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**‘Buddhist Path, Buddhist Teachings:
Studies in Memory of L.S. Cousins’**

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‘I’m Not Getting Anywhere with my Meditation...’

**– Effort, Contentment and Goal-directedness
in the Process of Mind-training**

Amaro Bhikkhu

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1. Introduction

The words that form the title of this article will be familiar to most people practising meditation as well as to those who are also teaching it in the West. Ours is 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, the process of applying effort and experiencing its consequences, 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, and so deeply unsatisfactory, 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 goal-directedness and exertion

2a. *Aggi Sutta*: the roles of investigation, energy and rapture

In the *Aggi Sutta* (S 46.53) the Buddha describes the Seven Factors of Enlightenment and their functioning by using the symbol of tending a bonfire:

'On an occasion, bhikkhus, when the mind is sluggish, that is the wrong time to develop tranquillity ..., concentration ..., equanimity as a factor of enlightenment. Why is that? The sluggish mind is difficult to arouse by those mental qualities. Just as if a person, wanting to make a small fire flare up, were to place wet grass, wet cowdung and wet sticks on it ... Is it possible that they would be able to make the small fire flare up?'

'No, venerable sir.' ...

'On an occasion, bhikkhus, when the mind is sluggish, that is the right time to develop investigation of qualities ..., energy ..., rapture as a factor for enlightenment. Why is that? The sluggish mind is easy to arouse by those mental qualities. Just as if a person, wanting to make a small fire flare up, were to place dry grass, dry cowdung and dry sticks on it ... Is it possible that they would be able to make the small fire flare up?'

‘Yes, venerable sir.’

These three mental attributes – investigation of qualities (*dhamma-vicaya*), energy (*virīya*) and rapture (*pīti*) – thus embody the energetic and goal-orienting aspects of the mind aspiring to enlightenment, the mind that is free of all greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). This shows that such exploratory engagement and arousal must necessarily be in accord with Dhamma and a *sine qua non* of the spiritual goal as described by the Buddha.

2b. 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 (*viriyam*), 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)

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 in the same way, 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.)

In the *Cetokhila Sutta*, ‘The Wilderness of the Heart’ (M 16.26), 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 (*virīya*) and determined striving; ... consisting in concentration due to [purity of] mind (*citta*) and determined striving; ... consisting in concentration due to investigation (*vimamsa*) and determined striving. And enthusiasm (*ussolhi*) is the fifth. (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 197)

As a final example we have the oft-repeated pattern of spiritual progress in a monastic disciple of the Buddha, a process replete with the employment of the mind's capacity to be directed, firstly to abandon the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) and then to cultivate the various states of absorption (*jhāna*), then culminating in directing and inclining the mind to the realization of the Three Knowledges (*tevijja*) and thereby the 'fulfilment of the holy life'. A good example of this progress is described in the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, 'The Shorter Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint' (M 27.17-26). Thus it is the application of effort and energy, in a very specifically directed set of ways, that leads to the consummation of the Buddhist Path and the realization of its goal.

2c. 'Just do it!'

As a more colloquial expression of the same principle, of the necessity for personal application 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 and a highly regarded teacher:

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. But don't hurry, if you just sit there watching to see what will happen, you'll be wasting your time. So be careful, 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 259-62)

3. The negative aspects of energy 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 frustration and disappointment with their efforts of their practice?

3a. 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 quite 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 realized liberation.

The first problem is thus that of attaching to the idea of goodness, or 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), 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, any distinction in knowledge or vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to Awakening?’ (Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro trans.)

In a similar vein there is the story in the books of the Vinaya discipline (MV 5.1.14–17) where the delicately reared Soṇa Koḷivisa goes at his walking meditation with such gusto that his feet are torn open and bleeding. The Buddha goes to see him, in order to offer some 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 (*accāraddhavīriyaṃ uddhaccāya saṃvattati, atilīnavīriyaṃ 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 in modern times. Here is some advice from some experienced teachers of this era, addressing the same area of misdirected urgency and enthusiasm. Firstly, Ajahn Mun, the reviver of the Forest Meditation tradition in Thailand, in the late 19th and early 20th century:

Wanting what’s good, without stop:

That's the cause of suffering.
It's a great fault: the strong fear of bad.
'Good' & '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 & 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. 281-82)

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. ... If the journey is just an act of will and ego, of course, it takes you to madness. You keep bashing away, knocking about in your mind. With the ego you're just caught in a trap. It seems a web of madness, hard to see beyond, or ever extricate yourself from. So meditation isn't something we do to attain or achieve or get rid of anything, but to realize. (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol. 1. p. 75)

In short, to quote Seng-ts'an, the Third Patriarch of the Ch'an lineage in China, in his *Hsin Hsin Ming*, or 'Verses on the Faith Mind':

To set up what you like against what you dislike
is the disease of the mind.

(Richard B. Clarke trans.)

3b. Mindless/unreflective 'wrong striving'

The second aspect of what can be called 'wrong striving' is not so much 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 it is based on, for example, obedience to a method out of blind devotion: 'The teacher told me to do mindfulness of breathing like this 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 burning out 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 (*dhamma-vicaya*) or examination of results (*vimaṃsa*), those long and patient efforts can well be experienced as futile. To use the Buddha's own phrase, 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, a few years ago, 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 or how often we try it, 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 teacher tells us 'this is right for you' or that 'this is the best method for the development of insight for everyone', 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?

3c. Perception of poor or absent results

The third aspect of 'wrong striving' is believing in the perception of having received poor or no results, or indeed that the mind is getting worse since one began 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 or liberality (as in *cāganussati*) 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 this country who habitually introduced himself as 'a failed Buddhist', albeit with a smile.

The Buddha, however, pointed out that progress can indeed be happening without our recognition of 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 been worn away, they know that it has been 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 been 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, perhaps because we are too busy attending to the cutting edge meeting the material of the day. For a meditator who makes the judgement 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 now, or how you deal with angry feelings now, as compared to then – how do they sit beside each other? Has there been a change?' It is like asking the carpenter to look at the handle of their own tool that they have not made note of 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 that of: '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. I couldn't think of anything nice about anyone, there was so much aversion coming up into consciousness. 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.

The Buddha described four modes that Dhamma practice can take shape in (A 4.161), the first two of these are painful:

Bhikkhus, there are these four modes of practice. What four?

- 1) practice that is painful with sluggish direct knowledge (*dukkhā paṭipadā dandhābhiññā*);
- 2) practice that is painful with quick direct knowledge (*dukkhā paṭipadā khippābhiññā*);
- 3) practice that is pleasant with sluggish direct knowledge (*sukhā paṭipadā dandhābhiññā*);

- 4) practice that is pleasant with quick direct knowledge (*sukhā paṭipadā khippābhiññā*);
These are the four modes of practice. (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 528)

It thus behoves the meditator to take into account that they have a body with certain tendencies and needs, while the accumulated habits that are the results of past actions and experiences will necessarily have their effects as well. The speed and ease, or lack thereof, with which the practice of meditation ripens is going to be dependent upon these and many other factors, a large proportion of which will be out of the present control of the individual. A meditator should therefore be prepared for the effects of those deep-seated aspects of conditioning to become apparent. Again, it is often enough to ask a person if it might not be the case that they have been carrying around an accumulation of habits and needs but, because of constantly a) placating them or b) ignoring them, that they have not been aware of their presence. As if one had been carrying around a suitcase bulging with possessions, treasures and obligations and had only just opened it and cognized what it contained.

Ajahn Chah here speaks candidly about his early endeavours at meditation in the monastery environment, encountering the passions of the youthful mind:

This is why I say that what people call practice (*patibaht* ปฏิบัติ in Thai) is not really practice, it's disaster (*vibaht* วิบัติ), if you don't stop and take a look, don't try the practice, you won't see, you won't attain the Dhamma. To put it straight, in our practice you have to commit your very life. It's not that it isn't difficult, this practice has to entail some suffering. Especially in the first year or two, there's a lot of suffering. The young monks and novices really have a hard time.

I've had a lot of difficulties in the past, especially with food. What can you expect? Becoming a monk at twenty when you are just getting into your food and sleep, some days I would sit alone and just dream of food. I'd want to eat bananas in syrup, or papaya salad, and my saliva would start to run. This is part of the training. All these things are not easy. ...

My meditation in the first year was nothing else, just food. I was so restless. Sometimes I would sit there and it was almost as if I was actually popping bananas into my mouth. I could almost feel myself breaking the bananas into pieces and putting them in my mouth. And this is all part of the practice. (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, p. 580)

Just as when one takes on the task of washing a well-used cooking pot; there can be years of charred and baked-on grime there that has up to now been ignored. When one decides to give it a proper cleaning, in that process there will inevitably be a lot of unappealing gunk that is released. Similarly, when one looks directly into the mind and decides to guide it towards wakefulness and peace, the equivalent layers of 'baked-on' habits and physical needs can be pretty gunky.

3d. 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’.

3d.i. ‘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 thought that, for example: ‘I shouldn’t be experiencing this anger, this restlessness, selfishness and these busy thoughts; I have to get rid of them so I can practise properly. After all, it says this in the *suttas* over and over again...’; such as in the many passages describing the mindful overcoming of the five hindrances and entry into the four *jhānas* (e.g. at M 27.18).

Essentially what we are doing when we formulate such an intention (‘I have to get rid of the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) so I can practise properly’) is that we are to 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 on the other side of ‘them’, purified, happy and free.

This rejection based on fear and aversion tends to exacerbate and reify the perceived obstacles. In contrast, and somewhat ironically, the best way to respond to the arising of any 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 to this issue thus:

In English the word ‘love’ often refers to ‘something that I like.’ For example, ‘I love sticky rice’, ‘I love sweet mango.’ We really mean we like it. Liking is being attached to something such as food which we really like or enjoy eating. We don’t love it. *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, from any desire to hurt them or annihilate them. That’s what we mean by *mettā*.

Sometimes there are things one doesn’t like about oneself, but *mettā* means not being caught up in the thoughts we have, the attitudes, the problems, the thoughts and feelings of the mind. So it becomes an immediate practice of being very mindful. To be mindful means to have *mettā* towards the fear in your mind, or the anger, or the jealousy. *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 this present reality (*paccuppanna-dhamma*). Again ironically, it is through this kind of radical acceptance that the hindrances seem to be most effectively met, counteracted and effectively transcended. This principle is echoed in the Buddha's description of the third foundation of mindfulness – *cittānupassanā* (as at D 22.12, M 10.34):

And how, monks, does a monk abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a monk knows a lustful mind as lustful, a mind free of lust as free of lust; a hating mind as hating, a mind free of hate as free of hate; a deluded mind as deluded, an undeluded mind as undeluded. ...
... mindfulness that 'there is mind' is present just to the extent necessary for knowledge and awareness. (Maurice Walshe trans., p. 340)

It is noteworthy that the afflictive states – lust, hate, delusion – receive no value judgement here at all; rather the Buddha encourages the examination of these states in terms of being natural processes like any other. When this non-judgemental, accepting mindfulness is present then it can be recognized, for example that: 'The problem wasn't lust, it was the fear of being lustful...'; or 'My dullness in meditation wasn't caused by tiredness, it was because of self-hatred...'. Then, when the respective state (fear of lust or self-hatred in these instances), is acknowledged, wholeheartedly accepted, their quality of hindering falls away.

3d.ii. '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 has some very pertinent observations to offer on this area:

'If I practise hard I might get enlightened in the future' is another self-illusion, isn't it? 'I'm unenlightened now – if I practise hard I might get enlightened in the future.' 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 judgement, 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)

In the currency of everyday life 'becoming' is taken for granted; as an obvious example: 'I need to compose this essay in order to be able to offer it for the Lance Cousins memorial volume'. The 'I need to do *this* in order to achieve *that*' principle is part of everyone's life. However, if that is the sole context for practising Dhamma, which is repeatedly described by the Buddha as '*sandiṭṭhiko* – apparent here and now' and '*akāliko* – timeless', then the practice will be neglecting that timeless, 'apparent here and now' element.

The harder *I* sincerely try to get over *there*, caught in the habit of becoming, the more this timeless reality is missed, which is intrinsically ever-present. Therefore, true peace is unrealizable unless the perspective is expanded. As Sāriputta says in a dialogue with Ānanda (at A 10.7): 'The cessation of becoming is Nibbāna (*bhava-nirodho nibbānaṃ*).' The exercising of effort, free from the fetter of becoming, will be explored in more detail below.

4. The negative aspects of contentment

4a. 'Buddhists shouldn't have desires'

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (S 56.11), as well as 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 becoming, and craving for annihilation (non-becoming).

On account of this centrality 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 *Adonais*:

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 and scholars 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!' Even in the media Buddhist values can be represented as fundamentally passive; for example, here is Buddhist teacher Ethan Nichtern, describing 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 essentially only ever 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 responsiveness to time and place and situation, creating a falsely abstracted would-be observer who is unable to adjust the observed without feeling as though they are doing something wrong and 'not following the practice'.

This is a very unfortunate misunderstanding but, even though it is quite 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, for a student of Buddhism – without intentionality, initiative and choice, based on some form of wishing, how could an enlightened being like the Buddha have acted to establish the Saṅgha, including an order of nuns, decide to go to visit various places and talk creatively to people as he so often did? To be enlightened is thus 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. This fact points to the conclusion 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 fear and aversion for 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 a disturber. One fails to

realize that it is the attitude of contention and rejection that is causing the disturbance rather than the sense objects and the situation itself. 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 once more, 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.)

4b. Passivity/habituation/numbness

There is another aspect of the unskilful application of contentment that will be instructive to look at, this one related to the subject of §3b, above – the making of efforts in an unreflective, unmindful way.

This is the issue of habituation to following a practice or a training system 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 §3b, 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 profoundly 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 lack of such 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 could see there was no point in that – 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)

5. The positive aspects of contentment

5a. *Aggi Sutta*: the roles of tranquillity, concentration and equanimity

As mentioned above (in §2a), the Buddha describes the Seven Factors of Enlightenment 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 tranquillity ..., 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, even 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, contentment should also be considered as a *sine qua non* of the Buddhist path and goal.

5b. *Dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti* – means and ends unified in Dhamma

The Buddha defines the first stage of enlightenment by using various criteria in different parts of 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 §3d.ii, of not practising Dhamma with attitudes based solely on worldly principles. In the political arena, and many other spheres besides, it is often touted that ‘the end justifies the means’. This is something of a misquotation of a passage in Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, a work that, ironically, philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau vigorously maintained was a satirical work. Nevertheless, it is regularly employed as sage advice 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, for example, that if you use a forceful, contentious, agitated means, you cannot receive a peaceful result. The means and the end are directly related, unified effectively, so that if a peaceful and energetic result is wished for, a means that matches that must be employed.

It is very easy, with the best will in the world, for us to set someone straight ‘for their own good’; oblivious to the fact that we are motivated by our own self-righteousness and aversion. We might have convinced ourselves of our noble intentions, with all the relevant facts at our fingertips, with witnesses to prove our point, yet our effort only reaps more division and stress. As Ajahn Chah once put it, ‘You can be right in fact, but wrong in Dhamma.’

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 become enlightened through ambitiousness, we are bound to end up with 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*) – one is using a peaceful and harmonious means so a corresponding result is likely to follow.

5c. Contentment through seeing all wholesome states as impermanent and subject to cessation, that is, via insight

As the *suttas* indicate, one of the ways 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 all efforts in the context of Dhamma. The Buddha describes this process in the *Aṭṭhakanagara Sutta* (M 52.4–14). 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 (*abhisankhataṃ abhisāñcetaṃ*), but whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the *āsavas* (mental outflows).

This pattern is repeated in the *sutta* for all the *jhānas*, up to the third of the *arūpa-jhānas*, as well as including the sublime abidings (*brahma-vihāra*). All the way along, as the mind deepens its tranquillity and states of brightness and spaciousness, 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 *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta* (S 22.59, MV 1.6). 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.

This is a contentment founded upon a penetrative wisdom. Since it is based upon and incorporates the element of wisdom, it is more of a subjective calmness, a coolness in the attitude, rather than a simple 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*

6a. 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 fully 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 §2b), the four Right Strivings or Exertions (*samma-ppadhāna*). They can be summarized as follows:

- (i) ‘restraining’; directed at the non-arising of unarisen afflictive unwholesome states (*saṃvara-padhāna*);
- (ii) ‘letting go’; directed at the abandoning of arisen afflictive 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 non-decay, increase, expansion and fulfilment by development (*anurakkhana-padhāna*).

In the exploration of the negative effects of misapplied goal-directedness and misapplied contentment, as above, there are two qualities that can be identified as underpinning the majority of these unsatisfying outcomes. These two are ‘craving for becoming’ (*bhava-taṇhā*) and ‘craving for non-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 intrinsically free of them, otherwise they would not be ‘Right’ (*sammā*). *Vibhava-taṇhā* relates to the first two of the Right Strivings; there is a restraining of the unwholesome that has not yet arisen and a conscious 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*) according to attunement to the present reality. Similarly, *bhava-taṇhā* relates to the second two of the Right Strivings; there is a conscious, deliberate bringing of the wholesome into being and the effort to maintain any wholesome qualities that have arisen. Again, it is not ‘me’ rousing and sustaining anything in order for ‘me’ to get somewhere or get something but, guided by *sati-paññā*, those efforts are made according to time and place and situation, conducting all the while to liberation.

Even though these qualities can bear a striking resemblance to each other – restraining and letting go can look very like the desire to get rid of, while developing and maintaining can seem identical to the desire to become – they are to be understood to be like the leaves of the stinging nettle 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.

6b. *Chanda* compared to *taṇhā* and related to the four *iddhi-pādas*

It was suggested above (in §4a) that it was a mistake to consider that all forms of intending, directing of attention, desiring, choosing, initiating of action or decision-making were inimical to peace and liberation – even though that is a common misconception. This confusion has been exacerbated by the fact that there are two different words in the Pali that 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 *agatis*, see above, §5b.) or neutral (e.g. as simple consent to the results of a community meeting). Thus one can have a completely 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 carries a sense of self-centred agitation with it. One can have a craving for food or for 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 the time of the Buddha. 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 volitional formations of striving and concentration due to either desire (*chanda*), energy, mind or investigation. The layman 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 §2b (M 16.26):

- (i) *chanda* = desire, zeal, interest
- (ii) *virīya* = energy, persistence
- (iii) *citta* = consideration, examination, planning
- (iv) *vimaṃsa* = investigation, review, reflection on results

In order to succeed at any chosen task, the Buddha’s teaching suggests that these four factors all 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 whether we achieved our goal or not – 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 time bomb to go off in a public place) or neutral (e.g. baking a cake or going to visit a park).

Lastly in this section here are some words from Ajahn Chah, describing the exact same conundrum:

Why is the practice so difficult and arduous? Because of desires. As soon as we sit down to meditate we want to become peaceful, if we didn't want to find peace we wouldn't sit, we wouldn't practise. As soon as we sit down we want peace to be right there, but wanting the mind to be calm makes for confusion, and we feel restless. This is how it goes. So the Buddha says, 'Don't speak out of desire, don't sit out of desire, don't walk out of desire. Whatever you do, don't do it with desire.' Desire means wanting, if you don't want to do something you won't do it. If our practice reaches this point, we can get quite discouraged. How can we practise? As soon as we sit down there is desire in the mind.

It's because of this that the body and mind are difficult to observe, if they are not the self nor belonging to self, then who do they belong to? Because it's difficult to resolve these things, we must rely on wisdom. The Buddha says we must practise with 'letting go'. But if we let go, then we just don't practise, right? Because we've let go.

Suppose we went to buy some coconuts in the market, and while we were carrying them back someone asked:

'What did you buy those coconuts for?'

'I bought them to eat.'

'Are you going to eat the shells as well?'

'No.'

'I don't believe you. If you're not going to eat the shells then why did you buy them also?'

Well what do you say? How are you going to answer their question? We practise with desire, if we didn't have desire we wouldn't practise. Practising with desire is *taṇhā*. Contemplating in this way can give rise to wisdom, you know. For example, those coconuts: Are you going to eat the shells as well? Of course not. Then why do you take them? Because the time hasn't yet come for you to throw them away. They're useful for wrapping up the coconut in. If, after eating the coconut, you throw the shells away, there is no problem.

Our practice is like this. The Buddha said, 'Don't act on desire, don't speak from desire, don't eat with desire.' Standing, walking, sitting or reclining, whatever, don't do it with desire. This means to do it with detachment. It's just like buying the coconuts from the market. We're not going to eat the shells but it's not yet time to throw them away. We keep them first.

This is how the practice is. Concept (*sammuti*) and transcendence (*vimutti*) are co-existent, just like a coconut. The flesh, the husk and the shell are all together. When we buy a

coconut we buy the whole lot. if somebody wants to accuse us of eating coconut shells that's their business, we know what we're doing.

Wisdom is something each of us finds for ourselves. To see it we must go neither fast nor slow. What should we do? Go to where there is neither fast nor slow. Going fast or going slow is not the way. (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, pp 280-81)

6c. The role of *sati* in the *bojjhaṅgas* and *indriyas*

As referred to above (at §3d.ii and §6a) mindfulness (*sati*) is a significant agent in the chemistry of liberation. Along with its role previously described, in the guiding action that is free from self-view and conceit, it is the factor that balances all of the seven factors of enlightenment (as above, at §2a): 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 §2a and §5a), the discourse that employs the image of tending the bonfire, and the pertinence of particular enlightenment factors in particular 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 *Samyutta Nikāya* as saying:

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, insight or understanding (*paññā*) – that interprets the moment-by-moment changes in subjective attitude and objective experience. It attunes the mind to the present reality and continually guides its intentions and actions, in order that all efforts made conduce to realization and consequent liberation.

7) The transcendent view – positive and negative effects

7a. Two kinds of Right View

Even though it can be merely a figure of speech, to say 'I'm not getting anywhere with my meditation,' it can also betray a deeply set pattern of conditioning – the kind of conditioning referred to by Ajahn Sumedho when he spoke of the belief that, '... if I practise hard I might get enlightened in the future.' What he said in reference to that habitual view is worth repeating, '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 judgement, hope, despair – all this arises. So then *sati* is the gate to the Deathless.' This is pointing to the very idea of progress and how it unwittingly gets wrapped up in assumptions about time, self and location; how our noble efforts can get co-opted by habit and the practice of Dhamma is then cultivated in accord with self-view, rather than with Dhamma – it has ceased to be *dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti*. A comparable distinction is made by the Buddha, for instance in the discourse called The Great Forty, the *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* (M117.7-9):

And what is Right View? Right View, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is Right View with mental outflows, siding with merit, ripening on the side of attachment; and there is Right View that is noble, without mental outflows, transcendent, a factor of the path.

And what is Right View with mental outflows, siding with merit, ripening on the side of attachment? [There is the view] 'There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits and results of good and bad actions. There is this world and the next world. There is mother and father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are *samaṇas* and brahmins who, faring rightly and practising rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.' This is Right View with mental outflows, siding with merit, ripening on the side of attachment.

And what is Right View that is noble, without mental outflows, transcendent, a factor of the path? The wisdom, the faculty of wisdom, the power of wisdom, investigation of qualities as a factor of enlightenment, the path factor of Right View, in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is free of mental outflows, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the Right View that is noble, without mental outflows, transcendent, a factor of the path.

One makes an effort to abandon Wrong View and to enter upon Right View: this is one's

Right Effort. Mindfully one abandons Wrong View and mindfully one enters upon and abides in Right View: this is one's Right Mindfulness. Thus these three qualities – Right View, Right Effort and Right Mindfulness – run and circle around Right View.

In another passage quoted above, Ajahn Chah states, 'What should we do? Go to where there is neither fast nor slow. Going fast or going slow is not the way.' This was a frequent theme of his, especially in the latter years of his teaching career. Ajahn Chah's final message to Ajahn Sumedho which was sent by letter (a rare if not unique occurrence) in the summer of 1981. Shortly after this was received at Chithurst Forest Monastery in England, Ajahn Chah suffered the stroke that left him paralysed and mute for the last ten years of his life. He wrote:

Whenever you have feelings of love or hate for anything whatsoever, these will be your aides and partners in building pāramitā. The Buddha-Dhamma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. This, Sumedho, is your place of non-abiding. (*The Island*, p 162)

On another occasion Ajahn Chah stated:

When we know the truth of suffering, we throw out suffering. When we know the cause of suffering, then we don't create those causes, but instead practise to bring suffering to its cessation. The practice leading to the cessation of suffering is to see that 'this is not a self,' 'this is not me or them.' Seeing in this way enables suffering to cease. It's like reaching our destination and stopping. That's cessation. That's getting close to Nibbāna. To put it another way, going forward is suffering, retreating is suffering and stopping is suffering. Not going forward, not retreating and not stopping, is anything left? Body and mind cease here. This is the cessation of suffering. Hard to understand, isn't it? If we diligently and consistently study this teaching we will transcend things and reach understanding; there will be cessation. This is the ultimate teaching of the Buddha, it's the finishing point. The Buddha's teaching finishes at the point of total relinquishment. (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, p 165)

These statements evoke the spirit of one of the Buddha's most significant utterances on the nature of ultimate reality (*paramattha-sacca*). It is to be found in a collection of similar bold declarations, in the final chapter of the Udāna, called Pāṭali Village (Ud 8.1):

There is (*atthi*), bhikkhus, that sphere (*āyatana*) where there is no earth, no water, no fire nor wind; no sphere of infinity of space, of infinity of consciousness, of nothingness or even of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there, there is neither this world nor the other world, neither moon nor sun; this sphere I call neither a coming nor a going nor a staying

still, neither a dying nor a reappearance; it has no basis, no evolution and no support: this, just this, is the end of suffering (*dukkha*).

In effect, these ultimate reality teachings serve to pose such questions as, 'Where is there to get to, ultimately? And what is it that would be getting there?' These teachings remind the meditator to keep all efforts in the context of that higher, timeless truth, free of all attachments – the Dhamma which is 'apparent here and now'. Moreover, as has been helpfully pointed out by Peter Harvey in his book *The Selfless Mind - Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, the verb '*atthi*' associated with this statement indicates a timeless quality of being, rather than one representing 'time and personality'. The very wording of the inspired utterance resounds with the supramundane, transcendent (*lokuttara*) perspective:

It is notable that Ps.I.154 docs not list '*atthi*' or 'exists' among the synonyms of '*hoti*' in the context of questions on the *tathāgata* after death. All the synonyms are ones which suggest continuation in a world of change, i.e. in the conditioned world. '*Hoti*' is in fact a contracted form of '*bhavati*', meaning both 'is' and 'becomes', again suggesting a context of change. '*Hoti*' is the word used to say that one thing or person 'is' something or other, e.g. 'the brahmin is a minister' or 'the Self, unimpaired after death, is formless' (S. III.219). In sum. it is a word used of something continuing in a world of change, having a particular worldly identity. To say that a *tathāgata* beyond death '*hoti*' is to imply that he is a permanent Self which continues eternally in time, within the cycle of rebirths, and 'is' one or other conditioned phenomenon. This is inapplicable to a *tathāgata* whose nature is *nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* is said to 'exist (*atthi*)' (Ud. 80). but '*hoti*' is never applied to it. '*Atthi*', then, can be applied to that which 'exists' in a timeless sense, just as objectless discernment does. (Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, §13.23)

With some irony, it can thus be the case that it is the 'I want to make progress' fixation that is most obstructive to one's natural progress. If such desire to become is relinquished, progress will be realized, as quoted above, (at §3d(ii)): 'The cessation of becoming is *Nibbāna*.'

7b. Stillness flowing

Another expression used by Ajahn Chah in his latter years of teaching, was the image of what he called 'still flowing water':

Have you ever seen flowing water? Have you ever seen still water? if your mind is peaceful, it will be just like still, flowing water. Have you ever seen still, flowing water? There! You've only ever seen flowing water and still water, haven't you? But you've never seen still,

flowing water. Right there, right where your thinking can not take you, even though it's peaceful you can develop wisdom. Your mind will be like flowing water, and yet it's still. It's almost as if it were still, and yet it's flowing. So I call it 'still, flowing water.' Wisdom can arise here. (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, pp 380-81)

This image of 'still, flowing water' can be used to address the conundrum of the interface between the time-bound and the timeless, or awareness and action. Just as perceptions, feelings, intentions, ideas, memories, moods and actions continually arise and pass, flow, in contrast that which is fully aware of them – call it knowing (*vijjā*), or 'the eye of wisdom' *paññācakkhu*, (as at M 43.11), 'that which understands a state that can be known' – is unattached and therefore carries with it an aura of perfect ease and stillness.

The disengagement with sense objects and the cultivation of an unattached awareness is an essential part of what is called insight meditation (*vipassanā*) – it is a practice that is nowadays cultivated all around the world. When one diligently follows that encouragement towards detachment, just as described by Ajahn Chah, 'Standing, walking, sitting or reclining, whatever, don't do it with desire. This means to do it with detachment,' however, most significantly it can easily lead to an unconscious attachment to 'being just the witness'.

The serenity of being an uninvolved observer can be very attractive; there can be a longing for the stillness factor after a lifetime of being caught in various and sundry 'flows' and often the instructions of meditation teachers appear to corroborate this stance. It is very common for those of us involved in giving *vipassanā* meditation instructions to use such 'just observe' language, for example:

Be the silent watcher, the silent witness, the silent listener. (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol 1, p 113)

Or, in the words of the highly respected Dhamma teacher Upasika Kee Nanayon, in the book of her teaching entitled, 'An Unentangled Knowing':

An inward-staying
unentangled knowing,
All outward-going knowing
cast aside.

(*An Unentangled Knowing*, p 33, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu trans.)

In addition it is the Pali scriptures which suggest a radical detachment from the 'five aggregates' (*pañcupādānakkhandha*) – material form as well as all aspects of mind. In the discourse

called 'To Vacchagotta on Fire', the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (M 72.20), the Buddha describes the unapprehensible quality of his own nature:

So too, Vaccha, the Tathāgata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it all off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from being reckoned in terms of material form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean.

In the correct context these are all excellent and appropriate teachings, however, just like the negative aspects of contentment and goal-directedness described above, the negative effects of misinterpreted transcendent teachings can lead to further dissatisfaction. The mind tries to become an abstracted witness, nullifying its natural responsiveness. In the well-intentioned effort to 'just watch, not do anything', *vibhavataṇhā* is creating a would-be inviolable eyrie, a secure walled-off hide behind a two-way mirror.

This unfortunately common misunderstanding of meditation practice not only leads to frustrating results for the practitioner, it also feeds common misinterpretation of Buddhist practice in general. To illustrate, here is a passage from the article written by Slavoj Žižek, referred to above (in §4a):

[Western Buddhism allows us to] fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game, while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless the spectacle is – what really matters to you is the peace of the inner self to which you know you can always withdraw. ('From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism', *Cabinet*, Issue 2, Spring 2001)

This is a substantial and regrettable misreading of Buddhist principles – regrettable both for the general public's appreciation of the Buddha's teachings and for the aspiring Buddhist practitioners who fall prey to its negative effects. The most acute of this latter category is that individuals can feel they have the would-be safe bubble of their 'practice' – which keeps all the doings of the mundane world at bay – and then they have their 'life' which is viewed as an unfortunate intrusion upon that practice. This false dichotomy understandably tends to lead to conflict and difficulty.

8. Unentangled participating

8a. The Middle Way – 'not halting ... not straining ...'

This subtle identification with ‘the witness’ or ‘the observer’ is thus an obstacle to the making of effort in accordance with Dhamma (as above, at §4a); it is a negative aspect of the application of non-attachment and the transcendent teachings. It encourages the view that insight meditation is like a person sitting on the bank of a river – watching the water tumble over the rocks, swirling and racing – yet they are never to respond to anything that the river does.

If we look at the life of an enlightened being (again the Buddha is the most obvious exemplar to call upon for this) we can see that, far from shying away from engagement with the world of senses, people and things, the Buddha was extraordinarily well-attuned to the people and their lives around him. The acutely pertinent range of similes and analogies that he produced in the course of his teaching career, his creativity in engaging effectively with every strata of society, his foundation of the monastic order of the Saṅgha – all these factors do not describe a practice dedicated to being non-responsive.

The wakefulness and responsivity of the Buddha is then more like a person in a canoe, riding on the waters of the river; they negotiate the rapids and constantly rebalance themselves, sensitive to the shifting swirls and eddies; they take action when it’s called for then glide on open water when no steering is needed. They are neither attached to or identified with doing or not doing, nor with getting somewhere or with being still.

In the very first *sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (S 1.1) the image of crossing a river is used by the Buddha to explain this principle to an enquiring *deva*. A *devatā* asked the Buddha: ‘How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?’, and he replies:

‘By not halting, friend, and by not straining I crossed the flood.’

‘But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining you crossed the flood?’

‘When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank; but when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining I crossed the flood.’
(Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., p. 89)

This is a perfect description of the Middle Way; it represents the ideal balance between contentment (but not halting) and goal-directedness (but not straining).

8b. *Vijjā-carāṇa sampanno* – ‘accomplished in awareness and action’

The Middle Way can also be well-described by a pair of qualities that are part of the standard list of the attributes of the Buddha, *vijjā-carāṇa sampanno*, meaning ‘impeccable in conduct and understanding’ or ‘perfect in knowledge and conduct’ or ‘accomplished in awareness and action’. The compound ‘*vijjā-carāṇa*’ represents the two principles of *vijjā* = ‘awareness, knowing’; and *carāṇa* = ‘action, conduct’. The word ‘awareness’ is perhaps better suited as a translation as ‘knowing’ usually suggests ‘knowing about’ or ‘comprehending a fact’. ‘*Vijjā*’ does not mean either

of these but is rather the quality of awareness itself, which is non-conceptual, but a direct seeing. Its opposite, *avijjā*, is named by the Buddha as the root cause of *dukkha* in the many teachings on dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), for example at S 12.41 and A 10.92: ‘With ignorance (*avijjā*) as condition, bhikkhus, formations come to be ... Such is the origination of this entire mass of suffering.’ Again this is not ‘ignorance’ in the usual English usage of the term, meaning ‘not knowing some information’ or ‘not familiar with some issue’, rather it means ‘unawareness’ or seeing things in a biased way – it is an ingrained misperception.

The ‘*vijjā*’ aspect of ‘*vijjā-carāṇa*’ thus represents an unattached, observing, transcendent, awakened awareness. It is indeed totally unentangled, however it sits in relationship to ‘*carāṇa*’ just like the canoe on the swirling river – it is apart in some ways yet it participates fully in the activity of the river’s many moods, the multifarious changing phases of the world of action, ‘*carāṇa*’.

While the domain of ‘*carāṇa*’ is constantly flowing, the boat of ‘*vijjā*’ sits ever balanced with equipoise upon its surface. Together then, ‘*vijjā-carāṇa*’ can be said to mean ‘a restful wakefulness in action’ or, the author’s preferred phrase, ‘unentangled participating’ – it is a hands-on letting go.

8c. A ‘self-adjusting’ universe

When one ‘sits on the bank’, it is as if to say that ‘any choice or action taken is inherently an intrusion upon peace’; when one ‘sits in the canoe’, in contrast, it is as if to say ‘all aspects of this body and mind are intrinsically part of the present reality; when mindfulness and wisdom are present, the system will respond perfectly in tune with the time the place and the situation, conducing to benefit and liberation to the fullest extent possible.’ That said, it is also important to consider that it can sometimes be helpful to simply ‘sit on the river bank’ for a while, as long as one does not think that this is how one should always be.

In this light it is significant that, in a talk by Ajahn Sumedho, he once said: ‘Be the silent watcher, the silent witness, the silent listener’ (as at §7b) but, most significantly, the words following this statement were: ‘– and allow that witnessing to have its effects. Things can then follow their natural course.’ (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol. 1, p. 113). This shows that if the knowing, watching, observing is carried out skilfully, the witnessing will have a natural effect on the witnessed – and the universe adjusts accordingly, attuned by mindfulness and wisdom. As stated above (at §4a), our intentionality is part of ‘the way things are’ rather than an intrusion upon it.

9. Making progress in accordance with Dhamma

9a. Four modes of practice

It was stated earlier (at §3c) that the Buddha defined four possible modes in which spiritual progress takes shape, in brief, once again: painful + sluggish; painful + quick; pleasant + sluggish; and lastly pleasant + quick. Accordingly, regardless of the extent of our efforts or how in tune with Dhamma our efforts might be, our practice can still be slow to show results and be painful to boot. If there are a lot of accumulated bad habits, or the results of unskillful actions, these facts of nature will necessarily have their effects. Even when there is fully committed and energetic *dhammānudhamma-ṭṭipatti*, progress can be unpredictable, so the aspect of contentment is a powerful tool at such times. It helps to frequently recollect the teaching that, ‘Patient endurance is the supreme practice for burning out defilements’ (as above, at §3b).

Just as when making a journey it can be necessary to pause, rest and recuperate, or wait patiently for the train that is due, or wait for the weather to clear, with spiritual progress there are different modes in which it manifests. There are times when spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*) is appropriate, to re-energize one’s practice and deepen its level, and times when contentment is appropriate, to settle into and get to know the new level one has reached. Then, later, more *saṃvega* should be exercised in order to take things deeper again.

9b. 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* (M 70.23):

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. In this case he took the pattern of progress as recounted here and then added a helpful addendum:

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.' That which is aware of 'the person', is not a person. Rather it is Dhamma being aware of its own nature, since all the aspects of body and mind are aspects of the natural order – they are *dhammajāti* (born of the Dhamma), *dhammaṭṭhitatā* (displaying the steadfastness of the Dhamma) and *dhammaniyamatā* (functioning according to the orderliness of the Dhamma). The mind is not a person; the mind is Dhamma.

9c. 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) [cf A 7.61 & 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 & 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*).

To complete this investigation of 'effort, contentment and goal-directedness', and to illustrate this final theme, here are some words from Ajahn Sumedho on 'letting go':

The second insight into the Second Noble Truth is: 'Desire [*taṇhā*] should be let go of (*pahātabbanti*).'¹ This is how letting go comes into our practice. You have an insight that desire should be let go of, but that insight is not a *desire* to let go of anything. If you are not

very wise and are not really reflecting in your mind, you tend to follow the ‘I want to get rid of, I want to let go of all my desires’ – but this is just another desire. However, you can reflect upon it; you can see the desire to get rid of, the desire to become or the desire for sense pleasure. By understanding these three kinds of desire, you can let them go.

The Second Noble Truth does not ask you to think, ‘I have a lot of sensual desires’, or, ‘I’m really ambitious. I’m really *bhava-taṇhā* plus, plus, plus!’ or, ‘I’m a real nihilist. I just want out. I’m a real *vibhava-taṇhā* fanatic. That’s me.’ The Second Noble Truth is not that. It is not about identifying with desires in any way; it’s about recognizing desire.

I used to spend a lot of time watching how much of my practice was desire to become something. For example, how much ... of my relations with other monks or nuns or with lay people had to do with wanting to be liked and approved of. That is *bhava-taṇhā* – desire for praise and success. ...

Then there is *vibhava-taṇhā* in spiritual life, which can be very self-righteous: ‘I want to get rid of, annihilate and exterminate these defilements.’ I really listened to myself thinking, ‘I want to get rid of desire. I want to get rid of anger. I don’t want to be frightened or jealous any more. I want to be brave. I want to have joy and gladness in my heart.’

This practice of Dhamma is not one of hating oneself for having such thoughts, but really seeing that they are conditioned into the mind. They are impermanent. Desire is not what we are but it is the way we tend to react out of ignorance when we have not understood these Four Noble Truths in their three aspects. We tend to react like that to everything. These are normal reactions due to ignorance.

But we need not continue to suffer. We are not just hopeless victims of desire. We can allow desire to be the way it is and so begin to let go of it. Desire has power over us and deludes us only as long as we grasp it, believe in it and react to it. (Ajahn Sumedho, *The Anthology*, Vol. 1, pp. 251-52)

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 experience of which is called Nibbāna. This is the end.

Abbreviations

- A *Āṅguttara Nikāya*; translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi as *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston, Wisdom, 2012.
- 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.
- S *Samyutta Nikāya*; translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston, Wisdom, 2005
- Ud *Udāna*
- MV *Mahāvagga*; translated by I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, Part 4, London, Pali Text Society, 1951.
- Ps *Paṭisambhidāmagga*

References to A and S are to *nipāta* or *samyutta* and *sutta* number. To Ud, to *vagga* 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. References to MV are to chapter, section and sub-section as marked in Horner's translation.

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