

Wise Effort:
Not Too Tight, Not Too Loose

By Peter B. Williams

If you are feeling frustrated by your meditation practice in some way, that you are either too restless or too tense or too distracted, it may be that your meditative effort needs adjusting. This essay describes how to do that.

There is a story in the Pali Canon in which the Buddha gives pith instructions on meditative effort. A student, Sona, had been practicing with great zeal. "After doing walking meditation until the skin of his soles was split & bleeding" and he had not achieved enlightenment, he decided to give up the path (*Anguttara Nikaya* 6.55, transl. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu). The Buddha, with his psychic powers, so the story goes, intuited Sona's frustration and magically transported himself to Sona's side and engaged him in dialog about his being a lute player. After establishing with Sona that his lute could not be played well if it was tuned either too tight or too loose, the Buddha said, "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."

This was just the nudge Sona needed, and with his persistence now properly calibrated, his renewed dedication led him, as so many stories

go in the Pali Canon, to full enlightenment.

The Buddha's analogy has been used over and over in the tradition because wise effort is such an important element of fruitful meditation practice. This is true whether one is a beginner or has been practicing for 40 years. Wise effort takes time to develop and needs continual maintenance. The renowned 20th century Japanese Zen master, Suzuki Roshi, said, "My practice was one mistake after another," and he may well have been talking about how easy it is to get too tight or too loose. Sure, practice involves relaxing into this moment, but spaciousness can easily become spaciness if one does not apply some effort. Likewise, attempting to screw one's attention to the breath in a grim struggle not to think is only going to lead to Sona-like frustration.

Attitudes of too tight or too loose do not work; they prevent us from being mindful in a sustained way. Wise effort is a balance of the key principles the Buddha alluded to above: diligence and relaxation. Proper balance of these seeming opposites is both a reflection of and a doorway into the free heart.

At the outset, we need to understand the larger picture of how we can change anything about ourselves. The Tibetan

word for meditation, *gom*, means to make oneself familiar with. This alludes to the fact that meditation is about developing a new habit. The brain is a creature of habit; whatever we mentally do now becomes easier to do in the future. In essence, the brain greases its own skids. This is borne out by the neuroscience adage, “Neurons that fire together wire together.” Repeated mental acts get wired physically into the brain through neuronal pathways that enlarge through increased neuronal bundling.

For people who have not meditated very much, there are not strong neural pathways for mindfulness. Because of this one cannot expect to meditate a few times and be proficient. It is helpful to realize this because it cuts the strain of unrealistic expectations. However, habits of mindlessness do not set the brain in neuronal stone; we can begin developing new habits right now to change our brain to become better wired for mindfulness. There are two keys to doing so: meditating regularly and employing wise effort in our meditation. This essay focuses on the latter, delving into the essential attitudes that support mindfulness.

Setting the Stage

Whenever we meditate, it is important to set the stage at the start of practice. We do this through the

attitudes of non-judgment, inspiration, and intention.

Get the Winning Out of the Way - Start a meditation session by humoring the judging mind for a wee bit. Notice one full breath – an in and an out breath. Then congratulate yourself. You are already ahead of the game, as you have noticed one more breath than if you were not meditating. So, from this moment on in your meditation, “Everything else is gravy.” You have already won, so the judge is no longer needed and you can set it aside.

A judgmental stance only gets in the way of mindfulness. After all, judging your practice is just further distraction. Secondly, being motivated through judging mind is not sustainable; it may work for a while but eventually we tire of beating ourselves up. All the motivation you need will come from your inspiration for being mindful.

Inspiration – When we remember that we really do want to be mindful we are more motivated to stay with our meditative object. To bolster inspiration, it can be very helpful to reflect on the reasons you meditate (see below for a meditation on this theme). When we repeatedly focus on the benefits of our practice, our desire to be mindful makes us less interested in being distracted. Any other motivation, such as self-judgment or guilt or a wish for self-improvement turns meditation into a chore and makes it less likely that one

will persist with practice. So at the beginning of a practice period, start with some kind of reflection on your inspiration for practice and let it lead to a simple, heartfelt thought such as, “I *want* to be mindful!”

Intention – Letting this inspiration coalesce into intention is a very helpful next step. Set the intention to be as mindful as you can during your meditation time. Think of the time as an experiment to see what happens if, instead of your usual mental strategies, you let mindfulness take care of things. Remember your common strategies – e.g., judging, analyzing, problem-solving, planning, fantasizing, or spacing out – and resolve to let go of them whenever you notice them and return to mindfulness. By accident, we will fall into these distractions and this is unavoidable. The point is not to purposely use the meditation time for them.

Simply put, the intentions are: 1) To be as mindful as you can during your sit and 2) To let go of distraction as soon as you notice it.

Attitudes During Practice

After you have set the stage there are key qualities during meditation that will boost your ability to be mindful: Interest, precision, relaxation, only celebrating, and simply returning.

Interest – One of the key mental factors that boost concentration is interest. We usually think of interest as being directed towards something active, such as reading, thinking, conversation, exercise, etc. We might think that something as benign as a meditation object cannot generate interest. Yet it turns out the contemplative aspect of mind is very interested in simple sensory experiences. Taking breathing as an example, we can be curious as we focus on the rise and fall of belly or chest. We can be interested in noticing when the sensation of an in-breath starts, how long it sustains, and whether there is a gap before the next breath. We can be interested in where in the body sensations of breathing are strong and where they are subtle. It takes some adjusting, but with practice we learn that noticing simple objects is not just interesting, but boosts contact with contemplative mind and its many helpful qualities such as contentment and ease.

Precision – Our interest is effective only when it is targeted precisely at this present moment. In fact, the this moment is the only object of which we can be aware. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in *The Sanity We Are Born With*, explains:

Really we operate on a very small basis. We think we are great, broadly significant, and that we cover a whole large area. We see

ourselves as having a history and a future, and here we are in our big-deal present. But if we look at ourselves clearly in this very moment, we see we are just grains of sand—just little people concerned only with this little dot which is called nowness. We can only operate on one dot at a time.

Life is nothing other than a series of present moments. Even regret about the past or anxiety about the future is occurring in the present as thinking. So the only effort we can make is to be with this moment, right here, right now. And now. And now. One little dot at a time. For instance, in working with the breath, wise effort is best directed towards just half a breath (an in or out breath). With precision, we can fully feel a half breath, catching its beginning, middle and end.

Relaxation – While precision requires effort, it is a minimal effort because it is easy to notice this moment. Thus, our precision directly leads to another key quality – relaxation. For example, when we do mindfulness of breathing we can relax because we are not trying to sit and notice our breath for an extended period, we are just noticing a half a breath at a time. All our effort is directed towards “this little dot of nowness.” Relaxation is an important quality because only a relaxed mind can stay immersed in the present moment. An over-exerting mind is a tense mind

that cannot rest deeply with a meditation object.

To support mental relaxation, it is very helpful to relax the body at the beginning of a practice period. We might think that a slouched posture gives us maximum relaxation, but this is not true. Full relaxation comes only with posture that is erect and aligned, in which the spine mimics the natural position of the spine when standing. In such posture the only force acting on the body is gravity and this avoids the muscle tension that misalignment causes. Whether you sit on a cushion, bench, or chair, you can achieve upright posture by ensuring that the pelvic floor has a slight forward tilt, the lower back has an inward curve, the shoulders are directly over the hips, the ears are directly over the shoulders, the crown of the head is raised, and the chin is slightly lowered.

Once your posture is aligned, then let the muscles relax around the support of your spine. Begin in the head, letting the eyes and brow melt into as much relaxation as possible. Then let the tongue relax. Then the throat. Then the shoulders, and so on, scanning down the body and letting every part of it melt into as much ease as wants to happen.

Mental ease can be harder to achieve in meditation than physical relaxation. One key way to relax the mind is to connect to the present moment with no ulterior motive. One is simply interested

in the texture of this moment for its own sake. The famed 20th century Zen master, Suzuki Roshi, elaborates this point in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*:

If you think you will get something from practicing zazen, already you are involved in impure practice. ...When you make some special effort to achieve something, some excessive quality, some extra element is involved in it. You should get rid of excessive things. If your practice is good, without being aware of it you will become proud of your practice. That pride is extra...Our effort in our practice should be directed from achievement to non-achievement.

When we drop all “extra” mental activities and let our minds focus only on nowness without any gaining idea we stop struggling with how things are. We can let everything be just as it is. There is a sense of relief when we give up our argument with reality, and the more we do so, the more we drop into what Tibetan Buddhists call “natural peace.”

Only celebrate – As part of mental relaxation it is helpful to understand that the moment of realizing we have been distracted is a great moment. Why? Because in this moment we are already mindful. We do not notice we are distracted until we actually pop out of it and into mindfulness. So rather

than bum ourselves out with a thought such as “I can’t believe how long I have been distracted,” we can actually celebrate that we have returned to mindfulness. Every time you realize you have been distracted, say to yourself “Yay!” or “Great!” Such positivity goes a long way to making us more motivated to stay with our meditation object.

Further, we can also celebrate whenever we notice ourselves being with our object. “Catching ourselves doing something right” is an adaptation of the new business management motto, and if it’s good enough for the business sphere, might it be good enough for our spiritual practice? The key is to not go into any big story, but just use a simple “Yay!” or “Great!” when you notice yourself staying with your meditation object.

Simply return – After celebrating that we are back, we need to then return our attention to our meditative object without judgment, comment or elaboration. To judge our practice after we realize we have been distracted is hallucinatory because to do so is to plunge back into distraction. This reveals the great secret about meditation practice: We cannot judge ourselves into mindfulness.

Our most effective strategy is to simply return when we realize we have been distracted. Returning simply to our meditation object again and again is the

key to developing more mindfulness and to reducing judging mind at the same time.

A key insight that supports a non-judgmental approach is that we do not intentionally leave our mindfulness object or intentionally return to it. We sit down intending to be mindful of the breath, but eventually we become lost in thought and at some point we pop out of that distraction, all without conscious effort. It is only then that we realize what happened.

So what controls these unconscious events? Mental habit. Now, we can and must apply effort to change our habits, but we only have conscious control over this in the moment in which we have awakened out of distraction. At this time, we can resolve to be with our next moment of experience, for instance the half-breath that is happening right now. The rest happens without our volition under the sway of habit. So to blame oneself for not staying with the breath is not only more distraction, but it is also hallucinogenic. It is like blaming ourselves for the weather!

Summary – Engaging these five qualities is the most effective way to become mindful. Striving does not work and neither does drifting along in some kind of pleasant but unaware state. Instead, a gentle determination that is clearly informed by a desire to be mindful is the key to practice. Through interest, precision and relaxation, wise

effort is directed only at this present moment. Only celebrating and simply returning reinforce noticing “little dots of nowness.” We notice these little dots again and again, as we let go of any purposeful engagement with thinking. The Tibetan meditation tradition summarizes such an approach as “short moments, many times.”

The fruit of wise effort is that meditation is more light-hearted and fulfilling. We are clear, yet at ease, abiding in the pleasure of being connected to the present moment.

Transformation without Effort

There is an added, and significant, benefit to wise effort. Once we begin to rest more easily in an aware state a profound transformation of our psyche becomes possible. This is the point of Buddhist meditation practice and it depends on wise effort as both the ignition and the fuel for the process.

Wisdom, happiness, friendliness and many other beneficial qualities are uncovered by meditation. This happens not consciously, but unconsciously, simply by paying attention to the present moment. Because it is the grace of meditation practice that transforms us, not some egoic act of will, the transformation is more stable and reliable. You just find yourself being less reactive, less stressed out, and more loving, not on purpose, but just because that is how you are. As Burmese

meditation master Sayadaw U Pandita told Western vipassana teacher Sharon Salzberg on retreat, "You just sit and walk and let dharma take care of the rest."

While one cannot force wisdom to arise willfully, practice creates the conditions from which wisdom can emerge. As Baker Roshi once said, "Enlightenment is an accident. Practice makes you accident-prone." A poem by Sun Bu-er, a revered 12th century female Taoist master in China, echoes the theme (transl. Jane Hirshfield):

Cut brambles long enough,
Sprout after sprout,
And the lotus will bloom
Of its own accord:
Already waiting in the clearing,
The single image of light.
The day you see this,
That day you will become it.

Exercises on Wise Effort

CONTEMPLATION: WHY MEDITATE?

- In this, like any, contemplation practice, you direct your thoughts along a particular theme. Whenever you notice you have wandered off the topic, redirect your thoughts back.

I encourage you to spend repeated periods of meditation, at 5 - 10 minutes at a time, contemplating the ways in which meditation benefits you. People often mention benefits like less reactivity, less stress, greater depth and balance in one's emotional life, and greater capacity for intimacy. Think of other benefits as well. You may remember times you have been really connected with the present moment. Hold the memory in mind and see if you can remember how it felt in your body to be so relaxed, focused and alert. You may also want to focus on people whose meditative wisdom inspires you in some way. For instance, I personally find the compassion, spontaneity, and alertness of the Dalai Lama very inspiring. I am even more impressed when I remember that he is not this way by accident – he is known to practice four hours every day. How encouraging that the figurehead of an entire religion is able to carve out time for this much practice and how inspiring are the results of his practice!

It is helpful, in contemplation, to repeat key thoughts and themes. This helps them sink in at a deeper level. In addition, the more you do this contemplation, the easier it becomes.

Eventually, the thoughts can be very simple and strong and you can use these thoughts at the beginning of every meditation period to help you be inspired to be as mindful as you can be.

RELAXED AND ALERT - Sharon

Salzberg says that the decision to locate Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA was serendipitously validated when she and the other founders discovered that the town motto was “Tranquil and Alert.” This description perfectly echoes the Buddha's principles of wise effort.

With this motto in mind, take a meditation period to pay special attention to effort. Wise effort uses exactly the right amount of energy to connect with this moment. Using the breath as a meditation object, you can see that, as long as you are not distracted, it actually takes very little effort to be aware of a half breath. Whenever you do notice that you have been distracted, it is important to remember that you are already mindful; the hard work is over. All you need to do is direct the attention to this half breath. The actual noticing of the half breath is not hard at this point. In fact, you can be very precise with it. Can you feel it at its very beginning and then sustain the attention through until its end? Then you can repeat the process with the next half breath. As you do this, let yourself really relax into this awareness. Be inside the breath sensations and just take a relaxed ride with the chest or belly as it rises or falls.

We can only enact wise effort right now, in the present moment. This involves not superhuman, gargantuan effort, but small, precise and repeated efforts that are directed only at the now, at this present moment. We can't be with three breaths from now or be wondering if we were with two breaths ago. We can only be with this one now. If we are willing to do this patiently and diligently, we will surely become more mindful. This is effort that works. You can decide to notice a half breath and have your intention come true. Anything else is extra and is bound to lead to frustration.

You can monitor your effort, in large part, by checking in with the body. Do you find your brow twisted into a knot of intention to bear down on the breath as it moves past the nostrils? Are your shoulders pinned to your ears? This tension is a sure sign of striving. If you find yourself consistently striving in practice, see what it is like to become mindless for a few minutes. Slouch your posture, look around the room, think whatever distracting thoughts seem useful for the goal. You might find you stop struggling so much. You can relax because you have lifted the burden of expectations off your practice. Now that you know what relaxed practice feels like, see if you can come back to mindfulness practice with the precise and relaxed half-breath attention described above.

WASH THE DISHES TO WASH THE DISHES - This exercise follows Thich Naht Hanh's suggestion to a student on how to do kitchen clean up. We usually wash dishes to get them clean. While goals for action are necessary, once the goal is set, it can be dropped. Fixating on goals once they are set leans us into the future. We are five moments ahead of this one, skating across the surface without dropping into what the activity at hand really feels like.

In this exercise, pick a "mundane" activity, such as brushing the teeth, taking a shower, or washing the dishes and bring your awareness into your senses. You've done it a thousand times, so no thought is really necessary. Your only job is to pay attention. See if you can "come to your senses" by noticing sights, smells, and sounds. Notice arms and hands moving, legs moving. Such attention fosters simplicity and precision and both qualities help the mind relax. When mind and body are synchronized, well-being naturally emerges. Get really familiar with such practice and you may even drop into a flow state, where activity unfolds effortlessly, in what the Zen tradition calls "Doing without doing." As one of the characters said in the French movie, *Diva*, about buttering bread, "No knife, no bread, no butter. Just a gesture in space." Now this is flow!

BUDDHIST SERENITY PRAYER

Do your work, then step back.
The only path to serenity.
– Tao Te Ching

We can apply the lessons of wise effort to taking action outside of meditation. Effective action involves doing the best you can with what you know and what you have, and letting go of the results of your actions. It involves resting in the intention behind the action more than how the world responds to your action. That you cannot control. Tibetan Buddhists have a saying, “If you have a problem and you can do something about it, then no problem. If you have a problem and you can’t do something about it, then also no

problem!” You might be experiencing unavoidable pain, but acceptance of the pain cuts the unnecessary suffering caused by reacting to it. See if you can apply this saying to your life. Notice when you are struggling against the unavoidable and notice the tension in the struggle. Might you be willing to drop it? On the other hand, you may be in denial about something that might benefit you to change. It might be more comfortable to avoid the situation altogether. In this case, might you be willing to take action, and notice what discomfort feels like? As long as you are witnessing the discomfort, it cannot harm you. Be curious about how it feels in the body. Be curious about the thoughts. Are they calibrated to the situation?