a practitioner of Buddhism, 'You can't ask for a raise — you're supposed to be a Buddhist!' In the media Buddhist values are regularly represented as fundamentally passive; for example, Buddhist teacher Ethan Nichtern describes the views of the philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek:

> [F]or Žižek, Buddhism, in the context of a Western consumer culture, allows the individual to believe he is transforming his mind without actually changing the conditions of suffering that shape the individual's society.
>
> (Ethan Nichtern, *Huffington Post*, 20-8-2010)

The demonizing of all forms of volition and desire then makes it seem as though Buddhist practice should be thoroughly passive, a quietist one of only watching and 'not doing', as if any action was interfering with 'the way things are'. This misinterpreting can then easily lead to, again, a well-intentioned but ultimately harmful result — to wit a freezing of one's natural responsivity to time, place and situation, creating a falsely abstracted would-be observer who is unable to adjust that which is being observed without feeling as though they are doing something wrong and 'not following the practice'.

This is an unfortunate misunderstanding but, even though it is common, it should be surprising that it happens at all. Why? Because of the evidence of the life of the Buddha himself — the most eminent of enlightened beings. To be enlightened is not to be devoid of intentions and interests, or the ability to act, otherwise the Buddha would have never moved from the foot of the Bodhi tree and spent decades teaching others. This fact is clear evidence that our intentionality is part of 'the way things are' rather than an intrusion upon it.

In addition — as with the reification of the hindrances through aversion toward them — with respect to activity, contending against it to try to achieve some sort of über-abstracted observer state only serves to reify the role of action and engagement as the apparent disturber. One fails to realize that it is the attitude of contention that is causing the disturbance rather than the sense objects themselves. As Ajahn Chah puts it:

> It's the same with *saṅkhārā*. We say they disturb us, like when we sit in meditation and hear a sound. We think, 'Oh, that sound's bothering me.' If we understand that the sound bothers us then we suffer accordingly, if we investigate a little deeper, we will see that it's we who go out and disturb the sound! The sound is simply sound, if we understand like this then there's nothing more to it, we leave it be. (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, pp. 6-7)

So, the sounds of the world and action in the world need not be a disturbance. Or, to put it another way and to quote Seng-ts'an, in his 'Verses on the Faith Mind': 'When you try to stop activity to achieve passivity your very effort fills you with activity.' (Richard B. Clarke trans.)

4.2. Passivity/habituation/numbness

There is another aspect of the unskilful application of contentment that will be instructive to explore, this one related to the subject of §3.2, above — the making of efforts in an unreflective, unmindful way.

This is the issue of habituation to following a practice in a state of spiritual numbness — a blind belief that the method or practice will liberate and purify one if one just adheres to the behaviours required. It is a plodding along half-heartedly, dully content with the apparent lack of benefit. Whereas the subject of §3.2, above, dealt with making vigorous effort but in a fruitless way, and was thus related to the *nīvaraṇa* of restlessness (*uddhacca*), the present subject addresses practising with an unskilfully placid contentment and is thus related to the *nīvaraṇa* of sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*). It is a kind of contentment but it is one that can be obstructive since it eschews reflection on experience; it leads to engaging with meditation as a learnt behaviour that is followed out of mere habit, rather than being a method of genuine transformation. It is a kind of inept *saddhā* unbalanced by the faculty of *paññā*.

That said, there are times when a lessening of mental sharpness can be appropriate:

> I also used to think: 'My mind is too alert and bright; I've got so much restless movement in my mind.' Because I had always wanted to have an interesting personality, I trained myself in that direction and acquired all sorts of useless information and silly ideas, so I could be a charming, entertaining person. But that doesn't really count, it's useless in a monastery in North-East Thailand. ... Instead of becoming fascinating and charming ... I started looking at the water buffaloes, and wondering what went on in their minds. ... I'd think: 'That's what I need, to sit in my kuti, sweating through my robes, trying to imagine what a water buffalo is thinking.' So I'd sit and create in my mind an image of a water buffalo, becoming more stupid, more dull, more patient

> and less of a fascinating, clever and interesting personality.
>
> (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol. 1, p. 57)

Similarly, Venerable Sāriputta once observed:

> Having attained the perfection of wisdom, having great discernment and great thought, not dull (but) as though dull, he always wanders, quenched. (Thag. 1015, Norman trans.)

To the undiscerning, a person of great calm and equanimity can *seem* to have a dull mind.

5. The positive aspects of contentment

5.1. *Aggi Sutta*: the roles of tranquillity, concentration and equanimity

The Buddha describes the Seven Factors of Enlightenment *(bojjhaṅga)* using the symbol of tending a bonfire (S 46.53):

> 'On an occasion, bhikkhus, when the mind is excited, that is the wrong time to develop investigation of qualities ..., energy ..., rapture as a factor of enlightenment. Why is that? The excited mind is difficult to calm down by those things. Just as if a person, wanting to extinguish a great bonfire, were to place dry grass, dry cowdung and dry sticks on it ... Is it possible that they would be able to extinguish that great bonfire?'
>
> 'No, venerable sir.' ...
>
> 'On an occasion, bhikkhus, when the mind is excited, that is the right time to develop tranquility ..., concentration ..., equanimity as a factor for enlightenment. Why is that? The excited mind is easy to calm down by those things. Just as if a person, wanting to extinguish a great bonfire, were to place wet grass, wet cowdung and wet sticks on it ... Is it possible that they would be able to extinguish that great bonfire?'
>
> 'Yes, venerable sir.'

Thus these three mental attributes — tranquillity (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) — embody the calming and peaceful aspects of the enlightened mind, the mind that is free of all greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). This shows that, though contentment can have its drawbacks when wrongly applied, such calm and peaceful qualities must necessarily be in accord with Dhamma as well and, accordingly, should be considered as a *sine qua non* of the Buddhist path and goal.

5.2. *Dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti* — means and ends unified in Dhamma

The Buddha defines the first stage of enlightenment by using various criteria in the Pali Canon. One format that he employs is to speak of 'the four factors for stream entry'. These are listed (at S 55.5) as:

> Association with superior persons, Sāriputta, is a factor for stream-entry. Hearing the true Dhamma .... Careful attention .... Practice in accordance with the Dhamma is a factor for stream-entry. (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 1792)

The fourth on this list is *dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti*. This quality is of particular significance here as it echoes the point made above at §3.4.2, of not practising Dhamma with attitudes based on worldly principles. In the political and other spheres it is often touted that 'the end justifies the means', alongside such chestnuts as 'you have to be cruel to be kind' and 'all's well that ends well'.

According to the principle of *dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti* ('practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma') the opposite is held to be true; that is to say, if you use a forceful, contentious, agitated means, you cannot receive a peaceful result. The means and the end are directly related, unified, so that if a peaceful and energetic result is wished for, a means that matches that must be employed.

We can, correspondingly, go about our meditation with the same conflictive attitudes and find a similar result. If we try to wipe out the hindrances with aversion, or to become enlightened through ambitiousness, we will surely experience weariness and disappointment. Instead, if the qualities of contentment and goal-directedness are fully balanced and embodied in accordance with Dhamma — i.e. devoid of the biases (*agati*) of desire (*chanda*), hatred (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*) and fear (*bhaya*; D 33.19) — one is using a peaceful and harmonious means so a corresponding result is likely to follow.

5.3. Contentment through seeing all wholesome states as impermanent and subject to cessation, that is, via insight

As the *sutta*s indicate, one way that the mind can be trained both energetically and contentedly is through the direct application of reflective wisdom (*yoniso manasikāra, paññā*) — the wisdom that keeps the making of effort in the context of Dhamma. This process is described in the *Aṭṭhakanagara Sutta* (M 52.4–14 [M I 350–352]).[3] Here the teaching elucidates how a deep contentment is continually refreshed through seeing all the wholesome states, of increasing refinement, as 'impermanent and subject to cessation' and thereby the mind is freed from attachment to them:

> Here, householder ... a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first *jhāna* .... He considers that and understands it thus: 'This first *jhāna* is conditioned and volitionally produced (*abhisaṅkhataṃ abhisañcetayitaṃ*), but whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation.' Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the *āsava*s (mental outflows).

This pattern is repeated in the *sutta* for all the *jhāna*s, up to the third of the *arūpa-jhāna*s, as well as including the sublime abidings (*brahma-vihāra*). All the way along, as the mind deepens its concentration, those states are mindfully recollected in the context of their essential nature — as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*) — as defined by the analysis of the Buddha in the 'Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self', the *Anattālakkhaṇa Sutta* (S 22.59, MV I.6.38–47). The reminder that each state is impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty of self and what belongs to a self brings a cooling, settling quality, even as the states develop in splendour and vastness.

3. Cf. Harvey paper in this collection, p. 24.

This is a contentment founded upon penetrative wisdom. Since it is based upon and incorporates wisdom, it embodies a subjective calmness, a coolness in the attitude, as well as a mundane calmness due to lack of disturbance in the objective world.

6. Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*) as the skilful alternative to *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*

6.1. Four aspects of Right Effort — right/left hand analogy

The presence of the positive aspects of goal-directedness and contentment outlined above (in §2 and §5 respectively) indicate that there are ways that effort can be made that are in accord with Dhamma and that don't contribute to greater discontent. The factor of the Noble Eightfold Path called Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*) comprises the essence of these ways.

Right Effort is made up of four qualities called, as mentioned above (S 43.12 and S 49.1 in §2.1), the four Right Strivings or Exertions (*samma-ppadhāna*). They are summarized as follows:

i. 'restraining'; directed at the nonarising of unarisen unwholesome states (*saṃvara-padhāna*)
ii. 'letting go'; directed at the abandoning of arisen unwholesome states (*pahāna-padhāna*)
iii. 'developing'; directed at the arising of unarisen wholesome states (*bhāvana-padhāna*)
iv. 'maintaining'; directed at the continuance of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecay, increase, expansion and fulfilment by development (*anurakkhana-padhāna*)

In the exploration of the negative effects of misapplied goal-directedness and contentment, there are two qualities that can be identified as underpinning most of these unsatisfying outcomes. These two are 'craving for existence/becoming' (*bhava-taṇhā*) and 'craving for non-existence/becoming or annihilation' (*vibhava-taṇhā*). The four *samma-ppadhāna* are the liberating counterpoint to the afflictive *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*.

Whereas *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* are permeated by conceit (*māna*) and self-view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), the four Right Strivings are free of them, otherwise they would not be 'Right' (*sammā*). *Vibhava-taṇhā* is an unskilful parallel to the first two of the Right Strivings; there is a restraining of the unwholesome that has not yet arisen and a letting go of anything unwholesome that has arisen, but no sense of I-making or mine-making obtrudes. It is not 'me' restraining or letting go, rather those actions are guided by mindfulness and wisdom (*sati-paññā*) attuned to the present reality. Similarly, *bhava-taṇhā* is an unskilful parallel to the second two of the Right Strivings; there is a deliberate bringing of the wholesome into being and the effort to maintain wholesome qualities that have arisen. Again, it is not 'me'

rousing and sustaining anything in order for 'me' to get somewhere or be something but, guided by *sati-paññā*, those efforts are made according to time and place and situation, conducing all the while to liberation.

Even though these qualities can bear a striking resemblance to each other — restraining and letting go can look like the desire to get rid of, while developing and maintaining can seem identical to the desire to become — they are rather understood to be like the leaves of the stinging and the dead nettle, they look alike but they are quite different plants. Perhaps a better simile is that of being like the left and right hand, exactly like each other in one way yet completely opposite in another.

6.2. *Chanda* compared to *taṅhā* and related to the four *iddhi-pāda*s

It was suggested above (in §4.1) that it was a mistake to consider all forms of intending, directing of attention, desiring, initiating of action or decision-making as being inimical to peace and liberation — even though that is a common misconception. This confusion has been exacerbated by the fact that two different words in the Pali have historically been translated into English as 'desire'. These are *taṇhā*, which we have already been looking at closely, while the other word is *chanda*. This latter term has variously been translated as 'desire', 'zeal', 'intention', 'will', 'interest', 'impulse', 'excitement', 'resolution', 'wish for' and 'delight in'. *Chanda,* in contrast to *taṇhā*, is essentially a neutral term, it signifies a directedness of interest or action but one that can be wholesome (e.g. *dhamma-chanda*, 'virtuous desire'), unwholesome (e.g. *kāma-chanda*, 'excitement of sensual pleasure', or *chanda* as one of the *agati*s, see above, §5.2) or neutral (e.g. as consent to the results of a community meeting). Thus one can have a wholesome desire for liberation, for example.

Since *taṇhā* is almost invariably unwholesome in nature, a better English word to use for it would be 'craving' as this latter term conveys a sense of self-centred agitation. One can have a craving for food or a cigarette but, if one is 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma' (*dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti*), one can't have a craving for enlightenment, at least not in the author's understanding of English usage.

Some of the misunderstandings about desire, goal-directed action, and their relationship to liberation have come about through the effects of translation but some have been there since ancient times. Here is a dialogue that took place in Kosambi between Ānanda and a layman called Uṇṇābha (at S 51.15). The layman asks Ānanda what the purpose of the holy life taught by the Buddha is. Ānanda explains that it is for the abandoning of 'desire' (*chanda*), and that the path that leads to this is the Four Bases of Spiritual Power, namely striving and concentration due to either desire (*chanda*), energy, mind or investigation. The laymen responds by saying, 'Such being the case, Master Ānanda, the situation is interminable, not terminable. It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself.' Ānanda replies by asking him whether, before coming to the park where they were, did he not have a desire, energy, thought and investigation related to going to the park, which then all subsided once he had reached the park? The layman accepts

that this was so, and Ānanda then says that it is the same with the desire etc. for arahantship.

The four qualities that Ānanda highlights here, when questioning Uṇṇābha and elucidating this area so skilfully, are the 'Four Bases of Spiritual Power' or 'Roads to Success' (*iddhi-pāda*) mentioned above in §2.1 (M 16.26 [M I 103]):

i. *chanda* = desire, zeal, interest
ii. *viriya* = energy, persistence
iii. *citta* = consideration, examination, planning
iv. *vimaṃsa* = investigation, review, reflection on results

In order to succeed at any task, the Buddha's teaching suggests that four factors need to be employed; (i) we need to be interested in the matter, (ii) we need to apply energy to getting it done, (iii) we need to think about how to best go about achieving the wished for result, and last and by no means least, (iv) we need to investigate if we have achieved our goal — this final factor provides the crucial feedback as to whether the action can be beneficially repeated in the future or some other action taken instead. These principles apply, again, irrespective of whether the task is wholesome (e.g. freeing the *citta* all of greed hatred and delusion), unwholesome (e.g. setting a bomb to go off in a public place) or neutral (e.g. baking a cake or going to visit a park).

6.3. The role of *sati* in the *bojjhaṅga*s and *indriya*s

As referred to above (at §3.4.2 and §6.1) mindfulness (*sati*) is a significant agent in the chemistry of liberation. Along with its role previously described, in the guiding of action that is free from self-view and conceit, it is the factor that balances the seven factors of enlightenment (*bojjhaṅga*): the three rousing ones — investigation of qualities (*dhamma-vicaya*), energy (*viriya*) and rapture (*pīti*); and the three calming ones — tranquillity (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). In the *Aggi Sutta* (S 46.53 — at §5.1), the discourse employing the image of tending the bonfire and the pertinence of particular enlightenment factors in different situations, at its very end the Buddha concludes his description by declaring that: 'But mindfulness, bhikkhus, I say is always useful.' (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 1607). In his endnote to this sentence (p. 1910), Bhikkhu Bodhi quotes the *Sāratthappakāsinī*, the Commentary to the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*:

> It is desirable everywhere, like salt and a versatile prime minister. Just as salt enhances the flavour of all curries, and just as a versatile prime minister accomplishes all tasks of state, so the restraining of the excited mind and the exerting of the sluggish mind are all achieved by mindfulness, and without mindfulness this could not be done.

Another instance of mindfulness (*sati*) being the great balancer is in the functioning of the Five Faculties, the *indriya*. The group is traditionally divided into the pairs of:

i. faith (*saddhā*) and wisdom (*paññā*)
ii. energy (*viriya*) and concentration (*samādhi*)

Mindfulness has the role of balancing the effects of these faculties with each other (*Visuddhimagga* IV.45–49). Thus it integrates how faith and wisdom need to inform each other; likewise it orders how energy and concentration work together to help the mind be both alert and tranquil simultaneously. The five together are sometimes compared to the wings of a bird, with faith and energy as one wing, while concentration and wisdom form the other, and with mindfulness in the centre as the life-source and integrative principle.

In the context of working with Right Effort and the Bases of Spiritual Power, it is mindfulness (*sati*) — often conjoined with its supportive collaborators 'full awareness' or 'clear comprehension' (*sampajañña*), and wisdom or understanding (*paññā*) — that interprets the moment-by-moment changes in subjective attitude and objective experience. It attunes the mind to the present experience and continually guides its intentions and actions, in order that all efforts made conduce to realization and liberation.

7. Making progress in accordance with Dhamma

7.1. Progress along the path: Being Dhamma

The progress along the path that most of us are familiar with, at least in its initial stages, is described in the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta* (at M 70.23 (M I 479–480)):

> Monks, I do not say that the attainment of final knowledge is all at once. Rather, the attainment of final knowledge is after gradual training, gradual practice, gradual progress. ... There is the case where, when faith has arisen, one visits [a teacher]. Having visited, one grows close. Having grown close, one lends an ear. Having lent an ear, one hears the Dhamma. Having heard the Dhamma, one remembers it. Remembering it, one gains a reflective acceptance of those Teachings. When one has gained a reflective acceptance of those Teachings, zeal arises. When zeal has arisen, one applies one's will. When one applies one's will, one contemplates. Having contemplated, one strives. Having striven, one realizes with the body the ultimate truth and, having penetrated it with wisdom, sees it.

This description shows the natural unfolding of progress, based on interest, faith, reflection and effort. It was characteristic of Ajahn Chah to take a classical formulation like this from the scriptures and to add his own flavour to it:

> First one learns Dharma, but does not yet understand it; then one understands, but has not yet practiced. One practices, but has not seen the truth of Dharma; then one sees Dharma, but one's being has not yet become Dharma. (*Being Dharma*, p. *xx*, Paul Breiter trans.)

This insightful addition is of such significance that it provided the title to this particular collection of Ajahn Chah's teachings. It underscores the relative nature of all concepts of progress and degeneration and articulates the need for the realization of Dhamma to ripen to the point where, as it were, it is 'the Dhamma realizing what this apparent "me" is, rather than "me" realizing the Dhamma.'

7.2. How to embody this principle?

So, how can one best embody this principle, use it to inform one's efforts and facilitate progress in accordance with Dhamma? The Buddha summed the core issue up in four words, for example in the 'Shorter Discourse on the Destruction of Craving', the *Cūḷataṇhāsankhaya Sutta* (at M 37.3 (M I 251), cf A 7.61 and S 35.80):

> Here, ruler of gods, a bhikkhu has heard that nothing is worth adhering to (*sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāya*). When a bhikkhu has heard [this], he directly knows everything; ... he fully understands everything; ... whatever feeling he feels, ... he abides contemplating impermanence in those feelings ... Contemplating thus, he does not cling to anything in the world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna.
>
> (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 344)

As long as that principle of non-grasping is sustained, and applied in every dimension, then progress will develop as fully and swiftly as possible and will be enacted with an attitude of restful ease along the way. The urge to grasp anything should be restrained (*saṃvara*) and if anything has been grasped, in the sense of clung to, it should be let go of (*pahāna*).

If the ideas of 'me progressing' or 'not progressing' are let go of with wisdom, then progress happens in accordance with Dhamma. Eventually all that remains is Dhamma aware of its own nature, the felt sense of which is called *Nibbāna*. This is the end.

Abbreviations

A	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*; translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston, Wisdom, 2012.
CV	*Cullavagga*; translated by I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline,* Part 5, London, Pali Text Society, 1952.
D	*Dīgha Nikāya*; translated by M. Walshe, *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 2nd revised edition, Boston, Wisdom, 1996.
M	*Majjhima Nikāya*; translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston, Wisdom, 1995.
MV	*Mahāvagga*; translated by I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline,* Part 4, London, Pali Text Society, 1951.
S	*Saṃyutta Nikāya;* translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston, Wisdom, 2005.
Thag.	*Theragāthā*; translated by K.R. Norman, *Elders' Verses I: Theragāthā*, London: Pali Text Society, 1969.

References to A and S are to *nipāta* or *saṃyutta* and *sutta* number. References to D and M are to *sutta* number and section within these as demarcated in the Walshe and Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi translations. As the M section numbers are not marked in other translations and the PTS Pali edition, Pali volume and page number are also given for M references. References to MV are to chapter, section and sub-section as marked in Horner's translation.

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