

Skillful Effort

Some dharma teachers may be reluctant to encourage students to make strong effort. The Buddha, however, wasn't at all shy about urging his disciples to put strong effort into their practice. The Buddha stressed the criticalness of making effort. In doing so, he often explained to his followers that he was exhorting them because he had compassion for them, because he wanted them to find an end to suffering.

It takes strong effort to practice the dharma. It takes strong effort to follow the Buddha's path. It isn't a path for the lazy or halfhearted. It isn't a path for anybody looking for an easy way out.

Like any meaningful undertaking dharma practice requires great effort. Think about anybody who's achieved a high level of proficiency in a particular area. Chances are, they've made exceptional effort. Very little in life is accomplished without a degree of perspiration, a good amount of effort. I recently watched an interview with a renowned guitar player. I'm always interested in listening to people who've attained virtuosity in their chosen field. In the interview the guitarist indicated that as he cultivated his skill he practiced eight hours every day. When we watch somebody display great expertise, it all may seem rather effortless; but the truth is, it takes a lot of practice, a lot of effort to reach that seemingly effortless state.

As dharma students we're asked to make strong effort. But we're asked to make a certain kind of effort: skillful effort. Our effort must be skillful.

During the course of our lives, most of us have probably had a rather unskillful relationship to the subject of effort. In making effort, in whatever context, we've probably cultivated bad habits. We've probably caused ourselves suffering. Most of us, of course, were never shown how to make skillful effort. It wasn't a subject that was taught in school. The people who served as models for us, parents, teachers, bosses, probably showed us how to make unskillful effort. In all likelihood we've learned ways of making effort that aren't useful in terms of finding true happiness in our lives.

You might want to take a few moments right now to reflect on the relationship you've had during your life to the quality of effort.

Put your attention on your breath. Have a sense of your body.

Reflect.

“What kind of relationship do I have to effort?”

“What have I learned in my life when it comes to effort?”

“Do I tend to make effort in an unskillful fashion?”

Allow the reflection to reside in the body. Let understanding form.

Many of us don't take a positive view of the subject of effort. This may be why dharma teachers don't like to talk too much about this particular skillful quality, why they don't urge students to make strong effort. Because students may have an historically problematic relationship to effort, because they may have a tendency to push themselves too hard, because they may have a tendency to be hard on themselves, because their habitual ways of making effort may be stress-producing, because they may have been pressed, treated unkindly by parents, teachers, etc., the inclination, for some teachers, may be to bypass the subject. But when teachers don't encourage students to make strong effort, they aren't doing students any favors.

To meet the needs of students who have a difficult relationship to the subject of effort, the solution isn't to ignore the subject. The solution is to teach students to make skillful effort.

As dharma practitioners we make effort in the service of abandoning the unskillful and developing the skillful.

As the Buddha explains:

"And what, monks, is right effort? **(i)** There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen. **(ii)** He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the abandonment of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen. **(iii)** He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen. **(iv)** He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen: This, monks, is called right effort." (SN 45.8)

In developing skillful effort we pay attention to: (1) the quantity of our effort and (2) the quality of our effort.

It's important to be mindful of the quantity of our effort. In practicing the dharma we have to make sure we're putting in the right amount of effort. Effort must be balanced. To this end we're asked, in developing skillful effort, to discern whether we're making too little effort or too much effort.

In observing the quantity of our effort, we examine the effort we're making on what we might call the "macro" and "micro" levels.

In examining our effort on the macro level, we step back and take a broad view of our practice. Assessing the quantity of your effort on the macro level, you may discern that you're not making enough effort. You may discern that you're not putting enough time into developing skillful qualities. You may discern that you're not putting enough effort into developing a specific skillful quality.

You may recognize that you need to make greater effort to practice breath meditation. You've been meditating perhaps four or five days a week. It's not enough, you realize. In order to develop sufficient concentration you're going to need to meditate every day.

You may perceive that you need to meditate for longer periods. You usually sit for about twenty minutes, but if you're going to move forward, you realize, you're going to need to meditate for at least thirty minutes every day.

You may conclude that you're not putting enough effort into practicing natural meditation. You're not keeping the breath in mind during the course of the day. You're not attempting to maintain present moment awareness. (We'll talk more about natural meditation in a later chapter.)

Conversely, you may discern that you're making too much effort.

You may discern that you're putting too much time into "closed eyes" practice. You've been sitting twice a day, for long stretches. You've been going on lots of retreats. You've been overdoing it, you realize. As a result, you've been neglecting other parts of your life. You haven't been taking much-needed actions with regard to your work life. You haven't been attending to important relationships. All the meditation, you see, isn't supporting your efforts to

end suffering. You need to cut back, reduce the amount of time you're spending on the proverbial cushion.

When we observe our effort on the micro level, we observe the effort we're making from moment to moment, as we're practicing the dharma. Scrutinizing your effort while meditating, you may discern that you're not applying sufficient effort. You're chasing after thoughts, going off on tangents, and you're not making much, if any, effort to bring your attention back to the breath. Recognizing that your effort is slack, you increase it. You turn it up.

We increase effort largely by inclining to the quality of effort. We assert the intention to make more effort. We tell ourselves: More effort. We have an innate ability for making effort. We have the skillful quality of effort. It may not be well-developed, but we have it. By inclining to this quality, shining the light of our awareness on it, we're able to connect to our capacity for making effort.

You can try it right now.

Have the intention to increase the effort you're putting into reading these words.

“More effort.”

Incline toward the skillful quality of effort.

As you're reading, apply increased effort.

Examining your effort on the micro level, you may notice, while practicing breath meditation, that you're making too much effort. You may notice that you're trying too hard. Gritting your teeth, dripping sweat, you're pushing like a jogger with a twisted ankle trying to run up a hill. This sort of over-efforting creates tension, dis-ease. It prevents you, in fact, from developing concentration.

Sometimes I notice, while I'm working with the phase of breath meditation known as "evaluation," that I'm trying too hard. In practicing "evaluation" we cultivate an easeful breath. Perhaps needless to say, my over-trying undermines my ability to cultivate a comfortable, easeful abiding. Aware that I'm pushing, I'll turn down my effort, soften it. Inclining my mind to the faculty of effort, I'll assert an intention to make less effort.

In the sutta, "About Sona," the Buddha explains how to cultivate skillful effort. Sona was a monk with a propensity for making an inordinate amount of effort. It seems he was putting so much effort into walking meditation that his feet were bleeding. Clearly, the way Sona was going about things wasn't working. And he was getting discouraged. In fact, he was considering giving up the monk's life.

When effort is unskillful, we often find dharma practice unpleasant, and, consequently, we often build up an aversion to the practice. The aversion frequently leads to doubt. We doubt our ability to practice. We doubt the practice itself. Many practitioners get caught in this syndrome. It's something to watch for. If your effort is unskillful, chances are you'll fall into this trap. You'll begin to dislike the practice. You'll begin to register doubt.

Luckily for Sona, the Buddha was clued in to his dilemma. He taught Sona to develop skillful effort:

"Now what do you think, Sona. Before, when you were a house-dweller, were you skilled at playing the vina?"

"Yes, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too taut, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too loose, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned to be right on pitch, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, Sona, over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence." (AN 6.55)

If effort isn't balanced, the Buddha says, we'll produce an untoward result, in the same way that a stringed instrument such as a vina (lute or guitar), if not tuned properly, will produce a dissonant sound. If the strings of a guitar are too tight or too loose, the effect will be unpleasant. It doesn't matter if the musician is profoundly talented; if Eric Clapton is playing a guitar that's out of tune, he isn't going to generate a pleasing sound. In dharma practice, if our effort isn't "in tune" we'll get similarly unpleasant results.

Like a musician who learns to detect when his guitar is out of tune, the dharma student learns to discern the "pitch" of his effort. When he notices he's making insufficient effort, he turns the effort up. He tightens the strings. When he's making too much effort, he turns it down, loosens the strings.

As dharma students cultivating skillful effort we learn to distinguish the “right” amount of effort. Not too little. Not too much. Just right. In tune. When we find the right pitch, our practice flourishes.

There have probably been times during your life, when you were involved in certain endeavors, when you didn’t mind making a lot of effort. You didn’t hesitate to make effort. In all likelihood your strong exertion was in the service of doing something you wanted to do, something you enjoyed. This was my experience when I played soccer in high school and college. The sport required much effort. Practices were often grueling, but I didn’t mind. To the contrary, I loved every minute of it. I loved the practices. I loved everything about the game. Putting effort into it wasn’t a problem; it was a joy.

In traversing the Buddha’s path, we have to learn to develop this same kind of heartfelt effort. We have to learn to practice heartfully. We have to learn to put our heart into the practice.

The heart quality that motivates dharma practice is compassion; we practice out of compassion for ourselves, so that we might end our suffering. In making effort, the quality of our effort must be skillful, driven by skillful intention, by compassion.

You may not have a heartfelt relationship to dharma practice; you may not be in the habit of making effort that’s informed by the heart, by compassion. But that’s okay; you can learn to put your heart into your practice.

It’s all about intention. If your intention is skillful, imbued with compassion, the quality of your effort will be skillful.

And you can develop skillful intention.

As you practice the dharma, it's important to pay close attention to the quality of your intention. Is your intention unskillful? Is it driven by unskillful mental factors, by desire, aversion, delusion? Or is it driven by love, compassion?

As you take a broad view, as you scrutinize your practice on the macro level, you may discern that the quality of your effort is unskillful.

You may discern that your effort is informed by unskillful desire. As a dharma student you must have a desire to follow the path. Without the desire to practice and achieve a true happiness, we won't get very far. The Buddha emphasized the importance of cultivating "skillful desire." But desire sometimes turns unskillful. You may, for instance, have a desire to get further along the path than, at the moment, you're ready to get. You may have a desire to achieve things that, at this point in your development, you're not ready to achieve. If you get caught in this kind of desire, your forward movement will in fact be hampered.

You may notice, in looking at your dharma practice on the macro level, that you have an aversive relationship to your practice. You're at odds with the practice.

You may discern that your intention is imbued with delusion. You're moving along the path like somebody moving through a thick fog. You're not quite sure where you're going.

In being mindful of your effort on the micro level (while practicing) you might see that your effort is corrupted by unskillful factors.

You might see that you're compelled by an excessive desire to obtain results. You're spending more time thinking about what you want from the practice rather than actually practicing. You're pushing too hard. You're getting frustrated when you don't achieve certain results. We might think of unskillful desire as "wanting what we don't have." While practicing breath meditation you might not be experiencing the jhana factors, ease, pleasure, and you may

begin to crave these states, your mind may be afflicted with a painful wanting. “Wanting results” is one of the primary manifestations of unskillful effort. This sort of wanting will only hinder your ability to cultivate concentration.

When desire becomes unskillful we often find ourselves trying to manufacture results, instead of putting our effort into developing the causes that will lead to results. In practice, this is where the effort is put: in developing the causes.

As you sit down to meditate, you may notice that you’re riddled with aversion. You don’t want to be doing what you’re doing. Like a kid who doesn’t want to play the piano, you’re practicing, but you’re not happy about it.

You might notice, while practicing at home, that you keep checking the clock, longing for the meditation to be finished. This is usually a sign that there’s aversion in your mind, that your intention has turned unskillful.

There may be times when you’re consumed with dread. During my early years of practice, I was frequently stricken with dread when I approached the meditation cushion.

You may discern, when meditating, that your intention is marred by delusion. You’re not in touch with any clear-cut intention. As you take your seat on the cushion or chair, you’re like somebody who’s been getting on the same commuter train every day for the past twenty years. You’re going through the motions.

As dharma students developing skillful effort, we seek to purify our intention. We recognize when our intention is unskillful, infused with desire, aversion, delusion. In recognizing our intention, we assume the role of the observer. We step back from the unskillful mental quality, observe it. We get some distance from it. We stop feeding it. The unskillful quality, in turn, begins to lose its power.

Abandoning unskillful intention, we develop skillful intention.

As we've said, we develop skillful intention by: (1) asserting directed thought and (2) connecting to a felt sense.

Taking the broad view, considering our practice on the macro level, we establish a skillful resolve. We resolve to follow the path out of compassion for ourselves, so that we might come to the end of suffering.

On the micro level, we develop a skillful intention whenever we make an effort to cultivate skillful qualities, concentration, insight.

When we sit down to meditate, we see what the mind is like. Then we set a skillful intention. We assert that we're going to practice mindfulness of breathing, and we're going to practice out of compassion for ourselves. We connect to a felt sense of the heart, the feeling of compassion.

It's important to set a skillful intention at the beginning of every period of formal meditation. In teaching mindfulness of breathing, I always emphasize the importance of setting intention. If we remember to set a heartfelt intention every time we practice breath meditation, it will make a significant difference. It will put us on the right track. It will put us on the path.

After my morning meditation and before attending to the day's affairs, I'll set an intention to practice natural meditation as the day goes on. Asserting directed thought, I'll say something along the lines of: I'm going to make an effort to keep the breath in mind throughout the day. I'm going to practice natural meditation out of compassion for myself. I'll put my attention on my heart center and apprehend a felt sense of compassion.

During the day I'll check my intention, I'll look to see if I'm staying to it, if I'm making a wholehearted effort to keep the breath in mind. If I see that I've lost the thread, I'll re-set my intention.

In order to move forward toward a greater happiness, we have to learn to make skillful effort. It's such an important element of the path. When effort is unskillful, our ability to move forward is greatly diminished. Think about Sona. Plagued by his out-of-tune effort, he came close to forsaking the dharma.

In many ways, it's the skillfulness of our effort that determines our ability to go on. When effort is skillful, we keep going.

Sona, in fact, became fully enlightened, an arahant, not long after he learned to adjust his effort. And although we might not become arahants, we'll certainly come to know the fruits of the path if we learn to make skillful effort.

Determination: Traveling the Long Road

The skillful quality of determination is characterized by the effort we make to practice the dharma over a period of time. Developing determination, we make ongoing, persistent effort. In breath meditation. During retreats. During the course of our days as we maintain mindfulness of the breath. During the long journey, the span of days, weeks, months, years, as we seek to abandon the unskillful and cultivate the skillful. We keep going. We stay with it.

Determination is an elemental skillful quality because dharma practice, by its nature, requires that we make effort over the long haul. Dharma practice is a gradual undertaking. It's a process that unfolds, usually pretty slowly, over time. As one teacher puts it, as we follow the path we experience a "gradual awakening." The Buddha compared the way the path unfolds, the way we evolve, the way our skills develop, to the way the ocean floor slopes: gradually, gradually, gradually.

Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way this Doctrine and Discipline has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to gnosis only after a long stretch. (Ud 5.5)

Generally speaking, we make slow progress. This is important to understand and to accept. If we expect to get on a fast track, we'll be setting ourselves up for struggle; we'll get bogged down by disappointment and frustration and self-doubt, and we'll inhibit our capacity to move forward. In the end, we won't get very far at all. The fact is, it's going to take a while to change the habits of a lifetime. Most of us are lugging heavy parcels of karma, all the consequences of our past actions, our tendencies for acting unskillfully, our deeply grooved patterns. It's going to take time. It's going to take time to develop skillfulness, train the mind, end suffering, find true happiness. It's a long road. Understanding this, we develop determination.

Cultivating the skillful quality of determination, we keep going, day after day, week after week, year after year. Realizing it's going to take an ongoing effort, we keep making effort. We keep at it. Skillfully. Joyfully.

It's a long road. And there will be times, undoubtedly many times, when you'll veer off the road. You'll veer off while practicing breath meditation. You'll lose purchase on the breath, veer off into daydreams, fantasies, planning, reminiscing. You'll be in your apartment in Brooklyn, meditating, but in your mind you'll be lying on a beach somewhere in Spain. In the middle of July, you'll be sitting on your meditation cushion, deeply involved in planning for Thanksgiving dinner.

As the months and years go on, there will be times when you'll lose the path. There will be times when you'll be detoured by the affairs of your householder's life, your work, your relationships. There will be times when you'll be sidetracked by your desire to follow the ways of the world, to seek after sense pleasure, gain, status, praise. There will be times when you'll stagger down the painful roads of depression, despair, grief, stress, anger, resentment, desire. There will be times when you'll find it difficult to put effort into developing skillful qualities

(there will be times, almost certainly, when you'll put a concerted effort into developing unskillful qualities). There will be times when you'll have a hard time getting to the proverbial cushion, when you'll struggle to maintain your meditation practice. There will be times when you'll lose interest in the path. There will be times when you'll lose faith.

All of this is normal.

The fact is, everybody veers. The dharma student who has developed determination isn't somebody who doesn't veer; rather, he's someone who veers but then gets back on the path. This is how we cultivate determination: we veer but then, realizing we've veered, we make an effort to get back to the path.

We cultivate determination by making the effort, again and again, to regain the path.

As we practice breath meditation, we develop the quality of determination. The mind wanders incessantly. But we keep coming back, returning our attention to the breath. Again and again, we return.

In practicing the dharma over the course of weeks, months, years, we do the same thing. We keep coming back. When we veer off, we return to the path. We keep returning.

We cultivate determination by being mindful, by paying attention to what we're doing, where we're going. We notice when we've veered off. We're truthful about it.

Acknowledging that we've turned down a side road, we might take some time to reflect, to ask some simple but pointed questions.

What am I doing?

Where am I?

Where am I going?

Is this the most useful course to be taking?

Am I acting out of love and compassion for myself in following this road?

What's my most heartfelt wish for myself?

How can I most skillfully, most happily, take care of myself?

What's my intention for practicing the dharma?

The questions guide us. When we veer off the path, they re-orient us. They help us recognize, or re-recognize, where we want to go and why we want to go there. We ask the questions, but don't answer. Instead, we let the questions resound, move in gentle waves through the body. We foster embodied knowing, felt wisdom. When we live in the questions, as the poet Rilke advises, we begin to know, in the heart, what we've got to do.

After veering off the Buddha's road, we should reflect on our purpose, our intention for practicing the dharma. This is a crucial step in regaining the road. We should remind ourselves of why we practice. We should remind ourselves that we follow the path out of compassion for ourselves.

The bottom line is we make an effort to follow the path, we stay with it, day after day, year after year, because we suffer, because we want to come to the end of suffering. As we strive to regain the road we should remember that there's suffering in our lives and that we have a wish to find freedom from it. We should, in returning, connect to the heart, to the quality of compassion. Compassion for ourselves. Compassion is the heart's response to suffering. Compassion drives us, motivates us to practice the dharma in an effort to end our suffering. Compassion informs our journey toward true happiness. It empowers our intention.

Re-finding the path, you should establish clear intention: to practice the dharma out of compassion for yourself. If you don't develop skillful intention, you'll return, in all likelihood, influenced by an unskillful mental factor. You'll return, perhaps begrudgingly, like a kid who's

been apprehended by the truant officer. You'll come back weighed down by self-judgment. You'll be stricken with regret or guilt or shame. You'll be afflicted with self-doubt.

After you've veered off the path, you might judge yourself. Self-judgment, it's critical to remember, is a major obstacle to moving forward in dharma practice. If you allow yourself to wander into self-judgment, it will be more difficult for you to get back on the path. As you make a determined effort to return to the path, you have to watch out for self-judgment. You have to make it a point to put aside thinking imbued with this kind of unskillful judgment. You have to replace self-judgment with compassion for yourself. In light of the fact that you've drifted from the road, you should have compassion for yourself. Compassion is the appropriate response.

As we travel the long road we'll find ourselves again and again confronted with the choice of following the Buddha's path or the world's path, the path of sense pleasure, gain, status, praise. We might face that choice every morning, as we consider whether to meditate or switch on the TV and watch the news. As we continue forward in dharma practice we acquire a deeper understanding of our choices. We begin to understand that the choice of which road to follow isn't much of a choice at all.

Gradually, we come to see with greater clarity that the Buddha's path offers the more beneficial option. Gradually, we veer less. We gain conviction in the path.

The path is often difficult, but as we move forward we realize that we don't have much choice but to follow it. What else are we going to do? Are we going to turn around and head back to where we were? Are we going to go back to the sort of life we had before? Gradually, we realize that it's a no-brainer. We know what we've got to do. And we do it. We keep at it. We keep going.

Complacency

As a teacher, I've been blessed to have students who've demonstrated great determination. They've stayed with it. They've kept practicing year after year.

I've been fortunate, as guiding teacher of DMC, to be able to work with a good number of students for many years. In the process I've come to see that the challenges faced by veteran practitioners take distinct shapes. After practicing eight, nine, ten years, students are often subject to complacency.

As a dharma student making effort over the long haul, you have to take stock on a regular basis. You have to practice circumspection. Circumspection is the capacity to self-monitor, to be mindful of the state of your practice, where it is, what direction its going in. It's a key skill, essential to the development of determination.

As you get further down the road, you have to watch for complacency. You have to check to see if you're resting on your laurels.

You have to learn to ask:

Where am I in my practice?

Am I continuing to move forward?

Is my practice stagnant?

Am I complacent?

Am I continuing to grow?

What do I need to do in order to grow?

In practicing the dharma, you have to keep moving forward. You can't stand still. You have to keep moving. You have to keep growing, always. If you don't continue to grow, your practice will deteriorate, wither.

As dharma students cultivating determination, we notice when we're standing still and, in turn, we ascertain what we have to do to get ourselves moving forward. This is a key aspect of the skill of developing determination: seeing what we need to do, what adjustments we need to make, so that we might get further down the road. Working with a teacher in deciding a course of action is always advised. It's often hard to see exactly where we have to go; a wise being, such as a teacher, can provide the needed guidance.

If your dharma practice has become stagnant, flat, you may need to take some time to re-establish your resolve; you may need to review your intention, remind yourself why you're following the path. Often times, when mired in complacency, we've lost sight of our intention. The weather in the mind has turned murky, cloudy; the mind is afflicted by delusion.

In the service of renewing your intention, you might ask some pertinent questions:

Why am I following the path?

What is my intention for practicing the dharma?

What is my purpose in developing skillful qualities, concentration, insight?

Is there suffering in my life?

What do I want for myself in my life?

It may be useful, in renewing your resolve, to reflect on the truth of your suffering (of course, this must be done calmly, objectively). In reflecting, recognize that there's suffering in your life, the suffering that comes from wanting what you don't have and not wanting what you do have. In other words, the suffering in the mind, the mind infected with desire and aversion. Reflecting, open to the truth: the truth of your suffering. Put your attention on your body. Feel the truth in your body, in your heart. Recognize that you're not yet where you'd like to be. There's still suffering. There's still work to do. As you acknowledge your suffering, connect to the wish that you have to be free from it. Feel compassion for yourself.

In the final analysis, you move beyond complacency, you move forward, out of compassion for yourself.

In confronting your complacency, you may recognize that you need to increase your effort. You need to put more time into abandoning the unskillful and developing the skillful.

At times, when you've fallen into the rut of complacency, you may perceive that you need to make changes in your practice. You may perceive that there are elements of the path that you haven't given enough attention to, haven't developed. You may determine that you need to build your skill in these areas.

You may decide that there are certain skillful qualities that you need to cultivate, that you need to fortify, strengthen.

You may decide that you need to strengthen your breath meditation practice.

You may recognize that you need to make a deeper commitment to keeping the breath in mind in all postures, while engaging in the activities of your householder's life.

There have been various times when, realizing my practice was stalled, I've decided to make changes. Sometimes I've made small shifts. Other times I've made significant changes in my dharma practice.

After practicing the dharma for about ten years, I realized I'd reached a plateau. I wasn't moving forward. I was struggling with certain forms of suffering that I wasn't able to transform. Eventually I decided that I was going to have to learn to cultivate stronger concentration. I was going to have learn to cultivate jhana. I wasn't going to be able to move forward, end suffering and find true happiness if I didn't learn to develop much better concentration.

I began to learn to practice mindfulness of breathing, anapanasati, in the manner the Buddha suggested. Following Ajaan Lee's instructions for practicing mindfulness of breathing, I began to learn to cultivate jhana. It took a great deal of effort. I had to learn a new method for practicing breath meditation. But gradually, with the help of my teacher, I began to learn the method. And, of course, I'm still learning. (In learning breath meditation, we engage in an ongoing process; there's no room for complacency. It's said that Ajaan Lee himself, one of the foremost masters in Thailand, was still developing his practice right up to the time of his death.)

In the years that have followed, I've been able to develop much stronger concentration. I still have a ways to go, to be sure. But I'm getting there.

The important thing is, I'm moving forward. I'm continuing to grow.

Of course, as we move forward we don't want to move too quickly. We have to be careful not to try too hard to get further down the road. We have to be careful not to make too much effort.

The Buddha, asked how he crossed over the flood (a metaphor for attaining awakening), captured the essence of determined effort.

"Tell me, dear sir, how you crossed over the flood."

"I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

"But how, dear sir, did you cross over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place?"

"When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

(SN 1.1)

This pretty much says it all. We don't stay in place. If we stay in place, we'll sink, we'll never cross over the flood.

At the same time, we don't push too hard.

I can't help but think of my grandmother when I consider the skillful quality of determination. She was somebody with many good qualities. She wasn't familiar with the Buddha's teachings; her goodness shined through effortlessly. I lived with her for a while when I was an adolescent. It was a difficult period. I was riddled with anger and depression. I wasn't easy to be around. But my grandmother related to me, unfailingly, with kindness, compassion.

She lived to be 100 (an act of determination in itself). At the party celebrating her 100th birthday, I had the privilege of offering the "keynote speech." I explained that it was a blessing to have had her in my life. I talked about my grandmother's unswerving goodness. After I made my speech, others made comments. They all spoke about my grandmother's remarkable character. Finally my grandmother stood up and, in her wholehearted way, made her own speech (she was sharp as a tack, right to the end). As she went on, she remarked, "I really do appreciate

what Peter said, and what everybody said. But I have to say, I'm not always that nice to the people in the nursing home. I get persnickety sometimes. I say things I shouldn't. I realize I've got to do better. It's something I'm going to work on."

Now that's determination! After 100 years, my grandmother wasn't going to rest on her laurels. She was still willing to grow. She was determined, after a century of life, to continue to develop her good qualities.

-from *The Skill of Living*.....

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