

THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

Right Effort (Samma-vayam)

Recently, a friend told me a story about a teenager who escaped from Germany just before the Nazi darkness descended across Europe in the late 1930's. Harry and his family fled with little more than the clothes on their back. Having no money to buy visas, they emigrated to one of the few places on earth that would accept a family of Jewish refugees: Shanghai, China. They spoke only German and shared the same one-room apartment during the war. Eventually Harry left China, got married and moved to Los Angeles where he has enjoyed a long and good life. On occasion, he shares his experiences with school children. What lesson does he hope they take from his story? "You must endure and learn the language." The wisdom of his words rings deeply true.

I once sat with an unemployed client who told me, in our first session, that he intended to commit suicide if he didn't gain some glimmer of hope within the next three months. Week after week he came to his session and stared at me in defiance and desperation as the remainder of his life's savings trickled away. Although his was an extreme situation, I have sat with many clients who, at times, have lost their will to endure. More than once a poem by Galway Kinnell called *Wait* would come to mind.

Wait.
Don't go too early.
You're tired. But everyone's tired.
But no one is tired enough.
Only wait a little and listen:
music of hair,
music of pain,
music of looms weaving all our loves again.
Be there to hear it, it will be the only time,
most of all to hear
the flute of your whole existence,
rehearsed by the sorrows, play itself into total exhaustion.

There is only one way for us to hear our music play itself into total exhaustion. We must endure through the hard days, the days of despair when we wake up and have the thought “I don’t want to do this anymore.” Harry and his family first endured and then they learned the language. This is exactly what the Buddha’s transcendent vision of truth has done for over twenty-five centuries. It has endured. But it has done much more. Just as Harry learned to speak Chinese, Buddhism had to learn to speak its subtle meaning through other languages. As it spread beyond India into other parts of Asia, it “learned” to speak the language of China and the languages of Tibet, Korea and Japan. Astonishingly, it incorporated the unique genius of each new culture into its very essence as it took root in foreign lands. Now the Buddha-dharma is learning the languages of Europe and the Americas.

Everything, including each one of us, has its own unique language. When anything or anyone is fully heard, it becomes a flower that opens to share its secret. This truth is beautifully expressed in David Whyte’s poem *The Statue of the Buddha*:

In that first step away from home,
You came so far and all
alone, faithful to all things as you met them

until finally,
everything bowed to you
and everything spoke to you in its own voice.

To be “faithful to all things” is to learn a thing’s unique language. When we learn its language it bows deeply and speaks to us in its own voice. Too often our desperate need to be heard prevents us from listening. Today we are so busy shouting at one another, for instance Red states versus Blue states, hawk versus dove, that we are unable to hear others speak their unique language. We only want to listen to those who mouth our own prejudices, be they political, religious or cultural. Even lovers forget to learn each other’s language. They can spend a lifetime shouting their truths at one another, like two monologues engaged in mortal combat.

As we study the Eightfold Path, we must continually remember that we are learning a new language. Thus we begin with an attitude of

humility. Instead of skipping over difficult concepts such as non-duality, anatta, anicca, dukkha or the twelve nidanas, we must work with our resistance. We must admit that our Right Understanding is only skin deep and that these truths have yet to flower and whisper their secrets to us. Thank goodness we are enduring. Now it is time to learn the language!

The sixth step of the Eightfold Path is Right Effort. Since every aspect of the Eightfold Path depends on Right Effort, it could as easily be placed in the *prajna* (wisdom) group of Right Understanding and Right Thought. One could also argue that it belongs in the *sila* (virtue or conduct) division of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Indeed, what spiritual practice is possible without Right Effort? But it makes good sense to place Right Effort in this third and last division of the Eightfold Path.

Contemporary teachers prefer to call the third section the “concentration division,” but we will use the term that early teachers used, *dhyana* (meditation), for the last three steps. Anyone struggling with sloth and torpor (or “sloth and torture” as one student calls it), trying desperately to stay awake during a sit, will readily attest to the correctness of placing Right Effort in the meditation division. At times, the only effort one can muster is to hang on - to endure until the blessed and/or despised bell rings.

The Buddha divides Right Effort into four “great endeavors”: the effort to avoid, the effort to overcome, the effort to develop and the effort to maintain.

1) The effort to avoid

According to Patanjali, the famous codifier of the yogic sutras, yoga is the control of mental fluctuations, *yogash chitta vritti nirodha*. A crucial stage in training and development is *pratyahara*, where the yogi learns to control all the senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking). The meaning of the Sanskrit word “nirodha” is to settle or become still; it is also used in martial arts to describe a blocking maneuver. Although one may not like the idea of yoga as a path of control, yoga actually demands tremendous control over the body and the mind. Undoubtedly, the Buddha was an accomplished yogi and his words about “the effort to avoid” reflect this:

What now is the effort to avoid? There the disciple incites his mind to avoid the arising of evil, demeritorious things, that

have not yet arisen; and he strives, puts forth his energy, strains his mind and struggles.

This extraordinary passage goes completely against the grain of our western sensibilities. We go to yoga classes to learn how to relax, breathe deeply and calm ourselves, not to “incite the mind to avoid evil.” Similarly, the last thing we want to do as we sit in meditation is “strain the mind.” It feels contrary to everything we seek to accomplish when we sit on the cushion. How are we to understand the Buddha’s statement that right effort begins with the effort to avoid evil by straining our minds?

As a therapist I was taught to take an inviting, accepting attitude toward the unconscious rather than treating it like a crazy relative who needs to be locked in the basement. For many years, I have held to the psychological truism that *the shadow you do not embrace will one day embrace you*. In other words, the shadow part of ourselves, that part of the personality that we push out of our conscious mind, will eventually “flower” and even dominate our personality. You can bet on it. When I first read the Buddha’s statement that we must learn how to avoid evil by inciting the mind, straining the mind and struggling against “demeritorious things,” I dismissed it outright. Repression is what got us so screwed up in the first place. The Buddha’s teaching of self-control, or mind control, seemed utterly anti-psychological and negative to me. But as one studies the Buddha-dharma, one discovers that the Buddha speaks to each of us at precisely where we are, in other words, to our specific level of understanding. The Ch’an master Yang-shan explains it quite wonderfully:

It is like a man setting up a store stocked with all kinds of goods for daily use as well as articles of gold and jade, to accommodate customers of different abilities...If someone wishes to buy rat’s excrement, I will sell him rat’s excrement, and if he wishes to buy an article of pure gold, I will sell him an article of pure gold.

This is the meaning of the term *upaya*, or skillful means. A person desperately struggling with an addiction probably does not need to hear high-toned Buddhist concepts about non-duality or no self. What he or she may need from Yan-shan’s general store is a strategy to get through the day.

Recently, I sat with a beautiful woman in her early thirties. Outwardly, it looks as if she has everything going for her, everything except for her addiction to crystal methamphetamine. Slowly, her addiction is destroying her precious body and she seems incapable of “inciting her mind” to the battle of life versus death that is raging within her. It is as if she is the passive witness to the horror of it. If she cannot *strain her mind* to avoid the siren call of addiction, she will not endure. She will not “stay awhile” to hear the beautiful song of her own existence as it plays itself into total exhaustion some day in the future. She will not last long enough to learn any language other than the language of victimhood. Reflecting long and hard on her story and the story of so many others like her, I have finally begun to grasp the Buddha’s challenging truth at a gut level. Sometimes all we can do is muster the energy to avoid evil before it has had a chance to arise and completely wipe us off the map.

Certainly, there is a time to relax and a time to strain. But here we are talking about the time to strain, the time when our life is about enduring. In the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot was warned of the impending destruction of Sodom. He was told to leave quickly with his wife and two daughters and warned that they must not look back at the evil city. As they made their escape, Lot’s wife could not resist the temptation to take just one more little peek. As she looked back at the beautiful city, she turned into a pillar of salt.

For some of us, the only way to avoid the pitfalls of our self-destructive behavior is through the effort of sheer will power, through the heroic effort of avoiding evil before it can arise in our mind. How silly it would be to speak of transcending both good and evil (the teaching of non-duality) to someone longing to take one more peek at the face of evil. When evil is close on your heels, it is not the best time to contemplate the truth that evil it is not really real. Imagine that you are at a party and everyone is having a fabulous time. People are flying high on speed and the intoxicating allure of sex is in the air. You have a great buzz going. “What’s the harm in letting go just one more time?” sings the siren voice of desire. Or perhaps you are seduced by the thought, “What’s the harm in having a little fantasy if I don’t act on it? After all, I’m only thinking about it.” How many people never return after taking “just one more peek?”

Here is a version of the oft-told story about a guy who is walking down the street and falls into a hole.

Badly bruised, he climbs out of the hole and limps home. Tomorrow arrives: a new day, a new dawn! Out the door our friend walks as he or she heads down the street vaguely remembering that there is a hole somewhere along the way. He falls into the same damn hole!

Momentarily forgetting right speech, he climbs out of the hole and drags himself home, nursing his wounds. He vows never to fall into that hole again.

Tomorrow comes: a new day, a new dawn! He heads down the street but this time he remembers exactly where that hole is. "I won't fall into that damn hole again," he mutters confidently to himself. Sure enough, he sees the hole up ahead and walks carefully around it. With a thud, he falls into the same old hole! Crawling out, without even the semblance of right thought, he manages to limp home.

The next day, if he has even a shred of right understanding, he will *take another route*.

If there is a hole that you keep falling into, it is best to avoid that road altogether. Choosing to take another route requires right understanding and it also demands humility. Perhaps others can walk down that street without falling into your hole. Perhaps you know many people who can drink at a party without falling into the addictive cycle of alcoholism. Perhaps some people can indulge in wrong thoughts or mean speech and come out smelling like a rose. Perhaps some people can smoke pot without dulling their consciousness. But what difference does that make to you or to me? The game of "I'll get it right the next time" is a deadly trick that the ego plays with itself when it cannot bear to surrender to what is. Another part of the game is the fantasy that I still have tomorrow. Sooner or later we will all come to one day that will turn out to be our last one on earth. If we don't choose a new road now, when will we?

In olden times, ancient cities were protected by strong and formidable walls that served as the first line of defense against the dangerous world outside. The effort to avoid is precisely that strong wall which protects us from the hindrances that constantly attack our inner city. But the Buddha had something far subtler in mind with he talked about this first line of defense. Ultimately, the hindrances to our inner peace, to our practice of mindfulness and to our journey to the Real come from

inside the city gates not from an enemy out there. It is vital that we grasp the difference.

In the West, we do not think of concentration as vital to the defense of the inner city. Concentration is what we develop to attain success as a scientist, musician, yoga teacher or basketball player. But in the East, concentration means samadhi, a powerful inner state of calm. Concentration, or samadhi, creates a strong wall of energy that protects us from all the hindrances rising from the unconscious. This is what the Buddha means by “avoiding the arising of evil.” Samadhi literally acts as a force field that keeps greed, hatred, doubt and worry from invading consciousness. It is hardly surprising that the Buddha would encourage us to watch over our senses in the same way that we would watch a group of four year olds at a birthday party. We are called to an attitude of vigilance. We must be guardians at the door of the eyes, the door of the ears, smell, taste and touch. And most definitely, we need to guard the door of thinking, which is the most seductive of all the senses. Without a measure of control, there is no possible way for the mind to begin the long task of developing concentration.

Now, let’s go back to the situation of sitting with good concentration and a mind that is steady and quiet. Suddenly I realize that I have drifted into a dream state and am overcome with drowsiness. My eyes are absolutely burning and feel very heavy. I long for sweet, delicious sleep. I keep drifting off, and now in addition to feeling lousy I am overcome with anger and disgust at myself because I am a complete failure as a meditator. Has that happened to you?

2) The effort to overcome

After I have fallen into the hole of an unconscious hindrance, it is too late to turn my attention to the first great effort of avoiding evil. When this happens, the Buddha says that I must turn my attention to the effort to overcome what has already arisen in my mind. As I sit in meditation, if the hindrance of sloth and torpor has enveloped me with its seductive power, this means that I have disconnected from the watchful eye of mindfulness and have not recognized the subtle moment when I started to saunter down a familiar street with a certain hole waiting around the bend. Suddenly, I am falling forward, my eyes are heavy and I want to quit this agony of sitting still. In reverse, and just as disturbing, I am completely overwhelmed by a mind run amuck by a barrage of thoughts running

helter-skelter. Now is the time for the second great effort, the effort to overcome.

Again, the Buddha says that we must strain our mind! The enemy is no longer knocking at the door, it is in the house. “With teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the gums, he should, with his mind, restrain, suppress, and root out these thoughts.” The key words? *With his mind.* The Buddha constantly points us toward a truth that is unbelievably simple: It is mind that must control the mind! It is the mind that leads us to hell and it is the mind that rescues us from hell. But of course, our shadow side (the mind) whispers, “What’s so terrible about these thoughts, darling? You’ve worked so hard all day long, and don’t you deserve a little rest?” And if we are on a retreat, we may head for bed, often without an ounce of guilt. Why not? There’s always tomorrow.

This brings us to a very clear line of demarcation between “doing meditation” and what U Panditta called “doing therapy” (rather than meditating). There are times when the Buddha’s second effort, the effort to overcome, demands that we let go of psychological work as we sit on the cushion. These are fighting words for most of us who have spent years learning how to process psychologically, and that definitely includes me. Most of us have avoided feelings of sadness or grief all our lives. And heaven help us, what about anger? How many of us have any relationship at all with our dark, angry side? Psychology urges us to “stay with it,” to stay with those feelings and help to bring them into consciousness. Now this Buddha guy is telling me to give up working with these emotions psychologically? Not only does it seem impossible to do, it also feels completely unnatural.

What we are called to remember (again) is that truth is never one-sided. Many of us have experienced deep sadness or rage while sitting in meditation, perhaps for the first time in our lives. In fact, it may be the only opportunity some people have to get to know the grief and sorrow that they have repressed for most of our lives. Who can judge whether or not psychological processing is necessary before one can begin the process of deconstructing her personal story? Who can judge when a person is ready to leave “psychologizing” in order to enter the impersonal experience of meditation? As we discussed this subject in our sangha, someone asked, “am I doing psychology if I just sit with the sadness rather than trying to figure out where it comes from?” It was a fascinating and illuminating discussion. We agreed that the central question is not the

reality of sitting with a painful emotion but *how* one sits with the emotion. Are we working with the impersonal noting that “sadness is present” or the personal note, “I am sad”? Psychology is always about the person, the “I.” Meditation is always about the impersonal. At some point in our journey to the Real, psychological processing becomes the ego’s last stand.

Imagine that you are sitting with strong concentration - the mind is calm and steady - and you suddenly have an insight into the reason that you have been feeling depressed for the past few days. You received an e-mail from a friend whom you trust and her words hurt your feelings, but you had completely put it out of your mind, that is until you sat on the cushion Sunday afternoon. That insight could open you up to a flood of memories. Perhaps one of your parents had a pattern of saying hurtful things to you when you were a child. Perhaps schoolmates were cruel to you. A single memory can lead to a stream of psychological insights.

But what if Right Effort means that you must be committed to building a powerful state of concentration as part of your journey to the Real? Then isn’t it possible that any psychological insight, no matter how compelling, is nothing more than another hindrance? In that moment you may remember Joseph Godstein’s “pointer” that “nothing is worth thinking about,” at least in the context of meditation. As a result, you may try to put that delicious thought away for another day. If so, you will find a tremendous challenge facing you because our habit of continuously pouring energy into our personal story is an enormously powerful opponent to developing concentration. We seem endlessly fascinated and in love with our story. Perhaps this is the most treacherous eddy waiting to sink our little boat.

One way to think of letting go of psychological insights while sitting is to compare it to fishing. Some people fish purely for the sport of it. They have no need or desire to kill the fish. When they feel the line tug and spy a beautiful fish on the hook they pull it in, take the fish off the hook and then throw it back into the water. Off it swims! This is exactly the same as releasing a thought - no matter how interesting or exotic - back into the water of the unconscious. If that thought wants to swim back, rest assured that it will! The person who cannot let that delicious thought go is like the fisherman who catches a fish, takes it home, carefully skins, de-bones and sautés it in butter and garlic. He will eat that fish for dinner and wash it down with a glass of good white wine.

If we do see that our psychological processing is just another hindrance to the work of meditation, we are then called to remember the Buddha's second great effort to overcome. We must gather our strength, strain our mind and overcome our psychological processing. We must ratchet up the noting ("thinking, thinking, thinking") and try to release the content of our thoughts, moment by moment. Time and again I hear people complaining that they cannot control the constant barrage of thoughts that run wild in their minds. "If only I could turn them off even for a moment," they say. The Buddha assures us that we can overcome any thought with Right Effort. Can we begin by finding our stories a little less fascinating?

The Buddha's first effort to avoid is like putting a fence around our garden in order to keep all the little "critters" away. This allows the seeds that have been planted to begin their slow journey upward toward the sun and fruition. The second great effort to overcome involves weeding. Straining the mind sometimes means that we literally have to pull the weeds out by their roots. Even a weed can be pretty but it will still choke the fragile seedlings of mindfulness and concentration if allowed to spread in the garden of our being. In an earlier chapter we quoted Ta Hui's admonition that we must tend to the Ox. He certainly would have agreed that we also must weed our garden!

Since you're studying this Path, then at all times, in all your encounters with people and responses to circumstances, you must not let wrong thoughts continue. If you cannot see through them, then the moment a wrong thought comes up you should quickly concentrate your mental energy to pull yourself away. If you always follow those thoughts and let them continue without a break, not only does this obstruct the Path, but it makes you out to be a man without wisdom.

The first two efforts fall in the category of enduring, straining your mind when sheer willpower is all that will get you through. Now, with the garden's fence secure and the weeds pulled, we can attend to the third effort, which the Buddha called the effort to develop. We have endured and now we begin to learn a language.

3) The effort to develop

“What now is the effort to develop? There the disciple incites his will to arouse meritorious conditions that have not yet arisen.”

In order to nurture our garden, we must till and water the soil. We want to make sure it gets enough sunshine and the proper nutrients. The Buddha lists seven “meritorious conditions” that must be developed in order to create the possibility of enlightenment. These conditions are the seeds of enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. They wait in the deep soil of the unconscious. With the proper care, they will eventually sprout and flower in our garden. But the good news is that none of us has to go to some spiritual gardening center to purchase a packet of seven seeds. Nor does any enlightened being, even one capable of moving mountains, have the ability to give us these seven seeds. They already belong to us and are part of our own buddha nature. Long before the first weed of avijja ever sprouted in our garden, the seven factors of enlightenment were present in the rich soil of our true Self. What an empowering idea! The Buddha is very clear about it. If the seven seeds of enlightenment were not already an intrinsic part of your nature, where else could they possibly come from?

Another seed that we nurture each Sunday is the seed of Metta or lovingkindness. Many of us feel that it is strange to chant a prayer of lovingkindness for all beings when we literally cannot feel any love for ourselves. But if the seed of lovingkindness is already within the garden of our own heart, then the practice of sending metta to all beings is the nurturing of a seed that will one day break through the soil first as a fragile plant and eventually as a magnificent flower.

Like the first two efforts, this third effort to develop makes complete intuitive sense. I have to give up the afternoon in order to attend a Sunday sit. I have to avoid letting anything else take precedence over that time. And even if I make the time, I still may resist going, so I have to overcome this resistance too, as it whispers “you don’t need to go today. Let’s play instead.” The effort to develop involves my willingness to sit my bottom on the cushion and allow the process of inward-turning to begin. The effort to develop also requires a willingness to listen to a dharma talk, even when it seems irrelevant. It means practicing patience and kindness when others share their thoughts in group discussions, even when we are judging and comparing their ideas with our own brilliant notions. Right

effort is about hanging in there and taking care of the garden through all kinds of weather.

The very fact that you are reading a book on the Eightfold Path means that you are putting energy into the effort to develop. Studying the scriptures, listening to recordings of meditation teachers or reading their works are other obvious ways to put energy into the effort to develop the heart and mind.

Finally, we may be able to find a teacher we trust and in whom we have confidence. There are many stories of Buddhist teachers who came to enlightenment without the benefit and guidance of a living master. In some cases, they found the truth through the enlightened writings of those who had already passed on. Perhaps, just hearing a word or phrase can open our hearts to realization. We have already mentioned the story of Hui Neng who was enlightened when he overheard someone recite a Buddhist sutra. How is this possible? Your true teacher is the jewel within the lotus of your own heart.

But most of us need the guidance of a living teacher who has already walked some distance along the spiritual journey. As magical as it may sound, the presence of a teacher who has attained a state of inner silence seems to have some resonating and elevating effect on the consciousness of those sitting near her. Countless people report feeling more clarity and tranquility after sitting near the Dalai Lama. Clearly, sitting with a teacher is an important part of the effort to develop. It is said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears, as if by grace. Here is a beautiful description of this process:

If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world, then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself.

Truly, the greatest gift you have to give is that of your own self-transformation.

So find a teacher who is an integral being, a beacon who extends his light and virtue with equal ease to those who appreciate him and those who don't.

Shape yourself in his mold, bathe in his nourishing radiance, and reflect it out to the rest of the world.

You will come to understand an eternal truth: There is always a peaceful home for a virtuous being.

From *The Unknown Teachings of Lao Tsu* by Brian Walker

In *The Blue Cliff Record*, a remarkable collection of sayings and anecdotes by early Chinese Buddhist masters, Yuan Wu's description of a teacher is clear and scary:

One who can take action on the road is like a tiger in the mountains; one immersed in worldly understanding is like a monkey in a cage. If you want to know the meaning of buddha-nature, you should observe time and season, causes and conditions. If you want to smelt pure gold which has been refined a hundred times, you need the forge and bellows of a master.

Yuan Wu adds that "It is like a man in a dream, though he wants to awaken, he cannot wake up; called by another, he awakens." Only one who has escaped from the monkey cage, one who is no longer lost in a personal dream can help us to awaken. It is an inside-outside job. The teacher pecks at the egg shell from the outside, while the student pecks away from inside the ego.

4) The effort to maintain

"What now is the effort to maintain? There the disciple incites his will to maintain the meritorious conditions that have already arisen, and not to let them disappear, but to bring them to growth, to maturity and to the full perfection of development."

Nisargadatta says that we must never give up the ground that we have gained. I was surprised and a little disturbed when I first read his admonition, perhaps because I needed to believe that we can never lose what we have gained through our practice. And in the sense of many lifetimes it may be so that we don't really lose the ground we have gained. But what about this one lifetime? Undoubtedly we must remember Nisargadatta's words: "Call it honesty, integrity, wholeness; you must not go back, undo, uproot, abandon the conquered ground."

U Panditta expresses the same warning in his analogy of a mother hen sitting on an egg. She does not need to understand the process of a chick's development. She only needs to keep sitting on the egg! Her constancy keeps the egg warm and this allows the little chick to develop in its own time and rhythm. All the chick needs is a "good enough" mama hen. A commitment to constancy is the key to the Buddha's teaching of the fourth great endeavor. What is the point of my starting a garden if I am not in it for the long haul?

Whether I find a teacher or not, there is one more element that is vital to maintaining my garden. I need to find other people who are also interested in gardening. In a world that is so separated from the spirit, it is too hard to practice the dharma without the help and support of others who are on a similar journey. The Buddha told Ananda that our association with spiritual friends (good gardeners) is the whole of our spiritual practice. There is no question that this is the heart of what makes a sangha so necessary and so very wonderful. Each Sunday when we come together, there is a palpable sense of silent communion. It feels very much like tending to our garden.

Chuang Tzu adds that it is not enough to rent our garden from someone else. Ultimately, we must find and till our own garden:

The perfect men of old borrowed their way through humanity and lodged in justice for a night, on their way to roam in the transcendental regions, picknicking on the field of simplicity, and finally settling in their home garden, not rented from another. Transcendancy is perfect freedom. Simplicity makes for perfect health and vigor. Your garden not being rented from another, you are not liable to be ejected. The ancients called this the romance of hunting for the Real.

I must confess that I have omitted the Buddha's admonition, "you must strain your mind," during the discussion of the last two efforts. In doing this, perhaps I have given the impression that we have to strain our minds only in the first two great endeavors, the efforts to avoid and to overcome. In fact, the Buddha says that we have to strain our minds in our effort to develop and maintain as well. We must "strive, put forth energy, strain the mind and struggle." So much for relaxing!

As we have seen time and again, when it comes to the Buddha-dharma there will always be the other side of that mighty thin plank. We must strain and yet we must not strain. The Tibetans say we must “hasten slowly,” which is another way of articulating the paradox of not this but not that either. This paradox runs throughout the Eightfold Path. In the scriptures, the first part of each step is usually referred to as the Mundane (worldly) truth, for instance Mundane Right Understanding, but then there will be a discussion of the Ultramundane aspect. Yuan Wu says that “the real truth and the conventional truth are not two.” He adds that this is “the highest meaning of the holy truths.” In other words, in conventional truth there is good and there is evil. In the real truth there is no such thing as good and evil. But the paradox is that both are true. In conventional truth we must strain our minds. In the real truth, there is nothing to strain. Here is an elegant description of “effortless effort” that I copied from a Post It on a friend’s computer.

The essence of equilibrium
is not to cling.

The essence of relaxation
is not to hold.

The essence of naturalness
is to make no effort.

When he realized that one of his disciples, Venerable Sona, was having a crisis of doubt, the Buddha asked him if he had ever played a stringed instrument. Venerable Sona replied that he had. The Buddha then asked him how an instrument would sound if its strings were too taut (as in strained). “The instrument would not be in tune” was the response. Likewise the Buddha asked how it would sound if the strings were too loose. The answer was the same: “The instrument would be out of tune.” Venerable Sona was a determined student who had practiced walking meditation to the point that the soles of his feet were cracked and bleeding. Without a doubt, Ven. Sona had tuned his instrument way too tight! The Buddha soothed his disciple with the instruction that an instrument plays best and is tuned “right” when its strings are neither too tight nor too loose.

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, attune the pitch of the faculties, and there pick up your theme.

The scriptures say that after Venerable Sona had heard the Buddha's teaching, he went back to practice alone in the forest.

Dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent and resolute, he in no time reached and remained in the supreme goal of the holy life. He knew: 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done.'

Lama Gendun Rinpoche says:

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and will power.
But is already there, in relaxation and letting-go.
Don't strain yourself, there is nothing to do...
Only our search for happiness prevents us from seeing it...
Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences;
They are like rainbows.

There is nothing we can do with the paradox of "don't strain your mind" and "you must strain your mind" except hold the paradox consciously. Heedful, ardent and resolute are the watchwords of Right Effort, but again we must remember that the instrument must be tuned "just right" - not overly tight nor overly loose. We could call the Buddha's teaching The Goldilock's Effort: Our effort cannot be too hot nor can it be too cold.

In one passage of the Pali Scriptures, the Buddha talks about the raft that each one of us must build. This raft must carry us to the further shore. He does not suggest that we rent someone else's garden nor does he even hint at the possibility that we can hitch a ride on someone else's raft!

Suppose that a man, in the course of traveling along a path, were to come to a great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious and risky, the further shore secure and free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. The thought would occur to him, 'Here is this great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious and risky, the further shore secure and free from risk, but with neither a ferry boat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and, having bound them together to make a

raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, *making an effort* with my hands and feet?' (Emphasis mine).

This raft does not have an inboard motor speeding it across the deep water. By the way, it is said that the vast expanse of water between this shore and the distant shore of awakening has four "floods," or four powerful currents that can capsize our little raft at any moment: sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance. Sensuality needs no further introduction. Becoming refers to "bhava" or the tenth nidana, the incessant need to do this and to do that, to fill each moment with activity. "Views" refers to our need to fill our heads with opinions and beliefs *about* reality without any knowledge of our true Self. The fourth flood is our old friend avijja or ignorance, the first nidana.

Nor does our little raft have a sail to catch the wind. So, we don't get a break from the effort of crossing the great expanse of four floods. We must be heedful, ardent and resolute. We have only one means of moving this raft across the four floods: We have to paddle with our own hands and feet! Right effort is the motor that paddles our little raft through calm and through storm, through the days, weeks and years toward the distant shore of awakening.

The raft is none other than the Eightfold Path. What I most love about the Buddha's simile is the idea that each of us has to construct our own unique raft out of whatever is presently available in our life, right here, right now, just as we are, just where we are. The "grass, twigs, branches and leaves" are the stuff of our own personal experience. When I imagine a great expanse of water and the four floods swirling around our rafts like eddies, I picture us heading for the distant shore in every imaginable kind of raft. For sure, we better find material that will float!

When the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree, he made a vow to himself not to get up until he had completely awakened from the darkness of ignorance. Here are his famous words.

Though only my skin, sinews and bones remain, and my blood and flesh wither away, yet will I never stir from this seat until I have attained full enlightenment.

These words are the essence of Right Effort.

The Buddha's long journey away from home took him to a final moment of determination where he proclaimed his intention to be in it for the long haul: He would not stir from the mat he had placed under the bodhi tree until he had attained full enlightenment. This brings us to the last two steps of the Eightfold Path where the Buddha describes the actual process of meditation. Now the journey turns toward home.